

A New Approach to Biography in Early Medieval China: The Case of Zuo Si

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That reading entails interpretation is self-evident when we are faced with a ‘hard’ text, which must be interpreted to be understood. But it is equally true of texts that make sense fairly readily: we understand them well enough, but in order to make good use of them we must understand them a bit better than that. Getting to this higher level of interpretation requires the invocation of other, related texts and the development of the ‘context’ in which the text’s utterances were made. The most crucial step, however, is to situate the text within some explanatory framework, exploring how it unfolds within such a system.

The present study examines a set of texts – the extant biographical material on the poet Zuo Si 左思 (fl. late 3rd c.) – and through this case aims to evaluate the genre of biographical writing in early medieval China. Early medieval biographies are not, in the main, hard to read, and it is often possible to advance our understanding of them by associating them with other texts and by weaving in the proper historical context, in line with the first two senses outlined above. But the third facet of interpretation – the explanatory domain – presents much difficulty, ample existing assessments of the Chinese historiographical tradition notwithstanding.¹ What strategies do we have for reading biographical texts? What ways of reading will best facilitate our understanding of early medieval China and its culture?

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¹ For a good general treatment of historiography in this period, with characterizations of the main works, see Albert E. Dien, “Historiography of the Six Dynasties Period (220-581),” in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, vol. 1, gen. ed. Daniel Woolf, ed. Andrew Feldherr and Grant Hardy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 509-534. For a discussion of some of the problems involved, focusing on the demands that narrative places on fact and less-than-fact in Tang and Song historical writing, see Jack W. Chen, “Blank Spaces and Secret Histories: Questions of Historiographic Epistemology in Medieval China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 69.4 (2010): 1071-1091.

What I propose here is that it may be productive to place these texts within the interpretative domain of “communication.” I begin by setting out three communication paradigms: information, influence, and connection. “Information,” I will argue, is a deficient model for interpreting early medieval biography, and the arguments of the essay will be articulated against it. This cuts against the grain, insofar as information is what one would expect to derive from a historical source, and as our biographical materials are most frequently used in this way. Instead, I suggest that paying attention to how a text seeks to “influence” or persuade its reader is a much more profitable approach. But more important still is to trace out the pattern of “connections” in any given case, and pursue the implications of a connection model for our understanding of early medieval historiography.

Information, influence, and connection: three paradigms

To introduce our three communication paradigms, let us first look at how each might answer the following question: “How do we construe a given statement, ‘A’, in a given text, ‘T’?” Our answers will be formulated on a specific example from the only biography of Zuo Si that has been transmitted intact, in the received *Jin shu* 晉書 (History of Jin), compiled in the mid-seventh century.

The first response to “how do we construe ‘A’” is simply that “‘A’ means what we conventionally take the combination of words in ‘A’ to mean.” This answer invokes a “code” conception of communication, or what we may more directly label an *information model*.² In this model, intuitive and commonplace, language is like a series of containers. The author of the text selects the word or phrase “A” that contains the correct meaning and sends it over to the reader, who opens the container to obtain the information.

In our text, it is said of Zuo Si that “his face was dull and he had a stutter” (*mao qin kou ne* 貌寢口訥). From the information perspective, this statement simply conveys what it says. We may wonder what exactly these containers actually hold: does Zuo Si have some specific condition, or is it only saying that he was unattractive and did not speak well? There is also the problem of whether the containers presented are the most accurate ones: an earlier biography tells us that “his face was ugly” (*mao chou* 貌醜). This would force us to decide whether there is a distinction between the containers “dull” and “ugly,” and if so which to accept as the true information.

² For an assessment of the “code model,” as a base-level approach to communication, see Ulrich Stegmann, “The Philosophy of Communication and Information,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Information*, ed. Luciano Floridi (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 304-318. The “influence model” below combines elements of the “inferential” and “signaling models” described in Stegmann’s overview. See also the essays collected in Stegmann, ed., *Animal Communication Theory: Information and Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Nevertheless, the *Jin shu* statement appears to return two relatively clear “bits” of information.

The second answer to our question is that “by saying ‘A’ the author intends the reader to respond in a certain way.” This is an *influence model* of communication. The extreme form of this model is “manipulation,” in which a sender seeks not to convey information to a perceiver but to manipulate him, even using false information. “Manipulation” has largely been displaced in favor of theories in which the “honesty” of signals is, on balance, guaranteed. That is, there is a general congruence between the influence and information models, true information providing the basis for influence.³ Applied to the problem of historiography, we may likewise say that the author has more incentive to use established facts than to invent new fictions. Thus, the influence model does not insist that communication is based on untruths, and its application here does not necessarily imply that the information in our biographies is false, but only that the point of information lies in how it “informs” the reader, or “how signals *do* things to others.”⁴ This influence model is familiar to students of literature in other forms. The very idea of rhetoric, as persuasion, is a matter of influence – and rhetoric has often been conceived of in opposition to (true) information. The concept of the illocutionary speech act, popularized from the work of J. L. Austin and John Searle, identifies a type of statement in which semantic information is displaced by the statement’s intended effect.

How does the influence model lead us to construe the statement “his face was dull and he had a stutter”? The answer is that ‘dumb and ugly’ introduces a certain disposition in the reader. What disposition? In some cases, answering that question can be very difficult, perhaps even impossible – a fact that may well lead us to pine for a return to the information model. The effect of this example, however, is close at hand. Whether by the norms of early medieval China, where the lowly and downtrodden but talented “cold man” (*han ren* 寒人) had a positive valorization, or, we may suggest, by the more general assent granted to the meek across time and culture, this historiographical statement induces a sympathetic sensibility.⁵

³ On the cooperative interaction of manipulating senders and “mind-reading” receivers, see John R. Krebs and Richard Dawkins, “Animal Signals: Mind-Reading and Manipulation,” in *Behavioural Ecology: An Evolutionary Approach*, ed. Krebs and N. B. Davies, Second Edition (Oxford: Blackwell Scientific Publications, 1984), pp. 380-402.

⁴ Thomas C. Scott-Phillips, “Meaning in Animal and Human Communication,” *Animal Cognition* 18 (2015): 801-805. Michael J. Owren, Drew Rendall, and Michael J. Ryan, “Redefining Animal Signaling: Influence Versus Information in Communication,” *Biology and Philosophy* 25 (2010): 755-780, which argues strongly for the influence model in the study of animal communication, observes that “information” in the technical sense is actually closely related to “influence”: if we regard information not as a contained quantity but as a measure of probability that involves a disposition of the perceiver.

⁵ Note that the more expansive *Jin shu* biography of Zuo Si’s sister, the imperial consort Zuo Fen

The third model, *connection*, offers what we might describe as a bottom-up view of communication. As information, a statement is an organized semantic entity, presumably with a direct basis in historical fact. As influence, the statement, containing such information as it does, is deployed rhetorically. That is the view from the top. From underneath, information becomes abstract: we see the organized entities not as statements with semantic value, but simply as patterns with a given syntax, their elements anchored not to external facts but to other elements across the structure. Likewise, influence becomes over-determined: the connective templates are not the media for rhetoric, but the drivers of it, patterns of discourse displacing the intentions of the historian-discourser. The object of an inquiry into historiography becomes the determination of the degree to which connections direct the information and its use.

Thus, the connection model's answer to our question is that "we construe 'A' as a relation to some 'B' (or 'B and C', and so on)." This does not simply mean the obvious – that we understand words or statements in terms of their implicit contrast with other actual or possible statements. Rather, it means that we need to see chains instead of individual elements – not 'A', but 'A-B', or 'A-B-C'. In the context of our example, we find that we have made a parsing mistake. "His face was dull and he had a stutter" is not itself a statement, but the first part of a complex one: "His face was dull and he had a stutter – *and yet his literary art was beautiful and powerful*" 貌寢，口訥，而辭藻壯麗。The chain is similarly constructed, but with different content, in the *Biographies of Literary Men* (*Wenshi zhuan* 文士傳), a late fourth or early fifth century account:

His looks were bad, nary an expression rising up on his face, and he stuttered and could hardly carry on a conversation – *but though he remained silent, on the inside he understood everything.*

貌惡不揚，口訥不能給談；默而心解。

Considered as information, we might take the second halves of these sentences to be true, though *how true* will remain a problem. Are they accurate accounts of his talents, or stock containers into which the reality fit *close enough*? As influence, the second clauses fill out the disposition implied in the first. But the connection view will center on the "and yet" and the "but though," emphasizing that the parts here are part of an interrelated complex, a "pattern language" that should take the foreground in our interpretation.⁶

左芬 (d. 300), is composed on the same "cold" template: the homely girl who through her talents succeeded in winning the affection of the emperor; see *Jin shu* 31.957-962.

⁶ For one recent discussion of the formative significance of patterns in literature in general, see Franco Moretti, "Patterns and Interpretation," *Literary Lab Pamphlet* 15 (Sep. 2017), <http://litlab.stanford.edu/pamphlets>, esp. section 2. In terms of communication, connections may represent

In sum: the *information* model of communication has some validity but not a great deal of interpretive value. It may be necessary, but it is plainly insufficient. The other two models, by contrast, are much stronger. The assertion of this essay is that it is *only* through attention to *influence* and, especially, *connection* that we will come to terms with the qualities of early medieval biographical writing.

Influence: how a biography guides its reader

Though the raw material for Zuo Si's biography doubtless began to accrue during the life of the man himself, the first shapings in which we receive it, now partially extant, date to the century after his death in the early 300s. These include a biography in an early *History of Jin* ("Wang Yin"), a certain "separately circulating biography" ("Biezhuan"), and an account in the book of biographies of literary figures cited above ("*Wenshi zhuan*"). The anecdotes recounted in the early fifth century *Shishuo* likely also date to this period. Another version of the man appeared with a new, mid-fifth-century Jin history ("Zang Rongxu"). That work is generally regarded as the main source for our received *Jin shu*, a work compiled, at the command of the Tang imperial court, some three and a half centuries after the time of Zuo Si. A chronological list follows; for the texts, see the Appendix.

- A. "Wang Yin": Wang Yin's *History of Jin* 王隱《晉書》. Completed before 340. Two significant passages extant, recovered from the Li Shan 李善 (seventh century) and "Chao" 鈔 (seventh to eighth century) *Wen xuan* 文選 commentaries.
- B. "Biezhuan": A "separately circulating biography of Zuo Si" 左思別傳. Fourth century. Two significant passages quoted in the late fifth century commentary to the *Shishuo xinyu* – see item 'E' below.
- C. Material without source notation in the late tenth and early eleventh century encyclopedias *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 and *Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜. Perhaps paraphrasing Wang Yin and the Biezhuan?
- D. "*Wenshi zhuan*": The *Biographies of Literary Men*. Late fourth or early fifth century, possibly revised late fifth century. Two short quotations in the *Taiping yulan*.
- E. "*Shishuo xinyu*": The *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語, or *Shishuo* (Tales of the ages). Compiled early fifth century. One anecdote focused on Zuo Si (4/68); two (14/7 and 23/47) invoking him.
- F. "Zang Rongxu": Zang Rongxu's (415-488) *History of Jin* 臧榮緒《晉書》. Late fifth century. Two fragments in the seventh century *Wen xuan*

some underlying "language of thought": see Anne C. Reboul, "Why Language Really is not a Communication System: A Cognitive View of Language Evolution," *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (Sep. 2015): 1-12.

commentary of Li Shan, one in the early eighth century encyclopedia *Chuxue ji* 初學記.

- G. “*Jin shu*”: The received *History of Jin* 晉書. Compiled ca. 649. The biography, the only one fully extant today, appears as one in the grouped category “Garden of Literature” 文苑.

A new, communication model-based approach to this rich body of material is warranted in part because asking the old questions is unlikely to produce satisfying answers. It is not fruitful to try to fashion a ‘family tree’ out of this flat list. Though it stands to reason that some of them are genealogically related, the fragmentary nature of the record discourages any decisive statements on those matters. Because all of the sources but the last come down to us through quotation in commentaries or encyclopedic anthologies, works that regularly alter their sources through ellipsis and paraphrase, we cannot be sure that a given quotation exactly reflects what a text originally said. Further, even if a quotation allows us to say that text T said X, we cannot conclude from the non-existence of a passage that text T did *not* say Y – and non-extant passages far outnumber the extant ones. For similar reasons, it does not seem productive to try to reconstitute the individual, period, or ideological motivations underlying the composition of any one text.⁷ We know too little about most of them, and what we do know about some of them is too beholden to generality.

Taking the “influence” model up first, we find a basic contrast running through our material, expressed most saliently in the juxtaposition of the received *Jin shu*, which has a very positive orientation towards its subject, and the *Biezhuàn*, which is highly negative. The biographical corpus seeks to *influence* our view of Zuo Si in one of these two contradictory ways.

Let us briefly trace the positive progress of the *Jin shu*’s narrative of Zuo Si’s life. As our opening example shows, it starts Zuo Si from a position of disadvantage. From there it depicts his triumph over the literary milieu of his day. According to this biography, Zuo Si was born into a humble but learned family. After a wayward youth, he reformed and educated himself, and thereupon spent a year using his knowledge to compose a “Rhapsody on the Capital of Qi,” his native region. He then set to work on a grander scale, aiming to compose a rhapsody encompassing – as a proxy for his own Jin empire – the “three capitals” of the recently concluded “Three Kingdoms” period: Wei (220-265), Shu (221-263), and Wu (222-280). Moving to the capital when his sister joined the imperial harem, he pursued his goal zealously. He took the opportunity to inquire about the Sichuan region with a poet who had been there. He spent ten years making drafts and notes. Feeling his knowledge still insufficient, he

⁷ This includes the much-discussed question of how the received *Jin shu* might or might not have reoriented early medieval accounts to fit with early Tang ideology or political needs. For a recent study in this vein, see Matthew V. Wells, “From Spirited Youth to Loyal Official: Life Writing and Didacticism in the *Jin shu* Biography of Wang Dao,” *Early Medieval China* 21 (2015): 3-20.

sought out a post in the imperial library.⁸

When it was done, Zuo Si was immensely proud of his master work, but he feared his contemporaries would look down upon it, as they looked down upon him. Thus he (allegedly) sought out the imprimatur of an old and learned hermit, Huangfu Mi 皇甫謐 (215-282), who (allegedly) praised the work and wrote a preface to it. Two contemporaries provided fawning commentaries – the *Jin shu* quotes the preface to one of these at length – and a third added his own general exegesis – again the *Jin shu* includes the preface, full with praise for Zuo’s rhapsody. The crowning garland was a word of praise from Zhang Hua 張華 (232-300), the court’s leading patron and politician, upon which (legend has it) the price of paper went up in the capital, as so many people rushed to make a copy of the (quite lengthy) work. In a flashback, Lu Ji 陸機 (261-303), the greatest poet of the day, is said to have been pondering writing on this very same topic when he heard Zuo Si was working on it. “They’ll use the paper to cover wine jars,” he said dismissively. And yet when the work was finished and published, Lu Ji (purportedly) recognized its superiority: “prostrating himself in an extreme display of praise” 絕歎伏, he threw down his pen, relinquishing his former ambitions.⁹ The biography then closes quietly, with three short entries on Zuo Si’s official career, each of which sees him retreat further into seclusion. These career notes are near to degree-zero narration of historical “information,” but we shall see later that they harbor dispositions and connections of greater importance, making a fit ending to a very eulogistic representation of Zuo Si.

All of the preceding summary is “as told by” the *Jin shu* biography. The *information* status of much of this is in question, though it does convey some ascertainable facts. But that is not the point. From an *influence* standpoint, what the biography has done is persuade the reader that Zuo Si, here enshrined in the *Jin shu* chapter on “writers,” made his name as the writer of a magnificent work.

Two rudimentary rhetorical templates can help us better apprehend the contrast between the *Jin shu*’s affirmation of Zuo Si and the denigration that will be developed elsewhere.¹⁰ The first is what can be called “contrary consequence.” A persistent presence in early medieval biographical writing, this is already in evidence in the introductory example: “His face was dull and he had a stutter.” Were we to follow this

⁸ To substitute an analytical summary for the preceding three sentences: the *Jin shu* biography assembles three mimetic enactments of “Zuo Si working hard on his master work.”

⁹ The metaphor of “prostrating” (*fu* 伏) is replaced in *Taiping yulan* citations (587.7b, 599.8a) with the more ordinary “submitted to” (*fu* 服), but in the *Jin shu* biography immediately preceding Zuo Si’s the same metaphor is used to describe Zhang Hua’s reaction to the writing of Chenggong Sui 成公綏 (231-273). This testifies to the priority of “prostrate” – and provides an example of the “connections” discussed below.

¹⁰ These topics are developments of the old but still useful modern distillation of the topical tradition presented in Manuel Bilsky, McCrea Hazlett, Robert E. Streeter, and Richard M. Weaver, “Looking for an Argument,” *College English* 14.4 (Jan. 1953): 210-216.

train of thought straight out, we would reach the simple consequence of *‘so he was a person of no significance’. This naïve false consequence is the implicit springboard for its intended contrary, which actually does follow in the “and yet” clause: “*and yet* his literary art was beautiful and powerful.” The anecdote involving Lu Ji, retold above, also belongs to the type of “contrary consequence.” The proper consequence of a critical judgment by that formidable poet would be the fruition of his prediction – Zuo Si’s composition should turn out poorly. That linear development provides the foil for “Lu Ji’s” – not the real poet, but the historiographical character – hyperbolic reversal. Likewise, the whole narrative of Zuo Si’s producing a work that he suspected no one would respect: the reader knows full well not to follow this attitude of the general public through to a simple consequence, but the conceit of that direct consequence is the basis for an efficacious narrative tension – the grand reversal from marginalized scribbler to “best-selling” author.

An exemplary demonstration of the supple nature of contrary consequence is provided by the anecdote of Zuo Si’s early education under his father, for which we have two opposing articulations, in the *Jin shu* and in the “Biezhuān.” Here is the *Jin shu* version:

Generations of the family had been learned Confucians. His father, Yong, was initially appointed as a minor clerk, but for his talents he was promoted to be a Palace Attending Censor. When Zuo Si was young, he tried to learn the scribal styles of Zhong You and Hu Zhao, and then he tried to learn to play the zither, but he failed at all of this. “When I was that age,” Zuo Yong said to a friend, “I knew *so* much more than Si.” Thereupon, Zuo Si was inspired to action, applying himself to study, and becoming adept in the mantic arts as well.

家世儒學。父雍，起小吏，以能擢授殿中侍御史。思少學鍾、胡書及鼓琴，並不成。雍謂友人曰：「思所曉解，不及我少時。」思遂感激勤學，兼善陰陽之術。

Zuo Si comes from a family with a tradition of learning, his father gaining an extraordinary promotion due to his native talents: in Wang Yin’s earlier history, it is specified that the founding Jin Emperor (Wudi, r. 265-290) himself took notice of him. As a matter of simple consequence, Zuo Si should follow in the family path – but it turns out that Zuo Si is not a good student. This sets up a dramatic turning point, whereby the criticism of his father prompts the fulfilment of the proper consequence. And, as the ultimate success of the “Three Capitals Rhapsody” would show, the fulfillment was spectacular.

Now contrast the anecdote as it is told in the Biezhuān:

His father, Zuo Yong, was initially just a notetaking clerk, but because he was very knowledgeable he was made a Palace Attending Censor. Zuo Si lost his

mother early, and Yong, soft in his pity, did not give him much instruction in scribal learning. When Zuo Si grew up, he read widely in the famous works and perused the books of various writers.

父雍，起于筆札。多所掌練，爲殿中御史。思蚤喪母。雍憐之，不甚教其書學。及長，博覽名文，遍閱百家。

The opening gambit here is the same: Zuo Si's father was learned, so, by simple consequence, one would expect Zuo Si to be so as well. The difference lies in the father's intervention in this consequential path. (This is again to speak of the father as an historiographical character, not as a real person – not as historical *information*, but as an *influential* function in the text.) This father-figure does not set down the kind of prompt that will cause the son to spring back onto the proper path, with redoubled momentum. With his father's useless, uninspiring pity, Zuo Si (that is, "Zuo Si") is simply left undereducated, a fact he lamely remedies with some desultory "wide reading" as a young man.

A second rhetorical topos that helps establish the lines of influence here is what can be called the defining action. The defining action distinguishes itself from an action dictated by others or by mere circumstance; a strong rhetorical move, it marks something that is so on its own account, not because something else made it so. In the *Jin shu* biography of Zuo Si, we have seen how the protagonist redoubles his efforts upon hearing his father's criticism. He *makes himself* into a learned man, a result that, following the path of thwarted consequence, is stronger than the simple consequence of inheriting family knowledge would have been. This theme goes on to receive full expression in the account of the composition of his great rhapsody. "Himself (*zi*) recognizing that he did not know enough," it says, "he sought an appointment as Gentleman of the Palace Library" 自以所見不博，求爲祕書郎。 When the work was done, the biography continues, "he himself considered it the peer of the rhapsodies [on capitals] by Ban Gu 班固 (32-92) and Zhang Heng 張衡 (78-139)" 思自以其作不謝班張。 The biography continues with this motif of self-definition:

Intent on living without distractions, he showed no interest in social intercourse.
不好交遊，惟以閑居爲事。

Jia Mi, Director of the Palace Secretariat, requested him to lecture on the *History of Han*. When Jia Mi was executed, Zuo Si retreated to Welcoming-Spring Ward, where he immersed himself completely in study.

祕書監賈謚請講漢書，謚誅，退居宜春里，專意典籍。

Sima Jiong, Prince of Qi, commissioned him as his chief Recorder-Adjutant. But Zuo Si declined on account of illness, refusing to go to take up the position.

齊王同命爲記室督，辭疾，不就。¹¹

In all of this, Zuo Si is taking charge of his own fate. It is an implication of agency that stands out when we juxtapose these materials with their counterparts in the Biezhuan, which systematically undermines the sense of defining agency so liberally attributed to Zuo Si elsewhere.

The Biezhuan's negative reformulation of the father's intervention continues as follows, each sentence a stab at Zuo Si's agency.

The Minister of Works Zhang Hua appointed him Libationer on his staff.

司空張華辟爲祭酒。¹²

Thus, where our other versions have Zhang Hua recognize Zuo Si because of his great literary accomplishment, the Biezhuan just names Zhang as a patron.

Jia Mi nominated him for Gentleman of the Palace Library.

賈謐舉爲祕書郎。

Thus, where elsewhere Zuo Si seeks out a post in the Palace Library to fulfill his own literary ambitions, here he receives the appointment from Jia Mi (d. 300). As a negative historical character, Jia Mi was a dubious patron, and though the *Jin shu* treatment mentions him, a due distance is maintained: there, Zuo Si owes no official appointment to him, entering Jia's orbit only upon the latter's polite request for him to share his learning.¹³

When Jia Mi died, he returned to his hometown,¹⁴ devoting himself to his

¹¹ Factually speaking, evidence elsewhere in the *Jin shu* (90.2334, Cao Shu 曹摅) shows that Zuo Si did take the position, or it was considered to have been granted to him. The phrasing of the *Jin shu*'s statement that "he refused to go to take up the position" (*bu jiu*) accommodates the latter possibility.

¹² On the libationer (*jijiu*) position on the staff of high court ministers, as opposed to the post by that name in the imperial academy (e.g. Xu Chuanwu, *Zuo Si Zuo Fen yanjiu* [Taipei: Mingmu, 1998], p. 12), see *Jin shu* 24.726-727.

¹³ Elsewhere in the received *Jin shu* (40.1173), Zuo Si is identified as one of the so-called "twenty four friends" of Jia Mi. This is a negative association, but, broadly distributed among the talented literary men of the age, it does not directly impact the positive depiction in Zuo's biography proper.

¹⁴ *Xiangli* ("to his hometown") is vague. It may be a simplification of the more specific "retreated to Welcoming-Spring Ward," in our current *Jin shu*; on the identification of this ward, see Yang

writing.

謚誅，歸鄉里，專思著述。

Here the Biezhuan introduces a small but significant change in the activity he undertakes in retreat. In the *Jin shu* he retreated to books (*dianji*), that is, to the quiet, humble life of study that he had established in his early years. Here he returns to his writing (*zhushu*). What writing? His beloved Three Capitals Rhapsody, as the Biezhuan goes on to make clear:

Sima Jiong, Prince of Qi, requested him as Recorder-Adjutant, but Zuo Si would not return to official life – because at that time his Three Capitals Rhapsody was not yet finished.

齊王同請為記室參軍，不起。時為三都賦未成也。

Reclusion in early medieval China was a mark of high integrity – or at least, in the midst of the violence that opened the fourth century, a sign of practical political wisdom. As such, in the *Jin shu* treatment his refusal to return to service, on the pretext of illness, shows our protagonist reverting to and persisting in a positive, self-defining characteristic. But the Biezhuan ironizes this attempt at self-definition: reclusion is merely a consequence of his not having finished tinkering with his presumptuously grand rhapsody.

The facts, or *information*, of the history of the composition of the Three Capitals Rhapsody is a problem to which much attention has been devoted, but here we see how narratives of that process were also, and even primarily, conditioned by the positive/negative polarity of *influence*.¹⁵ The *Jin shu* account tacitly accommodates the fact that the rhapsody was composed over a long period of time, and the Zang Rongxu *Jin shu* was more specific, recording – if my reconstruction in the Appendix is accurate – a decade-long process in which the preface of Huangfu Mi (who died in 282) was added, various annotations were made and put in broad circulation, and the seal of

Helin, “Zuo Si zakao,” *Shanghai shifan daxue xuebao* (shehui kexueban) 30.3 (2001): 70-72, p. 72. Another factor could be a *connection* to the biography of Wang Chong 王充 (ca. 27-100), who like Zuo Si was a marginalized man of talent. Among other parallels to the life of Zuo Si, it includes the exact phrase *gui xiangli*, “he returned to his hometown”; *Hou Han shu* 49.1629.

¹⁵ For a review of scholarship on the composition of the rhapsody, see Wang Yuan, “Zuo Si lian Du zai kao,” *Yunmeng xuekan* 29.3 (2008): 112-117. Note that a proposal by Xu Chuanwu (*Zuo Si Zuo Fen yanjiu*, pp. 123-140) would remove one of the central stumbling blocks: Xu argues for the emendation of a single character in the biography of Huangfu Mi, changing his date of death from Taikang 3 (太康三年, 282 CE) to Yuankang 3 (元康三年, 293 CE), closer to when Zuo Si seems to have finished his work. While Xu concedes that there is no textual support for such a change, the possibility is worth considering.

approval of the Minister of Works Zhang Hua (an office he took in 291) was gained. This drawn out process of composition is another part of the steady narrative of Zuo Si's triumph – from a nobody, to somebody who wrote something few appreciated, to a writer praised by all.

Praised by all – except for partisans of the narrative espoused in the Biezhuan. “Final changes to his Three Capitals Rhapsody came to a stop only at his death” 其三都賦改定，至終乃止, it says, proceeding to give an example of a section Zuo Si allegedly drafted only to replace later. It is this example that is telling. Of the four lines quoted, three appear in somewhat varied form in our current rhapsody text. The key is the completely anomalous one:

Devil marksmen let fly a shower of pellets.

鬼彈飛丸以礮礮。¹⁶

We know that texts in manuscript changed in transmission, and it is certainly conceivable that Zuo Si, or his ‘editors’, revised his text. Stylistically, however, this line stands out, for even if a distant source can be traced for it, the fantastical image of devil archers is beyond the pale of the “realism” that objectively qualifies the Three Capitals Rhapsody. That spirit of realism was proudly proclaimed by Zuo Si in his preface to the work, and duly echoed in the other extant prefaces. The intent of the Biezhuan is to draw attention to a “purple patch” that shows Zuo Si struggling to meet the goals he trumpeted.

The “devil” line is a crucial detail in the overall argument of the Biezhuan, which dwells on the process of composition in an attempt to prove the whole accepted reception history of the work false. It downplays Zuo Si's possible relation with Zhang Zai 張載, who according to the *Jin shu* not only provided information about Sichuan but also added his own commentary to the Wei capital portion of the work. It claims Zuo Si's social standing was insufficient to have acquired a preface from Huangfu Mi, or from Zhi Yu 摯虞 (250-300), Huangfu's acolyte and a renowned man of letters roughly Zuo Si's age.¹⁷ It declares that the purported annotators died too early to have commented on his work. Drawing conclusions from this array of evidence, the Biezhuan turns the powerful topic of self-definition on itself:

¹⁶ Tr. David R. Knechtges, *Wen xuan: or “Selections of Refined Literature,”* vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 344, line 51 note. Note that we do not ourselves have to agree that “devil marksmen” would be incongruent to Zuo Si's work, but only that it would be plausible for a critic to make such a claim.

¹⁷ There is no other record of Zhi Yu's having written a such preface. Note also that at least in one version of the *Beitang shuchao*, the seventh century encyclopedia, Zang Rongxu appears to mention another otherwise unattested preface by Zhang Hua; see the Appendix, F1.

All of these annotations [and prefaces] were the work of Zuo Si *himself*. He borrowed the names of his contemporaries in an effort to make his composition highly regarded (*zhong*).

凡諸注解，皆思自爲。欲重其文，故假時人名姓也。

Thus, the Biezhuan does finally grant Zuo Si full agency – but only in a brazen act of forgery, and the “regard” Zuo Si so eagerly sought is promptly subverted, in its summary judgment of Zuo Si’s character:

Zuo Si had none of the practical skills of a clerk, but had “literary talent” instead. And he was immensely proud of the fact that his sister was in the imperial harem. For such reasons, his fellow natives of Qi had no regard (*zhong*) for him.

思爲人無吏幹，而有文才。又頗以椒房自矜。故齊人不重也。

Had Zuo Si only properly learned a scribe’s skills from his father, had he given up his pretentious literary ambitions, had he humbly remembered that his sister just *happened to be* an imperial consort – then, in the Biezhuan’s eyes, perhaps he would have made something useful of himself, attaining some of the respect he craved, at least at a local level.¹⁸

The Biezhuan account is patently libelous and it is not likely true in its given form, though it may accurately reflect a thornier history behind the production and publication of Zuo Si’s great work. Nor is it the only negative portrait in the extant record: the modern scholar Xu Chuanwu associates it with a *Shishuo* anecdote in which Zuo Si is mocked.¹⁹ We might view it historically, as a negative reaction to some earlier positive portrait of Zuo Si, but it is not inconceivable that two such portraits hovered over Zuo Si the living man, and we cannot, at any rate, say with certainty that the Biezhuan version postdates Wang Yin, our earliest extant account. More useful is the theoretical balance of historiographical “lives” constructed through two opposing rhetorical prisms, one eulogistic, guiding us toward admiration, the other disdainful. Of these two poles of influence, it should be said that, historical villains excepted, the eulogistic side tends to dominate historiography. This posture of our current *Jin shu* is articulated, if less fully, by remnants of the histories that preceded it – the Wang Yin

¹⁸ The *Jin shu* (31.953), in a passage mentioning Zuo Si, implies that entry into the imperial harem was a political privilege but not a social honor. For a useful discussion of the relationship of harem politics to our understanding of Zuo Si and his sister, see Shu Li, “Hougong shiyu zhong de Zuo Si xiongmei jiqi wenxue shuxie,” *Nanjing shifan daxue wenxueyuan xuebao* 3 (2013): 17-21.

¹⁹ *Zuo Si Zuo Fen yanjiu*, pp. 353-354. A different interpretation of this passage is presented in the conclusion of the present essay.

version of the “father’s teaching” anecdote, for instance, is basically the same as the received one, as is the account of the poet’s assiduous research in the palace library. More specifically, the Biezhuan’s supposedly scandalous story of the revision of Zuo Si’s rhapsody finds its way into other sources, where it is treated innocuously, or even positively. The surviving passage in the “Biographies of Literary Men” is brief, but the generally eulogistic approach of that work to its subjects, and to Zuo Si individually, suggests a positive interpretation: he was capable of weeding out a bad line. Still more clear is the use the story is put to in the *Taiping yulan*, the tenth-century encyclopedia: there it is classed under the category of “Slow Thinkers” (*si chi* 思遲), the implication being that Zuo Si’s Rhapsody became a “best-seller” only after the work of forty years of study, ten years of writing, and revision to the day he died.

All of this suggests the presence of a historian as an issuer, or at least conveyer, of historical judgment. But influence – rhetoric – is a slippery art, and the historian’s intentions, such as they were, might be over-determined by other factors. The major factor proposed here – the pull of “connections” – is the subject of the following section. We may make a start at the end of this one by raising for discussion a droll and apparently innocent narrative gem in Zuo Si’s biography. The passage in question is part of the account of the composition of the Three Capitals. It is found in Zang Rongxu – maybe Wang Yin had it, but we do not know – and passed on, only slightly modified, in the received *Jin shu*.²⁰ Zang Rongxu reads:

Thereupon he took the time of ten harvests to structure his ideas. He set out pen and paper [everywhere,] by the gates and around his courtyard and in the outhouse, and when a line came to him he would note it down.

遂構思十稔，門庭藩溷，皆著紙筆，遇得一句，即便疏之。

I do not think this little ekphrasis has ever been read as anything but a positive illustration of Zuo Si’s dedication to his task. Certainly the *Jin shu* took it that way, and probably Zang Rongxu did as well. But I will venture that traces of irony are to be found here that align it in the opposite direction of influence. First, the diction of “ten harvests” (*shi ren* 十稔) is tuned too high. The *Jin shu* duly adjusts it to the equivalent normal expression “ten years” (*shi nian* 十年), and if, familiar with that reading, we read this version again, we might hear the echoes of a mocking tone, or a solemnity

²⁰ The *Taiping yulan* (587.7b, rhapsodies; cited at Yu Jiayi, *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 4/68) also quotes a version of this, ascribing it to “Shishuo” 世說, but the received *Shishuo xinyu* does not have it. In that quote, there is no “toilet,” the four-character phrase being replaced with a more generic equivalent (“by the gates and yards and doorways and mats” 門庭戶席, perhaps based on *Zuozhuan* [Zhao 27] 門階戶席). This bowdlerized (?) version resembles the innocent source “anchor” for this trope – again the biography of Wang Chong, which speaks only of “windows, doors, and walls” (*hu you qiang bi* 戶牖牆壁); see *Hou Han shu* 49.1629.

that protests too much. Second, while keeping a collection of notes is fair enough for a work of this breadth and depth – we can be sure some such process must lie behind it – with the image of keeping a notebook by the toilet a choice is forced upon us of taking it literally or taking it seriously.²¹ And when, in that outhouse space, the author insouciantly “evacuates” (*shu* 疏, ostensibly used in the cognate sense of “note down” here) a line whenever (*ji bian* 即便, the latter word a regular conjunction but also having regular ‘privy’ connotations) the need comes upon him, the possibility must be considered that this description was somewhat less than eulogistic. The fruits of his labor have been turned to manure, his rhapsody become a mere “digest” of learning and lore.

Connections: how biographies are guided by patterns in the text

The preceding discussion has seen information displaced, to a great extent, by influence. Biographies “contain” information, some and even much of it true, but when we read a biography we must understand how it is using that information to influence its readers into certain positive or negative dispositions. Influence, however, depends not on data but on the links – the *connections* – between bits of information. Just as influence supplanted information, so it emerges that the ground of connection is of greater importance than the figures of influence that appear upon it.

A straightforward illustration of the imperative for connections is provided by a passage attributed to Wang Yin’s *History*:

Zuo Si was an avid learner, and Sima Tai, Prince of Longxi and Minister of the Masses, appointed him to his staff as Libationer.

好學，司徒隴西王（太）[泰]闢爲祭酒。

There is a historical problem here, because the Biezhuan, in a passage cited above, states that it was Zhang Hua, not Sima Tai, who appointed Zuo Si to his staff in this capacity. As information, we may side with one source or the other, or we may, as some historical dictionaries and modern studies do, try to negotiate a compromise

²¹ Note that the biographical sketch of Zuo Si in David R. Knechtges and Taiping Chang, ed., *Ancient and Early Medieval Chinese Literature: A Reference Guide*, 4 vols. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010-2014), 4:2381-2383, while very much an “information” oriented reference, judiciously prefaces both this story and the legend of the skyrocketing price of paper – on the likely fictitiousness of which, see below – with the word “reputedly.” The modern Chinese source from which much of their account is drawn – Cao Daoheng and Shen Yucheng, ed., *Zhongguo wenxujia dacidian: Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao juan* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), pp. 71-72 – shows no such compunction.

that allows both facts onto the record, at different points in time.²² Or we might feel bound to concede that we do not know. Placed in the light of “connections,” however, we detect a deeper structure at work, in which information is merely functional, and perhaps even produced to order. The driving force in this case is the key connection network of “patronage,” with Zuo Si linked to *someone* in a powerful position.

The role of connections is also manifest in another simple example centered on patronage. In the introduction to this study, we saw that the datum “he was ugly” exists in a contrastive influence structure that is also driven by a syntactic connection: “He was ugly – yet he had a brilliant mind.” Now consider a reformulation of that same connection, from the tenth century encyclopedia *Cefu yuangui*:

His face was ugly and he stuttered, [but] he went on to serve as Aide on the Staff of the Governor of Youzhou.

貌醜而口訥，爲幽州部從事。²³

This is almost certainly the result of an editing error: the encyclopedia compiler began with a phrase from Zuo Si’s biography, but in making an abridgment his eyes skipped ahead too far, moving into the next biography in the same chapter of the *Jin shu*, where Zhao Zhi 趙至 does hold the position noted here.²⁴ What carries the error is the necessity for “ugly” to be tied to a consequent fact. A paired pattern has formed, with connection as the determining principle, or, we might say, as the driving *influence*.

Because we naturally read texts for their intended meaning, it is easy for connective filigrees to slip by unnoticed. Consider two cognate but different adumbrations of the young Zuo Si’s pursuit of learning, in Wang Yin’s *Jin shu* and the received *Jin shu*, respectively:

In his youth, he showed an interest in the classical arts... (Wang Yin)

少好經術……

Thereupon, Zuo Si was inspired to action, applying himself to study, and becoming adept in the mantic arts as well. (received *Jin shu*)

思遂感激勤學，兼善陰陽之術。

The term “classical arts” (*jingshu*), in Wang Yin, is a binome meaning “classical

²² E.g., Xu Chuanwu, *Zuo Si Zuo Fen yanjiu*, pp. 12-14, placing the appointments in 291 (Sima Tai) and 296 (Zhang Hua), and emending *sikong* to *situ* 司徒.

²³ *Cefu yuangui* 835.10b; *Songben Cefu yuangui* 835.10a.

²⁴ See *Jin shu* 92.2379. This appointment is not mentioned for Zuo Si anywhere else. Also, compare the error under “stutterers” in the same *juan* of the *Cefu yuangui*, where the office held by Zuo Si’s father is erroneously ascribed to Zuo Si.

learning”; there are many examples in the *Han shu* (History of Han).²⁵ How ought we explain the difference in the *Jin shu* description? Whether or not the *Jin shu* had another source – no corresponding Zang Rongxu passage is extant – the formulation it presents is best interpreted as an expansion of the older one of Wang Yin. Breaking up the term *jingshu*, “classical” (*jing*) has been construed as serious “study” (*xue*), while *shu* is glossed out as “the mantic arts” (*yinyang zhi shu*). Is the *Jin shu* providing reliable information? At the least, it is rash to write as fact or even supposition that ‘Zuo Si was skilled in the mantic arts’.²⁶ More to the point, information is not in question here: the *Jin shu* is elaborating a connection.

This connection-making motive extends further as we plug these statements into their context. In Wang Yin, Zuo Si’s “interest in the classical arts” is part of a web of learning, comprising the family tradition (or at least the example set down by his father), the ‘contrary contrast’ anecdote about Zuo Si’s redoubled commitment to study, and the broad search for knowledge that enabled him to write the great Three Capitals Rhapsody. While that web is also present in the current *Jin shu*, in opening up the term *jingshu*, the word *shu* joins into another pattern: “Qi learning,” Zuo Si being a native of Qi and Qi being associated with the mantic arts.²⁷ This network is highlighted several times in the biography – when he writes a rhapsody on the Qi capital, when he relocates to Luoyang, and when he is appointed to the staff of the Prince of Qi. The Biezhuan raises it adversely, claiming that the natives of Qi had little respect for him. In fact, a “Qi connection” was probably an important part of Zuo Si’s real historical identity – but when our sources relate it, they are elaborating a connection, not delivering information.

Centering our interpretation of a biography on “connection” is a challenge because it is not grounded in the basic ways information and influence are. Interpreting information is a theoretically simple determination of facts, even if it can be difficult in practice to decide whether information is true or false, complete or partial. Influence, meanwhile, is unambiguously rooted in the recovery of intention, even when intentions prove difficult to determine. By contrast, connection is a less perspicuous point of focus because it is neither product nor interpretation of a text, but a description of textual quality. In the following pages we will explore this quality more fully with a group of examples that revolve around Zuo Si’s great Rhapsody.

The first involves patterns in the representation of time. The *Jin shu* biography says:

He composed his Rhapsody on the Capital of Qi, *completing it in one year*.

²⁵ E.g., *Han shu* 21A.975.

²⁶ E.g., Cao and Shen, *Zhongguo wenxuejia dacidian*, p. 71.

²⁷ The *yinyang* tradition was said to have been founded the Qi native Zou Yan, in the mid-third century BCE; see *Shiji* 28.1368-1369.

造齊都賦，一年乃成。

How do we interpret the specification of duration here? Is a year a long time? One answer is given in Wang Yin's *Jin shu*, or a quotation from it in the seventh-century encyclopedia *Beitang shuchao* 北堂書鈔, where the tale of Zuo Si reforming himself upon hearing his father's criticism concludes:

And so Zuo Si was inspired to action, and he composed a Rhapsody on the Capital of Qi, *not going outdoors for one whole year*.

思乃發憤，造齊都賦，一年不出戶牖。

Here 'a year' is a long time, signifying the concentration and dedication that went into the (now mostly lost) literary work with which he proved his father wrong. But in the *Jin shu*, the phrase "one year" is part of a different chain. There, two sentences later we find the little story about Zuo Si "structuring his thoughts (in the outhouse and elsewhere) *for ten years*" 構思十年. The effect is the creation of a contrastive pair, "one year vs. ten years," that is, a relatively short gestation period for the non-canonical piece of juvenilia versus a long, arduous process for the master work. Rhetorically, this is a salient – more developed? – contrast when compared with the corresponding passage in Wang Yin's version, where it is said only that while writing the Three Capitals "he completely cut himself off from society" 絕人倫之事. In terms of connection, a trope – *one year* – has rolled from one pattern into another.

On further inspection, this second counterpart – *ten years* – leads us to a chain that extends beyond the limits of our text. The "ten years" in the *Jin shu* account dates at least from Zang Rongxu's late fifth century biography, but it also appears in the *Hou Han shu* description of how Zhang Heng – one of Zuo Si's express objects of emulation – worked on his "rhapsodies on the two capitols" (*er jing fu* 二京賦). While in a certain sense this provides a specific "inter-text" for our biography, the trope is a more diffusely distributed, stereotypical anchor: for instance, the reference to "ten years" of study in the *Jin shu* biography of the poet Lu Ji.²⁸ The modern scholar Fu Xuancong has observed that the "ten years" in Zuo Si's biography cannot be read as historical fact; at best it may be regarded as what a study of Roman historiography has termed "description," which is invented by the historian, as opposed to an "event," which occurred or did not occur.²⁹ More fundamentally, however, it is part of a cluster of connections that over-determine the biographical text.

²⁸ *Jin shu* 54.1647.

²⁹ Fu Xuancong, "Zuo Si Sandu fu xiezuo niandai zhiyi: *Jin shu* Zuo Si zhuan deng bianwu," *Zhonghua wenshi luncong* 10 (1979): 319-329, p. 328. Cynthia Damon, "Rhetoric and Historiography," in *A Companion to Roman Rhetoric*, ed William Dominik and Jon Hall (London: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 439-450, p. 445.

Zhang Heng also provides the ostensible point of departure for another chain: the associations of Zuo Si's literary work with its predecessors and successors. Zhang Heng is said to have emulated the Two Capitals Rhapsody ("Liang du fu" 兩都賦) of Ban Gu 班固 (32-92). The evidence for this *as fact* is somewhat thinner than would it would appear: where Ban Gu and Zuo Si's rhapsodies are both accompanied by author's prefaces that name and contextualize their works, Zhang Heng's pair of rhapsodies is not, and the association of his work with Ban Gu's does not appear in extant portions of other early histories of the Eastern Han; furthermore, Zhang Heng's two rhapsodies appear in the *Wen xuan* with a third, on the "southern capital" of Nanyang. The express emulation comes – to us at least – only in the historiography. Regardless, in historiographical terms Zuo Si amplifies this connection by emulating Zhang and Ban together – while spending, like Zhang, ten years on his work. This little chain takes on literary historical significance, as these three literary monuments come to constitute the "Capitals Rhapsodies" section that opens the *Wen xuan*, gateway to the literary palace of early medieval China. But what draws our attention is the development of two more specific connections: a motif of criticism, followed by an exercise in the rhetoric of enumeration.

The *Jin shu* biography has Zuo Si define his work by comparing it, to his own advantage, with his models: "he considered it not inferior to those Rhapsodies by Ban Gu and Zhang Heng" 自以其作不謝班張. This same contrast is made much more sharply in Zuo Si's preface to his work – itself perhaps the trunk on which the historical narration was grafted – where he directly criticizes his predecessors for "falsely specifying precious and strange things, just to bring lustre and color to their compositions" 假稱珍怪，以為潤色.³⁰ Thus, Ban Gu and Zhang Heng's great works are less a model than a contrary prompt for his work, for it is by correcting their excesses that he is to distinguish himself.

Two of the other three extant prefaces to Zuo Si's Rhapsody extrapolate this critical claim about the relation of his work to its predecessors. Huangfu Mi, purportedly the earliest, amplifies Zuo's criticism: "They emptily present strange kinds of things, fancying that which does not exist" 虛張異類，託有於無.³¹ Liu Kui's 劉逵 preface, included in the *Jin shu* biography, takes this a little further, giving specificity to Zuo's criticism by articulating a sub-contrast between the earlier works: "In Ban Gu's Two Capitals, the diction does not rise to the level of the ideas, while in Zhang Heng's Two Capitols the sense is overrun by the artistry" 班固兩都，理勝其辭；張衡二京，文過其意.

The next link in this chain is provided by Zhang Hua, patron of Zuo Si's masterpiece – or perhaps by "Zhang Hua," historiographical elaborator of connections.

³⁰ *Wen xuan* 4.173. For a full translation of the preface, see Knechtges, *Wen xuan*, 337-39. For a potentially useful emendation of one of the key lines in this passage, see Chang Sichun, "Zuo Si Sandu fu jiaoji shier ze," *Zhongguo Chuci xue* 12 (2009): 339-344, pp. 341-342.

³¹ *Wen xuan* 45.2039.

In the *Jin shu* telling, Zhang Hua simply consolidates this anchor point, sighing in admiration when he saw the work: “This truly is in the tradition of Ban Gu and Zhang Heng” 班、張之流也。 In the *Shishuo xinyu* version of the story, however, he engages with greater artistry, effectively christening the composition: “With this, the Two Capitals of Ban Gu can be made Three” 此二京可三。 The rhetoric of enumeration in this comment is a clever development, aptly symbolizing the growth and expansion an act of literary emulation gives rise to.

Zhang Hua’s witticism goes on to produce its own connective series, propelling Zuo Si’s work into further connections, in the fertile fields of anecdote, with two mid-fourth century writers. The *Jin shu* biography of Sun Chuo 孫綽 relates the following story:

Sun Chuo had the greatest regard for the [Capitals] rhapsodies of Zhang Heng and Zuo Si. He would always say, “The Three Capitals and the Two Capitols are the imperial musical accompaniment to the Five Classics.” Sun composed a Rhapsody on Mt. Tiantai, its diction very fine, and when it was just finished, he showed it to his friend, Fan Rongqi, saying, “Throw it on the ground – it will ring like a metal bell or a stone chime.” To which Rongqi replied: “I fear that this bell and chime will be unorthodox....” But whenever Rongqi reached a good line, he would remark, “Indeed, this is the kind of thing men of our times should write.”

絕重張衡、左思之賦，每云：「三都、二京，五經之鼓吹也。」嘗作天台山賦，辭致甚工，初成，以示友人范榮期，云：「卿試擲地，當作金石聲也。」榮期曰：「恐此金石非中宮商。」然每至佳句，輒云：「應是我輩語。」³²

In the *Shishuo xinyu* this appears as two separate anecdotes – one remark on earlier rhapsodies, one on his own. In isolation it may be hard to say how strong the connection is in the *Jin shu*, but both the *Taiping yulan* and *Cefu yuangui* pick up the passage in a way that suggests their compilers regarded it as a whole.³³ The connection these readers intuited is undoubtedly a real one. Playing on Zhang Hua’s enumeration (“two” to “three”), Sun Chuo filiates Zuo Si’s work to the “Five” Confucian Classics.³⁴ Carrying on this numbers game, he composes his own great (albeit much shorter) rhapsody, the subject of which is a southern mountain range that he describes in the opening of the piece as “not ranked among the *Five Peaks*, and lack[ing] notice in

³² *Jin shu* 56.1544; *Shishuo xinyu* 4/81 and 4/86.

³³ *Taiping yulan* 587.3a. *Cefu yuangui* 838.6a. *Songben Cefu yuangui* 838.3b.

³⁴ On the *guchui* music, a property of the imperial court, see *Song shu* 19.558-559, and compare the almost identical figure of speech at *Sui shu* 32.909.

the standard canons” 不列於五嶽，闕載於常典。³⁵ The Tiantai mountain range was a southeastern religious center, and if Sun Chuo’s rhapsody is written as a numinous travelogue, he is using it to stake out the canonical status of a *sixth* “capital” peak, in the same way that Zuo Si made the two capitals into three. The un-Confucian subject matter arouses the suspicion of his interlocutor, who deems it “unorthodox” music, not fitting the canonical scales – not at all like the imperial “drum and fife” music to which Sun compared his literary models. But – contrastive consequence in action – Fan Rongqi changes his mind upon reading the piece, finding that it speaks to fourth century intellectual concerns, where the old kind of capital rhapsody no longer did.

Thus, by a chain of connections, we have moved from Zhang Heng to Zuo Si, through the bon mot of Zhang Hua, on to Sun Chuo’s reformulation of both the rhapsody and the comment, and finally its clever affirmation by a new critic in the Zhang Hua role. This path of connections continues in the same *Shishuo xinyu* chapter in which Zhang Hua’s and Sun Chuo’s comments appear. It is said that the poet and historian Yu Chan 庾闡 (ca. 287-340) wrote a “Rhapsody on the Yangtze Capital” 揚都賦 and showed it to Yu Liang 庾亮 (289-340), his much loftier relation:

Yu Liang, out of good will for a fellow member of the Yu clan, greatly enhanced its reputation and value, by remarking, “It may serve as a Third to the Two Capitols [of Zhang Heng], and a Fourth to the Three Capitals [of Zuo Si].” After this, people all vied to copy it, and the price of paper in the capital soared out of sight.

亮以親族之懷，大爲其名價云：「可三二京，四三都。」於此人人競寫，都下紙爲之貴。³⁶

Yu Liang is of course troping on Zhang Hua’s appraisal – or rather, given that we do not know when that remark was given to “Zhang Hua,” this joins the remarks of Zhang Hua and Sun Chuo in an “enumerative” trio.

For the student of early medieval Chinese literature, there is more at stake here than a play on numbers. The denouement of Yu Liang’s remark – a rise in the price of paper – forms another connection with Zuo Si’s Rhapsody, and an information-wise destabilizing one. The famous tale of paper in Luoyang becoming expensive after Zhang Hua praised Zuo Si’s work is first found, in extant materials, only in Zang Rongxu’s *Jin shu*, our fifth century source – where the phrasing is almost identical to the diction in the Yu Chan anecdote.³⁷ The story is not mentioned in the *Shishuo*

³⁵ Tr., Knechtges, *Wen xuan*, vol. 2, p. 243; *Wen xuan* 11.494.

³⁶ *Shishuo xinyu* 4/79. Translation here and below modified from Richard B. Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor MI: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), p. 142.

³⁷ In fact, this reference is questionable – it could be a note slipped into the single source that, in

account of the composition and reception of Zuo Si's rhapsody, nor is it noted there by Liu Xiaobiao in his wide-ranging commentary. No Tang encyclopedia cites the story in relation to Zuo Si, but elsewhere we find that the trope of "paper becoming expensive" gained quite some currency in the fifth and sixth century.³⁸ We finally find it expressly associated with Zuo Si in a rhapsody by Lu Zhaolin 盧照鄰 that has been dated to about 673 – at which point our received *Jin shu* had been in circulation for over twenty years.³⁹ In short, there is no solid ground for regarding this old chestnut as historical fact: the immortal legend of the price of paper skyrocketing as Zuo Si's master work was copied all throughout the capital is more likely than not a case of historiographical confusion.⁴⁰ Yet this is not just confusion of fact. We must observe the subtle but queer resemblance in the focus on paper in this anecdote and the diametrically opposed one, also present in our *Jin shu* account, in which Lu Ji suggests that Zuo's finished work will merely serve as (paper) covering for wine casks, a remark that is itself anchored in a historiographical precedent: the *Han shu* biography of Yang Xiong 楊雄 records Liu Xin 劉歆 (d. 23) saying of Yang's recondite *Taixuan jing* 太玄經, "I fear that the latter born [being unable to understand it] will merely use it to cover sauce jars" 吾恐後人用覆醬甌也。⁴¹ Paper – the medium of early medieval literature, and the cathetic object around which a cluster of historiographical connections, including the legend of Zuo Si, has gathered.

Returning to the anecdote featuring Yu Chan and Yu Liang, we find one more link in the chain. Some time after Yu Chan's work became popular, Xie An (320-384), the grand man of the following generation, reappraised it:

It won't do. This is 'building a house under a house' and nothing more. Item by item is imitated from its predecessors, and it is narrow and cramped to boot.
不得爾。此是屋下架屋耳，事事擬學，而不免儉狹。

opposition to other sources for the whole passage, preserves it. See the note to the passage in the Appendix, F1.

³⁸ E.g., *Gaoseng zhuan* 2.63-64, in a narrative of an early fifth century monk; *Nan shi* 11.324 (Xie Zhuang 謝莊); *Bei Qi shu* 36.476 (Xing Shao 邢邵).

³⁹ *Quan Tang wen* 166.1a.

⁴⁰ We see these kinds of conflations frequently in the *Shishuo xinyu*, where the same story may be grafted onto two historical figures (e.g., 2/22), or one template is 'echoed' across different stories (e.g., compare the famous story of Xie An playing Go at 6/35 with the early third century game scene at 2/5). For a demonstration of similar cross-fertilizations occurring in orthodox early medieval historiography, see Xu Chong, "Fan Ye *Hou Hanshu* Feng Liang shiji chengli xiaolun," *Zhongguo xueshu* 38 (Oct. 2017): 194-216.

⁴¹ *Han shu* 87B.3585. The comment of "Lu Ji" uses the same verb (*fu*), the words for "wine" and "sauce" share a key component (酉), and "jug" (*weng*) and "jar" (*bu*) are near synonyms.

Earlier, Yu Liang had played the part of Zhang Hua, the lofty and discerning critic, but here the scene is replayed, as the Rhapsody is re-anchored by a much more authoritative cultural ‘actor’, the great Xie An. Displacing Yu Liang’s judgment, Xie does not enumerate the work as an heir to a literary tradition, but deems it a false pretender – a zero, so to speak.

The greatest danger in dealing with this historiography may be the temptation to collapse these linked chains, taking the links as discrete “bits” of information. We close this section with a chain that ends in one historical example of how not to read them. This chain again begins with the author’s preface to the “Three Capitals,” which establishes the rhapsody as a canonical genre but asserts that writers in the tradition have all violated its standards with exaggerations and falsehoods, done for vapid literary effect. Zuo Si’s work, its details scrupulously sourced, is a corrective to this excess, a return to rule. When we turn to the preface by or attributed to Huangfu Mi, we basically find a reiteration of Zuo Si’s argument. It offers a fuller account of the history of the genre and an expanded critique of the excesses it has been subjected to, and the invidious literary trends those excesses have produced, closing with an affirmation that Zuo Si’s details can indeed be checked against historical maps and records.⁴²

This makes an echoing pair, and modern studies have wondered at these similarities: how could a venerable scholar simply repeat the talking points of his young supplicant?⁴³ On closer inspection, however, there are at least two twists in the Huangfu Mi preface. First, he seems to set some distance between his preface and Zuo Si’s own. Though echoing the author’s much vaunted factual accuracy, he narrows its scope, keying it specifically to the description of the Wei capital, and he voices his affirmation of Zuo Si’s claim in the ambivalent form of a rhetorical question: “Could there be any untruth to it?” 豈誣也哉. More significantly, Huangfu Mi reorients the rhetorical point of Zuo Si’s enterprise. In the midst of its criticism of rhapsodists since the Han, it offers a limited exception for a group of the greatest poets and works, including the capitals rhapsodies of Sima Xiangru, Ban Gu, and Zhang Heng – the touchstones of Zuo Si’s criticism:

In the beginning [of their compositions] they make most extreme use of broad and exaggerating diction, but in the end they return to the rule of restraint and simplicity. How their patterned writing shines, sparkling like the arrayed scales of a fish! They are the great ones among the rhapsodists of recent ages.

⁴² *Wen xuan* 45.2037-2040.

⁴³ See Wang Meng’ou, “Guanyu Zuo Si ‘San du fu’ de liang shou xu,” *Zhongwai wenxue* 9 (1980): 4-15, esp. pp. 7-8, and citing and building on Wang, Mou Shijin, “Sandu fu de zhuannian ji qita,” *Wen shi zhe* 5 (1992): 68-78, pp. 76-77. Wang questions the authenticity of the Huangfu Mi preface, but he concludes (pp. 10, 14 n. 3) that Zuo Si’s preface simply represents literary views held by Huangfu and his disciple Zhi Yu.

初極宏侈之辭，終以約簡之制，煥乎有文，蔚爾鱗集，皆近代辭賦之偉也。

What Huangfu Mi is pointing to here is the higher-level rhetoric of the capital rhapsody, according to which a composition starts with an errant viewpoint and concludes with its correction by a wiser, more restrained view.⁴⁴ He proceeds to identify the same structure in Zuo Si's composition, in which the benighted men of Wu and Shu are shown up by a man of Wei:

The men of those two states bathe themselves in the praises they have heard bestowed upon them. They all presume to think of their families coming from a prized land, of their people from a prized stock. But all of them lack an impartial view.

二國之士，各沐浴所聞，家自以為我土樂，人自以為我民良，皆非通方之論也。

The rhapsody on the capital of Wei – proxy for Zuo Si's Jin dynasty – serves to “correct them with the Way of the Ancient Kings” 折之以王道。

In one way, this reorientation pushes us back toward an intention-based reading. Zuo Si indeed intended his rhapsody as a paean to the Jin. Huangfu Mi may be helping him reveal that intention. Alternatively, he may be gently chiding his author: Zuo Si has criticized his esteemed predecessors rather harshly, but the wiser, older, more genteel critic is able to see that they were using literary exaggeration to achieve a proper effect. Yet if we look again through the lens of connection, we see things differently. Whatever “Huangfu Mi” intended, the criticism he presented is refashioned from Zuo Si's original one: ‘correcting the excesses of the men of Wu and Shu’ is a trope on Zuo Si's stated purpose of ‘correcting the excesses of previous literary works’.

For some later readers, Zuo Si's original critical stance recedes further into the background, as this reorientation swells in significance. Thus, a passage belonging either to Wang Yin or to a Tang commentator declares:

At that time, the empire was divided in three, and all bragged of the superiority of their own land. [Then,] in Zuo Si's time, Wu [and earlier Shu] was conquered by Jin, and so he made this rhapsody on the Three Capitals, *to exaggerate the boasts [formerly made by the men of those vanquished states]*.

于時天下三分，各相誇競。當思之時，吳國為晉所平，思乃賦此三都，以

⁴⁴ For this point, in a discussion of the capitals rhapsodies of Ban Gu and Zhang Heng, see Mark Edward Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), pp. 181-185 and p. 389 n. 219, with a unique interpretation of Zuo Si's rhapsody at pp. 238-243.

極眩曜。⁴⁵

This carries Huangfu Mi's point forward by bringing its hidden anchor almost into view: Ban Gu's preface to his *Two Capitals Rhapsody*. The closing words of that preface had made exactly the same claim: "Thus I have made this *Two Capitals Rhapsody*, to exaggerate the boasts made by those many men [from the old capital in the west], that I may correct them with the well-ordered rule of the present day" 故臣作兩都賦，以極衆人之所眩曜，折以今之法度。⁴⁶ Zuo Si, who had only trumpeted his literary realism, has become a writer willing – like Ban Gu and Zhang Heng – to exaggerate for a political purpose.

The lesson the connection model holds for us is that our "historical" sources are stuffed with tropes chained out from precedent anchors. The danger is not just that we too easily take the links literally, as "information," but that we may collapse the chains, as some traditional readers – now we sometimes call them our "sources" – were all too prone to do. In this case, we have the witness of the Five Ministers commentary to the *Wen xuan*, possibly drawing on Zang Rongxu:

When Zuo Si wrote his *Rhapsody*, Wu and Shu had been conquered. *Seeing the good and bad points in the writings of previous worthies*, he made this *Rhapsody to clear up any misconceptions anyone might have had*.

思作賦時，吳、蜀已平，見前賢文之是非，故作斯賦以辨眾惑。⁴⁷

This is but a lame attempt to ball a string of connections into one unity. Zuo Si said he was correcting literary excesses. Huangfu Mi mapped that correction onto the realm of political literature, where bad views are voiced so that they may be controverted by wiser ones. A history or commentary has 'exaggerated' this political point, linking Zuo Si directly to Ban Gu. With the Five Ministers, literary excess ("the *writings of previous worthies*") and ideological error ("misconceptions") are fused together, as if they had been one and the same from the start.

What connections do for historiography

"Connections," coursing through early medieval biography, undermine

⁴⁵ See the Appendix, A4.

⁴⁶ *Wen xuan* 1.4. The translation at Knechtges, *Selections of Refined Literature*, p. 99, is less emphatic: "to present an exhaustive account of the things that daze and dazzle the Chang's an multitudes...."

⁴⁷ *Wen xuan* (Xiuzhou ed.) 4.19b. This passage appears in the Li Shan commentary in the You Mao edition (*Wen xuan* 4.172), but as the "Study of Variants" (*kaoyi*; *ibid.* 4.174) rightly points out, it should be regarded as an interpolation from the Five Ministers.

information and influence. From this perspective, the spread of connective tissue only added to instability already in other ways inherent to the historical record.⁴⁸ Yet as a kind of system, a system of communication, historiography had a certain equilibrium and connections were a key factor in this, undergirding what they undermined.

Information's factors of stability were weak enough on their own. A statement containing information may appear to be stable, but we know from experience that with the entrance of new information it can immediately become unstable. A salient example is the given name of Zuo Si's father. No one ever would have doubted the informational value of the name "Zuo Yong" 左雍 in the *Jin shu* – not until the emergence of his daughter Zuo Fen's tomb tablet led scholars to conclude (conclusively?) that the received historical record is in error.⁴⁹ In this case the new information is contradictory, but the effect is still destabilizing even where new information only re-contextualizes the old.

We can identify at least three methods historiography had for dealing with the instability of information. One was ellipsis: given the recognition that no historical narrative was a complete record, but always an edited one, incoherent information was easily elided. Another was the inclusion of alternative accounts, be it in the narrative proper or in the form of a historical commentary. But perhaps the most useful method involves the supple syntax of chronology. When not directly contradictory, new information could be slotted in or stacked onto an existing record. The assumption may be that chronological sequence was being represented, but this assumption was unstated, leaving ample room to integrate material without making a strong claim for when it happened. A classic technique is the use of the stock formula "in the beginning" (*chu* 初) to introduce an anecdote: this is to slot it in *somewhere* in the chronology that preceded. In our biography, this allows the story about Lu Ji's denigration of the Three Capitals Rhapsody to have occurred at any point on the timeline. A more general flexibility is shown by the role played here by "Zhang Hua." In our *Jin shu*, it is not exactly said that Zhang Hua praised the Three Capitals *after* it had received a commentary. We might assume so, but the historian has not committed himself to any chronological value. By contrast, in the *Shishuo xinyu* version of that tale, Zhang Hua is inserted at a specific (early) point, in order to serve as the "prompt" that will lead Zuo Si to beseech a preface of Huangfu Mi. Utilizing its looser chronology, historiography – the record of what is true – paradoxically renders itself less falsifiable than the narrative of semi-fictional anecdote. Preserve information, let it float around in a loose mesh of historical connections, under-interpreted and unclear –

⁴⁸ For a discussion of the "epistemological instability" faced by the early medieval historian, see Chen, "Blank Spaces and Secret Histories," pp. 1076-1078.

⁴⁹ The epitaph has the given name Xi 熹 and the formal name (*zi*) Yanyong 彦雍, the second character of the latter apparently having been taken for the given name in the received record. See Fu Xuancong, "Zuo Si Sandu fu," p. 321; Xu Chuanwu, *Zuo Si Zuo Fen yanjiu*, p. 79.

but set it down in chronologically bound narratives and problems arise.⁵⁰

The primary method for stabilizing influence, or how a given historical figure was to be portrayed, involved the use of character stereotypes. The earliest scholarly treatments of Chinese biography in western languages recognized this as a key factor in the tradition. Arthur F. Wright, noting the “relative stability” of roles, placed the emphasis on the historical man’s selection and pursuit of a culturally provided role.⁵¹ The complement to this is the historiographical fitting of such roles, an aspect given its due by Denis Twitchett’s contribution (“Problems of Chinese Biography”) to the same volume, which observes the use of “formulas [as] indications of the character-type to which the historian assigned his subject.”⁵² Once a figure is associated with a given type, certain kinds of statements fall into place.

In the case of Zuo Si, we see clearly how an individual’s type association could be ambiguous – he is either the humble man of talent (*Jin shu*), or the upstart social climber (Biezhuan). In fact, in instances where we find one type only, that does constitute a sort of stability, but not an entirely happy one – for we must ask whether it is the reasoned product of historical evaluation, or the homogenized result of the winnowing of diverse viewpoints. More importantly, there is the question of what a portrait under a given type signifies. Is the type a description of the man – information, intended to influence – or is the type serving some other function? In our case, we have the example of a *Shishuo xinyu* anecdote featuring Zuo Si and his higher-born contemporary Pan Yue 潘岳 (247-300). When Pan came out on the streets, it is said, admiring crowds came out in droves, but when Zuo Si strutted about in the same fashion, people gathered around to spit on him.⁵³ While we might see congruence here with the negative thrust of the Biezhuan, we might equally find that this is not Zuo Si but “Zuo Si,” the appropriation of him as a narrative function, his ugliness serving to manifest the beauty of Pan Yue. He is merely a prompt; in a variant version of the anecdote, the foil’s role is given to another “character actor,” Zhang Zai.⁵⁴ The portrait of Zuo Si in cases like this cannot mean much, neither to the historian nor to the reader

⁵⁰ An example in our biographical materials is the question of when Zuo Si began to consider composing a Three Capitals Rhapsody. The *Jin shu* clearly articulates it as before his sister entered the palace (…復欲賦三都，會妹芬入宮，移家京師，乃詣著作郎張載…)，but Zang Rongxu, if the *Beitang shuchao* quotation is accurate, has him composing it after the family move to Luoyang (會妹芬入宮，移家京師。作三都賦，構思十稔…). This may be a case of syntax over-determining chronology – one syntax or the other is necessary, but the historian may not have known or even seriously considered which one was right. The literary historical puzzle of “which decade did Zuo Si spend writing his work” derives directly from this ambiguity.

⁵¹ See Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett, ed., *Confucian Personalities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), p. 11.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 28, and discussion at p. 35.

⁵³ *Shishuo xinyu* 14/7.

⁵⁴ Noted in the *Shishuo* commentary and taken up into the *Jin shu* biography of Pan Yue (55.1507).

of historiography. Serving the narrative, his depiction is not a historiographical portrait but a motif in a larger connective pattern.

In contrast to information and influence, the stability of the connection model derives from its independence from fact and intention. Information is either true or false, and the informed historian has made one judgment or another of the facts; the ideal chronicle is directed by information, as the judicious narrative tells the story as it *should* be understood by the reader. But the connection model, a structural principle whose individual manifestations will naturally vary, is syntactic, not semantic. The problem of stability is inverted: connections are fungible, easily transformed, broken up, and, most importantly, extended into new formations in ways that bits of information and vectors of influence cannot be, lest they give way to the forces of entropy. Connection's fundamental stability resides in its permutations, in the form of anchored pairs or groups, however their actual instantiations may shift. Historical narratives gravitate to this form.

How free is the connections structure to mutate? While any given node retains the potential to chain out, there is one very important substructure providing a stable base for historiography, a sort of meta-anchor to the whole enterprise. This is historical documentation – the writings produced by historical actors. These documents are regularly excerpted in the histories: roughly a quarter of the bulk of the *Jin shu* biographies is comprised of the quotation of documents in whole or at length. We may think of the narrative introducing and following upon them as a frame, but what looks like narrative is often found to be the distillate of documentation itself. The connections and patterns that take shape are woven out of it.

In the case of Zuo Si's biography, it has been observed that some eighty percent of the *Jin shu* account and over two thirds of the Biezhuan are devoted to matters involving the Three Capitals Rhapsody.⁵⁵ In a sense, that is, these biographical narratives are less “life of Zuo Si” and more “account of the triumph of a grand literary work” – or “exposure of a literary fraud.” But the ‘connection’ to documents does not stop with his great rhapsody. If we look carefully at the *Jin shu*, we can see that certain statements that appear to be general are actually anchored in other parts of Zuo Si's literary oeuvre. When he retreats to his books after lecturing at court on the *Han shu* – was he not composing his “Poems on History,” three of which directly involve Western Han examples? When, in the years in which so many of his literary peers and social superiors were killed in factional battles, he refuses the Prince of Qi's appointment, and later takes his family to the northern province of Jizhou, where he dies in anonymity – was he not writing the “Summoning the Recluse” poems for which many would remember him?⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Mou Shijin, “Sandu fu de zhuannian ji qita,” p. 70.

⁵⁶ For example, the anecdote at *Shishuo xinyu* 23/47, where Wang Huizhi 王徽之 (338-386) recites one of these poems before visiting a recluse. The scholar Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531-591) picks up on this point some three centuries later, classing Zuo Si as a rare example of the literary man who

Grounding our interpretation of literary works in biography is a regular part of reading pre-modern Chinese literature. Connections points us to the less familiar counterpart: the grounding of biography in written documents, literary and otherwise.⁵⁷ One reason this ‘connection’ works both ways can be had if we return to the topic of “definition.” Composing a literary work is an act of self-definition – defining the world and one’s experience of it in a certain way. Historiography serves as the objective yet contingent counterpart to the subjective composition, ratifying the document while relying on it as a “primary source.” But is literary composition an act of self-definition, or is it better characterized by one of the standard metaphors for “writing” in this period – “connecting pieces of literary pattern” (*zhu wen* 屬文)?⁵⁸ Literature and historiography form the systole and diastole of early medieval literary culture – and for both of these arts, connections are a primary, over-determining motivation.

Conclusion

Is it right to make a scapegoat out of “information”? To do so would seem both untrue of and unfair to our subject: untrue because things did happen in the early medieval Chinese past and the historiography from that period does give us (some) access to (some aspects of) those events, and unfair because in denying or even playing down the truth value of a well-intentioned source, we would fail to treat the historian behind it as “what he thought he chiefly was: a teller of true tales about the past.”⁵⁹ It is not too sentimental to observe that our interest in the Chinese past is fundamentally a shared one, among those who sought, and seek, to convey it “as it was.”

But indeed, this essay has sought to put the information perspective in question. Plainly put: to prioritize information in our interpretations of early medieval historiography – to suggest that Zuo Si kept notebooks all over his house for a period of ten years, or that paper in Luoyang grew expensive in the wake of the publication of his Three Capitals Rhapsody – is to commit a methodological error

managed to survive a time of great turmoil; see Wang Liqi, ed., *Yanshi jiaxun jijie* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980), 9.222. On Zuo Si and reclusion, see also Xu Chuanwu, *Zuo Si Zuo Fen yanjiu*, pp. 224-226.

⁵⁷ Another example is the biography of Tao Yuanming; see the remarks at Xiaofei Tian, *Tao Yuanming and Manuscript Culture: The Record of a Dusty Table* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2005), pp. 57-58.

⁵⁸ In the *Jin shu* alone the term *zhu wen* appears some 50 times.

⁵⁹ J. E. Lendon, “Historians without History: Against Roman Historiography,” p. 41, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Historians*, ed. Andrew Feldherr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 41-61. This is an instructive and entertaining evisceration of the scholarly trend that would regard Roman historiography as a species of rhetoric. But it is not strictly necessary to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

in historiographical inquiry. This is not to say that we have abandoned any interest in the information value of our sources. The ethical obligation of the historian aside, information takes on importance in two new ways. First, information remains significant because only through understanding the information value of historiography will it be possible to identify and make sense of its lines of influence and connection. Evaluating information provides the parameters necessary to our goal of producing robust interpretations of our sources. More importantly, information itself remains an end, but one transformed by this analysis. Would we say that historiography was important in early medieval China? It was very important. Would we suppose, then, that the phenomena of persuasion and connection-making in this historiography were isolated in it alone? To the contrary, it is far better to regard the motives crystallized in historiography as ones that ran through the culture at large. The forces of influence and connection themselves constituted and constellated the “information” of history.

Turning our attention to influence, we see early medieval ‘historiography’ not, primarily, as the ‘history’ of or inquiry into past events, but as a form of rhetoric – the presentation of events to a certain effect. There were facts and they could be had by historians, but many such facts reached them already mediated by a rhetorical process, and departed all the more so, and when, in the Jin dynasty under which Zuo Si lived, the composition of an orthodox biography served as a metric by which young men of the elite were evaluated, surely it was to test their prowess in rhetoric, if also their command of fact.⁶⁰ Thus we are right to focus on how history was told, and what assumptions and arguments can be detected below the ground of any given telling.

The problem with focusing on influence lies in the double-edged nature of rhetoric. In the active sense, rhetoric is the use of strategies of persuasion by historical actors – the historiographers, and those whose tales they tell. But a passive sense must also be acknowledged, in which the arguments we make are bound up with existing discursive structures. Arguments issue from us. For the early medieval historiographers, agents in an engrained praxis, the vectors of influence were not entirely in their grasp. Sometimes it may be quite clear what perspective a historian or a history is pushing us to adopt, but sometimes it is not, because the given historiographical text was written on the basis of earlier texts, taking up their various vectors of influence into one less than congruous whole. It may be that the historian did not even have a clear perspective on the issue at hand, but that ‘relaying and not creating’, he was connecting the pieces he had on hand.

In this context, while connections can be viewed as a historian’s resource in the crafting of arguments – or simply a way he integrated information – the connective principle is more fundamentally a source of passive rhetoric. Connection answers the question that is raised when the analysis of historiography faces one of the most basic conditions of communication – that the qualities of a medium or “channel”

⁶⁰ See *Song shu* 40.1246, noting the lapse of this practice.

determine, to some great degree, what message is conveyed. The textual channel here is formed of connective tissue, both within the bounds of a single text and across a ‘body’ of related texts. Thus, the connections perspective becomes an area of inquiry: How do we find these connections, and how do we find sense in them? According to what special connective patterns was the culture of early medieval China stamped out? What processes served to generate new connections, or extend older ones? What further concepts can help explain the significance of this ever extendible process of connection? If we can master it, focus on connection can become a valuable corrective in the hands of the modern student of early medieval China, allowing us to listen to what our sources say – their information and influence – without being bound to accepting the perspectives they appear to voice.

To close in the fashion of early medieval historiography – the encomiastic verse –

In early medieval biography:
Information is submerged in influence,
Influence is constituted by connections, and
Connections extend beyond influence.

Appendix: Biographical sources for Zuo Si

A. *Wang Yin's Jin shu* 王隱《晉書》

1. 王隱晉書：左思父雍，起卑吏。晉武以爲能，擢爲殿中侍御史。思少學鍾繇書、鼓琴，皆不成。雍曰：思不及我少時也。思乃發憤，造齊都賦，一年不出戶牖。（《北堂書鈔》（續修四庫全書）102.3b）
2. 又云⁶¹：左思，字太冲。少好學，司徒隴西王（太）〔泰〕辟爲祭酒。（《北堂書鈔》69.3b-4a.）
3. 王隱《晉書》曰：左思少好經術，嘗習鍾、胡書，不成。學琴，又不成。⁶²貌醜口訥，甚有大才。⁶³博覽諸經，遍通子史。（《文選集注》引「鈔」注）
4. 〔于時天下三分，各相誇競。當思之時，國爲晉所平，思乃賦此三都，以

⁶¹ The antecedent for *you yun* 又云 here reads “Wang *Jin shu*” 王晉書. If we assume “Yin” 隱 has dropped out, then 少好學 should be paraphrase of the more specific phrase 少好經術, in passage 3, below. However, the preceding entry in the *Beitang shuchao*, on Zuo’s contemporary Gu Rong 顧榮, does not directly match content on Gu Rong cited from “Wang Yin *Jin shu*” at *Chuxue ji* 12.2.283.

⁶² The diction here varies from passage 1. Either one of our sources is paraphrasing more than the other, or there were different versions of “Wang Yin,” or one attribution is wrong.

⁶³ Possibly 甚有大才 (“he had abundant great talent”) should be emended to the graphically similar 甚有文才 (“he had abundant literary talent”). That is the phrase in the *Biezhuan* (end of passage 1, below), and 大才 is redundant with 甚.

極眩曜。其蜀事訪於張載，事訪於陸機，後乃成之。（《文選集注》引「鈔」注）⁶⁴

5. 王隱《晉書》云：左思專思三都賦，絕人倫之事。⁶⁵自以所見不博，求為祕書郎。（《初學記》12.11.298；《太平御覽》233.6b）
6. 王隱《晉書》曰：左思徙居洛城東，著經始東山廬詩。（《文選》22.1028李善注）⁶⁶

B. A “separately circulating” biography of Zuo Si 左思別傳

1. 思字太沖，齊國臨淄人。父雍，起於筆札。多所掌練，為殿中御史。思蚤喪母，雍憐之，⁶⁷不甚教其書學。及長，博覽名文，遍閱百家。司空張華辟為祭酒，賈謐舉為祕書郎。謐誅，歸鄉里，專思著述。齊王問請為記室參軍，不起。時為三都賦未成也。後數年疾終。其三都賦改定至終乃止。⁶⁸初作蜀都賦云：金馬電發於高崗，碧雞振翼而雲披。鬼彈飛丸以礮礮，火井騰光以赫曦。今無鬼彈。故其賦往往不同。思為人無吏幹，而有文才。又頗以椒房自矜。故齊人不重也。（《世說新語》4/68劉孝標注）
2. 思造張載問婚蜀事，交接亦疏。皇甫謐，西州高士；摯仲治，宿儒知名；非思倫匹。劉淵林、衛伯輿，並蚤終，皆不為思賦序注也。凡諸注解，皆思自為。欲重其文，故假時人名姓也。（《世說新語》4/68劉孝標注）

C. Unidentified materials from the *Taiping yulan*

⁶⁴ This is a continuation of the “Chao” commentary quotation of passage 3. This may be from Wang Yin, or it may be a paraphrase/summary based on Wang Yin’s work. I separate it here for two reasons: 1) The diction seems different from what one would expect of historiographical narration: the use of “this” 此, and compare 于時 in the pseudo-Li Shan comment at *Wen xuan* 29.42a. 2) The whole is similar to the Five Ministers commentary in this same position. Although that passage is sometimes taken to be Zang Rongxu’s *Jin shu*, it may in fact be the Five Ministers’ explanation.

⁶⁵ *Taiping yulan* has 杜絕人事. Tang Qiu 湯球 (1804-1881), *Jiu jia jiu Jin shu jiben* 九家舊晉書輯本 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985) reads: 杜絕人流之事.

⁶⁶ In the context of the *Wen xuan* commentary, this is read as providing historical ground for a literary composition, but as argued in the last section of this paper, as a statement in historiography it is the inverse, building a historical account out of literary documentation.

⁶⁷ The Kanazawa edition (the earliest representative, photorpt. Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1962, p. 156) reads 思少孤 for 思蚤喪母，雍憐之. Yu Jiayi shows, by reference to Zuo Si and Zuo Fen’s writings, that the Kanazawa reading is factually wrong. But that does not explain how it got there, or the fact that some readers apparently read it this way. That version would seem to mean “but Zuo Si was orphaned at a young age, and his father did not [have the chance to] teach him much.” A potential source is the anchor text we have seen twice above: the biography of Wang Chong (*Hou Han shu* 49.1629), where the same phrase *shao gu* is used.

⁶⁸ 止 is from the Kanazawa edition. Note that Yu Jiayi’s text still reads 上 for 止 – a graphic corruption.

1. 晉書曰：左思字太冲，齊郡臨淄人。思少而好學，年四十未仕。潛思爲三都賦，十年而成。貴勢之家競傳相(sic)寫。(太平御覽600.6b，思遲)⁶⁹
2. 又案：郭伯通、衛瓘爲思傳曰思爲三都改易死乃止。(同上)⁷⁰

D. *From the Wenshi zhuan (文士傳, Biographies of Literary Men)*

1. 張隲文士傳曰：左思，字太冲。貌惡不揚，口訥不能給談；默而心解。(《太平御覽》464.9a 訥)
2. 文士傳曰：左思初作蜀都賦，曰：鬼彈飛丸以礪礪。後又改易，無此語。(《太平御覽》884.5a 鬼)

E. *Anecdote from the Shishuo xinyu 世說新語 (4/68)*

左太冲作三都賦初成，時人互有譏訾，思意不愜。後示張公。張曰：「此二京可三，然君文未重於世，宜以經高名之士。」思乃詢求於皇甫謐。謐見之嗟歎，遂爲作敘。於是先相非貳者，莫不斂衽讚述焉。⁷¹

F. *Zang Rongxu Jin shu 臧榮緒《晉書》⁷²*

1. 臧榮緒晉書曰：左思，字太⁷³冲，齊國人也。⁷⁴少博覽文記。⁷⁵{會妹芬入

⁶⁹ Could this be from Wang Yin's *Jin shu*? The detail "at age forty he still had not taken office" is unattested elsewhere.

⁷⁰ This is likely damaged and it could be a quotation of the *Biezhuan*. But it may be some source associated with Wei Guan/Quan – part of his preface? a biographical sketch of Zuo Si? – and the unidentified "Guo Botong."

⁷¹ Zuo Si or his "Three Capitals Rhapsody" also appears at 4/79, 14/47, and 23/47, and in the *Jin shu* expansion (56.1544) of the Sun Chuo anecdote at 4/86.

⁷² Here I have attempted a composite text. The basis is the *Wen xuan jizhu* version of Li Shan's author note to the Three Capitals Rhapsody; see Zhou Xunchu, ed., *Tang chao Wen xuan jizhu huicun* 唐鈔文選集註彙存 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2000), j. 8, 1:1-2. Other material is in {brackets}. The comparison texts are: the You Mao edition, the Xiuzhou edition text and the associated Five Ministers commentary (Xiuzhou 4.19a-b); the remnant *guozijian* 國子監 printing of the Li Shan *Wen xuan* (Fu Ssu-nian Library, microform 2673); two versions of the *Beitang shuchao*: Kong Guangtao's edited version (*Xuxiu Siku quanshu* ed., 102.3b), and the abridged and disparaged but apparently valuable late Ming text in *Tang lei han* 唐類函 (Ed. Yu Anqi 俞安期, printed 1603, scanned holding of the Chinese University of Hong Kong Library, shelf mark AE17.Y78 1603, accessed via ctext.org; vol. 21, 104.19b); and Tang Qiu's *Jiu jia jiu Jin shu jiben*. Significant variation is noted below.

⁷³ The *Wen xuan jizhu* alone prints 泰.

⁷⁴ Only the *Wen xuan jizhu* has the concluding particle *ye*, but it does appear in the Five Ministers citation of the passage. Below the phrase "native of Qi," Tang Qiu adds the following, from *Chuxue ji* 19.458, which cites only a *Jin shu*: 左思貌醜而口訥. This differs from the current *Jin shu* only by one graph and from the Wang Yin *Jin shu* only by the conjunction *er*.

⁷⁵ 文記 follows the *Wen xuan jizhu*. The Five Ministers and the *Tang lei han* edition (this sentence

宮，移家京師。} ⁷⁶ 欲 ⁷⁷ 作三都賦，乃詣著作郎張載，訪岷、邛之事。遂構思十稔，門庭藩溷，皆著紙筆，遇得一句，即便 ⁷⁸ 疏之。徵爲秘書。 ⁷⁹ 賦成，{世人未之重。} ⁸⁰ {皇甫謐有高名於世，思乃造而示之，謐稱善，爲其賦序。} ⁸¹ {張載爲注魏都，劉逵爲注吳、蜀，自是之後，漸行於世。} ⁸² {司

is not in the Kong Guangtao version) of the *Beitang shuchao* have 史記; You Mao, Xiuzhou, and *guozijian* have 文史. There are three reasons to follow the *jizhu* reading: 1) It is the rarer combination, *shi ji* and *wen shi* being common terms; 2) the *Wen xuan jizhu*, while not free from error, is known to preserve old readings; and 3) corruption of 文記 to the other two forms requires only graphic corruption or direct emendation of individual graphs (i.e., 文 to 史 for 史記, or 記 to 史 for 文史), while corruption between 史記 and 文史 would imply the interpolation of a new graph and the erasure of an existing one (e.g., from 史記: insert 文 at the beginning and drop 記 at the end).

⁷⁶ Placement of 會妹芬入宮，移家京師 before 欲作三都賦 follows the *Beitang shuchao* (both versions); Tang Qiu's collection inserts it after, which is how the received *Jin shu* presents it.

⁷⁷ The Xiuzhou edition prints *sui* 遂, "thereupon," in place of *yu* 欲, "he desired to." Both *jizhu* and You Mao have *yu* (the Five Ministers version omits both words), *sui* makes poor sense, and the appearance of *sui* two sentences down in the text is a likely cause for error in the Xiuzhou text.

⁷⁸ The word *bian* 便 has dropped out of the You Mao text, and those that follow it, including the corresponding Five Ministers passage, but is present in *Jizhu*, Xiuzhou, and the *guozijian* printing and, contra Tang Qiu's collection, should be regarded as integral to Zang Rongxu.

⁷⁹ Note that Zang Rongxu has *apparently* not taken up the expressly eulogistic image, presented in Wang Yin and carried on in the received *Jin shu*, of Zuo Si actively seeking out a position in the Library for the betterment of his great work. He is simply "summoned" to the appointment.

⁸⁰ This clause from the *Beitang shuchao*, and cited in isolation at Li Shan's title commentary to Huangfu Mi's preface to the Three Capitals (*Wen xuan* 45.1307). The Kong Guangtao edition of *Beitang shuchao* substitutes the conjunction 而 for 賦成. 世 is absent in the *Tang leihan* edition of the *Beitang shuchao*, likely dropped as an easy way of avoiding the Tang taboo – compare the instance of 世, 代, and 俗 below.

⁸¹ This sentence is inserted from the Li Shan commentary to Huangfu's preface, as noted above, where the quotation opens with 左思作三都賦 and closes with the particle *ye* – both part of the commentator's paraphrase. Note that the *Beitang shuchao* citation passes over Huangfu Mi, linking "people did not respect it" directly to Zhang Hua's comment below.

⁸² 張載... Inserted from Li Shan's note under the commentator ("Liu Yuanlin," 4.173), where *fu cheng* appears as *sandu fu cheng* 三都賦成; while this could either be a paraphrase expansion here or an elision in the earlier citation, the *Beitang shuchao* has *fu cheng*, suggesting that *sandu* is not integral. It is possible that this item could follow Zhang Hua's comment, but the logic of the narrative (some circulation, followed by publicity in the capital, followed by great circulation) better supports positioning it here. The You Mao edition does not identify this as Zang Rongxu's *Jin shu*, but it is so identified in Xiuzhou and in *Jizhu* (1:11) – where it comes after the title to "Shu Capital Rhapsody." The final clause appears as 漸行於俗也 in the

空} ⁸³張華見而咨嗟，{深贊之，兼作序。} ⁸⁴都邑豪貴，競相傳寫，⁸⁵ 遍于海內。⁸⁶ (《文選》4.172，李善注)

2. [三都者，劉備都益州，號蜀；孫權都建業，號吳；曹操都鄴，號魏。思作賦時，吳、蜀已平，見前賢文之是非，故作斯賦以辨衆惑。(《文選》4.172，李善注)]⁸⁷

G. *The received Jin shu biography* 《晉書》文苑傳——左思⁸⁸

左思字太沖，齊國臨淄人也。其先齊之公族有左右公子，因爲氏焉。家世儒

You Mao and Xiuzhou and *guozijian* editions; here following the *Jizhu* text, which lacks the concluding particle *ye* and has *dai* 代 for *su* 俗. *Dai* and *su* are two varieties of taboo substitution for the character *shi* 世, here restored to the text.

⁸³ 司空 is in the Kong Guangtao *Beitang shuchao*, but not in the *Tang lei han* version, nor is it in any *Wen xuan* text.

⁸⁴ 深贊之，兼作序 is from the *Tang lei han* version of the *Beitang shuchao* only.

⁸⁵ Here *only* the *Tang lei han* version of the *Beitang shuchao* adds the phrase 都下紙貴, where it closes the quotation; the Kong Guangtao *Beitang shuchao* simply closes the preceding clause with the particle *yan* 焉. Note that, as argued in the main text of this study, no other early source associates this story with Zuo Si: it is likely a note interpolated into the encyclopedia passage, and possibly a variation on the superficially similar locution in the text here, 都邑豪貴.

⁸⁶ The final clause, 遍于海內, is from the *Jizhu*, *guozijian*, and Xiuzhou editions, the latter two closing with the *ye* particle. It is absent only You Mao (and texts that follow), which continues with the Five Ministers interpolation noted below.

⁸⁷ The You Mao text of Passage 1 above continues with this passage. However, in both the *Jizhu* and the Xiuzhou edition, it is in the Five Ministers commentary, not Li Shan, and it is rightly absent from the *guozijian* Li Shan edition. The *Wen xuan kaoyi* observes that this is a case of the Five Ministers commentary polluting Li Shan, but the implications of this must be made explicit: that this is a Five Ministers gloss on the poem, not a quotation from Zang Rongxu. Indeed, in the *Jizhu* it is identified only as a Five Ministers comment, not as a quotation from a *Jin shu*.

⁸⁸ See *Jin shu* 92.2375-77, and *Jin shu jiaozhu* 92.8a-11b. For annotated translations, see especially: Satō Toshiyuki, “Rikuchō bunjin den: Sa Shi (Shin Sho),” *Chūgoku chūsei bungaku kenkyū* 34 (1998): 77-85; Nishioka Atsushi, “Sa Shi,” in Kōzen Hiroshi, ed., *Rikuchō shijin den* (Tokyo: Taishukan, 2000), pp. 293-303; Zhou Zuxun, ed., *Lidai wenyuan zhuan jianzheng* (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2012), pp. 163-174. The biography is summarized in section one of this essay; to go beyond what the above sources provide would require dealing with the status of the prefaces quoted in the biography, the relation of the biography to Zuo Si’s literary work, and the socio-political context in which Zuo Si and his family lived. The text here follows the *Zhonghua Jin shu*, but repealing both editorial corrections: the orthography of “Cai Yong” (pollution from the given name of Zuo Si’s father?) and the graphic confusion behind “Wei Guan” and “Wei Quan.” “Wei Guan” may be “wrong,” but it is so in all *Jin shu* texts and is confirmed in the *Sui shu* bibliography (where it is corrected again in the *Zhonghua* edition), in the *Cefu yuangui* citation of this passage, and in the *Wen xuan jizhu* commentary.

學。父雍，起小吏，以能擢授殿中侍御史。思少學鍾、胡書及鼓琴，並不成。雍謂友人曰：「思所曉解，不及我少時。」思遂感激勤學，兼善陰陽之術。貌寢，口訥，而辭藻壯麗。不好交遊，惟以閑居爲事。

造齊都賦，一年乃成。復欲賦三都，會妹芬入宮，移家京師，乃詣著作郎張載訪岷邛之事。遂構思十年，門庭藩溷皆著筆紙，遇得一句，即便疏之。自以所見不博，求爲祕書郎。及賦成，時人未之重。思自以其作不謝班張，恐以人廢言，安定皇甫謐有高譽，思造而示之。謐稱善，爲其賦序。

張載爲注魏都，劉逵注吳蜀而序之曰：

「觀中古以來爲賦者多矣，相如子虛擅名於前，班固兩都理勝其辭，張衡二京文過其意。至若此賦，擬議數家，傳辭會義，抑多精緻，非夫研覈者不能練其旨，非夫博物者不能統其異。世咸貴遠而賤近，莫肯用心於明物。斯文吾有異焉，故聊以餘思爲其引詁，亦猶胡廣之於官箴，蔡雍(sic)之於典引也。」

陳留衛瓘(sic)又爲思賦作略解，序曰：

「余觀三都之賦，言不苟華，必經典要，品物殊類，稟之圖籍；辭義瓌璋，良可貴也。有晉徵士故太子中庶子安定皇甫謐，西州之逸士，耽籍樂道，高尚其事，覽斯文而慷慨，爲之都序。中書著作郎安平張載、中書郎濟南劉逵，並以經學洽博，才章美茂，咸皆悅玩，爲之訓詁；其山川土域，草木鳥獸，奇怪珍異，僉皆研精所由，紛散其義矣。余嘉其文，不能默已，聊藉二子之遺忘，又爲之略解，祇增煩重，覽者闕焉。」

自是之後，盛重於時，文多不載。司空張華見而歎曰：「班張之流也。使讀之者盡而有餘，久而更新。」於是豪貴之家競相傳寫，洛陽爲之紙貴。

初，陸機入洛，欲爲此賦，聞思作之，撫掌而笑，與弟雲書曰：「此間有傖父，欲作三都賦，須其成，當以覆酒甕耳。」及思賦出，機絕歎伏，以爲不能加也，遂輟筆焉。

祕書監賈謐請講漢書，謐誅，退居宜春里，專意典籍。

齊王冏命爲記室督，辭疾，不就。

及張方縱暴都邑，舉家適冀州。數歲，以疾終。

A New Approach to Biography in Early Medieval China: The Case of Zuo Si

Zeb RAFT

When we want information about an early medieval Chinese poet, we turn to his biography in a dynastic history, and to other related kinds of early medieval sources. The purpose of this essay is to explore what it is we can get from these sources, or what it is that these sources “communicate” to us. To do so, three paradigms of communication are invoked: information, influence, and connection. The limited argument is that extant biographical materials on the Western Jin poet Zuo Si are most fruitfully read in terms of “influence” and “connection” – and less fruitfully for “information.” The more general argument is that our standard information-based way of utilizing biographical source material should be supplemented by closer attention to the persuasive qualities of biographical writing and, especially, to the connective patterns that emerge within a text and across a body of texts.

Keywords: biography historiography communication information rhetoric

訊息、影響與連結：從左思傳記探索 中古傳記的三種解讀方式

雷之波

史傳在中古文學研究中扮演重要的角色：當我們要研究一位詩人時，必定會參考、引用相關傳記材料。只是，我們從這類史傳材料所得出的，究竟是什麼樣的訊息？或者說，這些史傳「傳達」了什麼訊息給我們？本文以西晉詩人左思的傳記材料為例，試圖探索此一問題。本文應用三種不同的溝通範式——「訊息」(information)、「影響」(influence)與「連結」(connection)——來解讀左思的傳記材料。本文指出，最習見的「訊息」範式，其價值固然不可忽略，然而，另外兩種溝通範式——即「影響」與「連結」——應用在史傳上，所能產生的解釋力，值得我們注意。本文不僅認為左思相關傳記材料較適合從影響與連結的面向去解讀，更認為中古文學研究對史傳的通行用法，即以汲取傳記中「訊息」為主的方式，可藉此予以反思。

關鍵詞：傳記 歷史書寫 溝通 訊息 修辭

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