Introduction

This book offers a comprehensive analysis of the *Shih-shuo hsün-yü* (conventionally translated as “A New Account of Tales of the World”) and its literary legacy—a legacy that lasted for well over 1,600 years in China and that also extended to other parts of East Asia during this period. Compiled by the Liu-Sung (420–479) Prince of Liu I-ch’ing (403–444) and his staff around A.D. 430, the *Shih-shuo hsün-yü* consists of more than 1,130 historical anecdotes about elite life in the late Han (ca. 150–220) and Wei-Chin (220–420) periods—what is generally regarded as China’s early medieval period. Together, these beautifully written and artfully constructed anecdotes express what came to be known as the “Wei-Chin spirit,” an outgrowth of new intellectual trends that emerged during one of the most creative and iconoclastic periods of Chinese imperial history.

The *Shih-shuo hsün-yü* also inaugurated a specific Chinese literary genre—the *Shih-shuo t’i*, which inspired dozens of imitations from the latter part of the T’ang dynasty (618–907) to the early Republican era (the early twentieth century). Most of these imitations were Chinese works, but a few were written by Japanese. What do the *Shih-shuo hsün-yü* and its various imitations tell us about the way the Wei-Chin spirit came to be transmitted and transformed across space and time? What does the *Shih-shuo t’i* reveal about changing social values, standards of behavior, and attitudes toward gender in both China and Japan? Satisfactory answers to these and other such questions require new ways of thinking about a magnificent book (and an entire genre) that for too long has been marginalized and misunderstood.
The Purpose and Significance of Studying
the Shih-shuo hsin-yü Tradition

Despite a general recognition of the Shih-shuo t'i’s place in China’s literary history (and, to a lesser extent, that of Japan), the genre itself has never been adequately defined nor thoroughly studied. From the seventh century to the present, the Shih-shuo hsin-yü and its imitations have been categorized as hsiao-shuo (petty talk or minor persuasions), a pejorative classification analogous to what Confucians described as the hsiao-tao or the “petty path”—activities that did not measure up to Confucian standards of scholarship and/or moral attainment. The stigma of hsiao-shuo, with its connotations of triviality and incoherence, not only blurred the distinctive identity of the Shih-shuo hsin-yü, but it also dimmed the glory of the Wei-Chin spirit encapsulated within it. Complicating matters further is the fact that in modern China the term hsiao-shuo has come to be used as the equivalent of the Western notion of “fiction,” specifically the “novel.”

The Shih-shuo hsin-yü thus occupies a strange position in Chinese literary life. When treated as a collection of Wei-Chin cultural references and historical anecdotes, it has been highly regarded, placed in a central position, and hence well studied; but, when considered as hsiao-shuo, it has been ignored, marginalized, and hence underexamined. Paradoxically, the term hsiao-shuo, as a label of inauthenticity, has often undermined the Shih-shuo hsin-yü’s academic reputation, and yet the undeniable academic value of the Shih-shuo hsin-yü as a historical source clearly challenges the modern definition of hsiao-shuo as “fiction.” The result has been that scholars both in China and the West have failed to see the work for itself. By forcing the Shih-shuo hsin-yü into one or another inappropriate category, they have created a gap in our understanding of its proper place in the Chinese literary tradition.

This study, then, fills a critical gap in both Chinese and Western language scholarship on the Shih-shuo hsin-yü and its imitations, viewing the whole tradition as a distinct narrative genre in its own right. It offers the first thorough study in any language of the origins and evolution of the Shih-shuo t'i, based on a comprehensive literary analysis of the Shih-shuo hsin-
yü and a systematic documentation and examination of more than thirty Shih-shuo imitations, many of which are still unknown to specialists in Chinese literature. As a unique Chinese genre, the Shih-shuo t’i does not occur in other world literatures; it emerges out of particular historical conditions, and it changes as the historical conditions change. Studying this genre can teach us about the relationships between ideology, genre, and specific historical or social contexts.

This study also contributes to the growing interest in the Chinese idea of individual identity, expressed in concepts such as body, self, person, and gender. These terms have received considerable attention in recent years from scholars, some of whom have employed explicitly cross-cultural approaches. What the Shih-shuo hsin-yü and its many imitations offer is a detailed understanding of what the complex process of “self-fashioning” has entailed historically in China—specifically, how competing understandings of the “self” have been expressed in Chinese literature (and life) across the boundaries of time, space, and gender. By focusing specifically on the Shih-shuo genre, which provided the starting point in China for a systematic literary construction of the self (see below), we can see that contrary to certain Western assertions of a timeless Chinese “tradition,” an authentic understanding of issues such as personhood and gender in China was never static; rather, it changed continually and often significantly in response to changing historical and cultural circumstances.

The Shih-shuo hsin-yü as “Character Writing”

What kind of a book is the Shih-shuo hsin-yü? The following episode provides a brief illustration of the basic characteristics of this work, its genre, and its presentation of the Wei-Chin spirit:

When Huan Wen was young, he and Yin Hao were of equal reputation, and they constantly felt a spirit of mutual rivalry. Huan once asked Yin, “How do you compare with me [wo]?”

Yin replied, “I [wo] have been keeping company with myself [wo] a long time; I [wo] would rather just be me [wo].” (9/35)
What immediately strikes us about this episode is (1) the two characters’ burning desire for self-affirmation (the character 了, I/me/myself, appears five times in a thirty-character episode) and (2) their competing understandings of what it means to be a “self.” Huan Wen’s (312–373) understanding of self presumes a collective, hierarchical, and standardizable value system, in which superior status serves as the standard of judgment. For Yin Hao (306–356), however, the self is an independent, incomparable entity; to yield himself to a comparison means to erase his own identity while assuming another’s. Thus he declines Huan Wen’s challenge in order to keep his own “self” intact.

Two distinct personalities emerge in this brief anecdote: Huan Wen appears arrogant and blunt. Beneath his aggressive exterior, however, he is not very confident. He initiates a comparison and assigns himself as the standard, in order to affirm his self-worth by reference to someone else. In contrast, Yin Hao’s seeming restraint only reveals his pride; he refuses to compete with Huan Wen not because he is afraid of a direct clash, but because Huan’s unsophisticated challenge merits no attention. The author does not explicitly label these traits; we have to read between the lines. In this intense, face-to-face confrontation between the two characters, the heated atmosphere aroused by their rivalry exposes the personalities of both parties.

This episode exemplifies some basic features of the anecdotes collected in the Shih-shuo hsin-yü⁴—all of them about the daily life of real historical figures, ranging from state affairs to philosophical and poetic gatherings, from public relationships to trifling domestic matters. Most of the episodes focus not so much on recounting the details or progression of an event as on capturing the emotional and personal characteristics of the participants. This concern with human personality types is further elaborated in the structure of the entire book, which classifies all the episodes into thirty-six categories.

1. “Te-hsing” (Te conduct)⁵
2. “Yen-yü” (Speech and conversation)
3. “Cheng-shih” (Affairs of government)
4. “Wen-hsüeh” (Literature and scholarship)
5. “Fang-cheng” (The square and the proper)
6. “Ya-liang” (Cultivated tolerance)
7. “Shih-chien” (Recognition and judgment)
8. “Shang-yü” (Appreciation and praise)
9. “P’in-tsao” (Ranking with refined words)
10. “Kuei-chen” (Admonitions and warnings)
11. “Chieh-wu” (Quick perception)
12. “Su-hui” (Precocious intelligence)
13. “Hao-shuang” (Virility and boldness)
14. “Jung-chih” (Appearance and manner)
15. “Tzu-hsin” (Self-renewal)
16. “Ch’i-hsien” (Admiration and emulation)
17. “Shang-shih” (Grieving for the departed)
18. “Ch’i-i” (Reclusion and disengagement)
19. “Hsien-yüan” (Worthy beauties)
20. “Shu-chiieh” (Technical understanding)
21. “Ch’iao-i” (Ingenious art)
22. “Ch’ung-li” (Favor and veneration)
23. “Jen-tan” (Uninhibitedness and eccentricity)
24. “Chien-ao” (Rudeness and arrogance)
25. “P’ai-t’iao” (Taunting and teasing)
26. “Ch’ing-ti” (Contempt and insults)
27. “Chia-chüeh” (Guile and chicanery)
28. “Ch’u-mien” (Dismissal from office)
29. “Chien-se” (Stinginess and meanness)
30. “Tai-ch’ih” (Extravagance and ostentation)
31. “Fen-Chüan” (Anger and irascibility)
32. “Ch’an-hsien” (Slanderousness and treachery)
33. “Yu-hui” (Blameworthiness and remorse)
34. “P’i-lou” (Crudities and blunders)
35. “Huo-ni” (Delusion and infatuation)
36. “Ch’ou-hsi” (Hostility and alienation)

All these categories are related to the observation and evaluation of people: their physical appearance, innate abilities, moral qualities, psy-
The Wei-Chin Spirit as a Collective Intellectual Aura

What is the Wei-Chin spirit? This question goes side-by-side with another one: What caused the emergence of the Shih-shuo t’i along with the compilation of the Shih-shuo hsin-yü? In his effort to trace the origin of genres within world literature, Tzvetan Todorov points out that “each era has its own system of genres, which is in relation with the dominant ideology. . . . Genres, like any other institution, reveal the constitutive traits of the society to which they belong.” Accordingly, the Shih-shuo hsin-yü emerged from, and reciprocally embodied, the Wei-Chin spirit. This spirit evolved from the close interaction and mutual reinforcement of three aspects of Wei-Chin intellectual life: namely, the dominant ideology, Hsüan-hsūeh (dark learning or abstruse learning), the practice of jen-lun chien-shih (judgment and recognition of human [character] types, more succinctly translated as “character appraisal”), and the growth of self-awareness.

The focal point of this intellectual interaction was character appraisal, which started in the Later Han era as the basis of selecting officials for bureaucratic posts, when leading local scholars evaluated and recommended candidates according to Confucian moral criteria. During the Wei-Chin period, character appraisal gradually shed its political emphasis and evolved into a comprehensive study of human nature. Character appraisal incited intense competition in gentry society, nurturing in turn the growth of self-awareness that had resulted from the collapse of the Han Confucian moral codes. Self-awareness furnished character appraisal with a profusion of personalities, moving the development of this practice in the di-
rection of psychological and aesthetic concerns. In addition, both char-
acter appraisal and self-awareness sought their theoretical basis in *Hsüan-
hsüeh*, hastening the systematization of this new scholarship, which in-
volved a rereading and reevaluating of Han Confucianism in terms of
Taoism and newly imported Buddhism.10 *Hsüan-hsüeh* brought character
appraisal and self-awareness from concrete concerns about one’s charac-
teristics to an ontological, psychological, and aesthetic quest for ways to
understand and to express the subtle, elusive aspects of human nature.

Character appraisal involved the entire Wei-Chin elite, each member
both evaluating and being evaluated. From the perspective of the evalua-
tor, the effort to understand human nature in general and individual per-
sonality in particular triggered profound philosophic, psychological, and
ethical discussions, and the need to grasp one’s elusive spirit in language
and other media encouraged excursions in aesthetics, linguistics, art, and
literature. From the perspective of the person being evaluated (hereafter
“evaluatee”), each gentry member struggled to remain true to his or her
self and to express that authentic self. This self-fashioning required a con-
stant, often painful process of identification with and differentiation from
others, along with intensely personal comparisons and competitions.

Within this intellectual context, Wei-Chin character appraisal focused
on *ch’uan-shen*, or “transmitting spirit.” In this process, the evaluator tried
to comprehend the personality of the person being evaluated through ob-
serving his or her *shen* (spirit), and the evaluatee tried to expose the unique
part of his or her personality by means of the same “spiritual” vehicle. Both
parties relied heavily upon words to convey the spirit. To be sure, Chinese
intellectuals had long recognized the limitations of language. In the words
of the “Great Commentary” of the *I-ching* (Book of changes), “Writing does
not completely express speech, nor does speech completely express ideas”
(*shu pu chin yen, yen pu chin i*).11 The *Lao-tzu* also tells us, “Those who
know do not speak, and those who speak do not know” (*chih-che pu yen,
yen-che pu chih*).12 Yet instead of eschewing words, the Taoists used “all
available resources of literary art” to express meanings.13

Following this Taoist solution to the linguistic paradox, which was later
enriched by the similar concerns (and solutions) of Buddhism, Wei-Chin
character appraisal contributed substantially to the literary construction of the self in China. The *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* epitomized this Wei-Chin intellectual effort. It “transmitted the spirit” of over six hundred historical figures in the book, collectively reflecting the spirit of the age. This unique Wei-Chin style and manner, sustained by an extraordinarily eccentric, sensitive, and intellectually sophisticated elite group, became known to later generations as the *Wei-Chin feng-liu* (literally, Wei-Chin winds and currents), *Wei-Chin feng-tu* (Wei-Chin winds and manner), or *Wei-Chin shen-yün* (Wei-Chin spirit consonance)—in short, what I have termed the Wei-Chin “spirit.” This spirit can best be summarized as a relentless effort to realize and to manifest appropriately one’s true self.

The *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* left to later generations a two-fold legacy. It transmitted a spirit that continued to inspire Chinese intellectuals to find (and express) their authentic “self.” It also created a literary genre that yielded dozens of imitations. These imitations dutifully categorized collections of historical anecdotes according to the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü*’s system of classification. They also modified this model in order to conform in a more satisfactory way to their own understandings of the “self” and their respective social environments and cultural purposes. The *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* thus offered to later generations (and other societies) something other than a piece of China’s mute and passive cultural heritage; instead, it made the Wei-Chin spirit an active factor in the formation (or at least expression) of the cultural values and systems of later periods.

**Basic Structure of the Book**

This book consists of ten chapters, divided into three parts, each of which addresses a particular theme concerning the transmission of the Wei-Chin spirit across space and time.

Part 1 shows how the late Han and Wei-Chin practice of character appraisal (*jen-lun chien-shih*) gave rise to the *Shih-shuo t’i*. Chapter 1 traces the evolution of the term *jen-lun chien-shih* from its early use as the basis for selecting officials to a comprehensive study of human nature. This evolutionary process, as indicated in chapter 2, involved a growth in self-
awareness, encouraged by the debates and discussions of Hsüan-hsüeh in the Wei-Chin period. These debates and discussions revolved around various categories of complementary opposition such as ming and shih (name and actuality), yu and wu (something and nothing), yen and i (words and meanings), hsing and shen (body and spirit)—establishing a series of ontological, psychological, and aesthetic principles by which to recognize one’s personality and to realize one’s authentic self. Formed in this unique intellectual environment and designed to reflect its collective aura, the Shih-shuo t’i is, as chapter 3 explains at length, sui generis. To categorize it as hsiao-shuo is both a misclassification and a distortion.

Part 2 introduces the narrative art of the Shih-shuo hsin-yü, the means by which the work displayed idiosyncratic Wei-Chin personalities and transmitted the Wei-Chin spirit. Within part 2, chapter 4 examines the narrative structure of the Shih-shuo hsin-yü and its new taxonomy of human nature. Each of its thirty-six chapter titles summarizes and is in turn defined by the anecdotes assigned to that chapter. Together, they reflect the four major aspects of the collective Wei-Chin character: te (potentiality, capacity, efficacy); ts’ai (innate ability, talent, specialty); hsing (temperament, disposition, temper); and ch’ing (feeling, emotion, passion). All the categories involved in this taxonomy are redefined in terms of Wei-Chin Hsüan-hsüeh understandings of human nature. This structure also displays the linguistic paradox between the impossibility of ordering human nature with words and the necessity of doing so; hence a taxonomy of human nature oscillating between order and disorder.

Chapter 5 gives detailed attention to problems of characterization in the Shih-shuo hsin-yü. What, for example, bridges the conceptual gap between a cluster of linguistic signs and a “living person”? How is it possible to anchor a person’s elusive “spirit” with mere words? Influenced by the Wei-Chin idea that the “self” emerges from a relentless communication (and confrontation) with others, and with Nature, the Shih-shuo author consistently weaves the characters in each of his anecdotes into a network of dynamic relationships. Moreover, based on the intense competition prevailing in Wei-Chin gentry society, he creatively structures many a Shih-shuo anecdote following what I term the “rivalry pattern,” which condenses
human relationships into a single basic unit. Thus, instead of offering the reader one psychological entity composed of an assortment of static personality traits, the author offers an intense psychological relationship between at least two “rivals.” The tension in between generates a dynamic power that draws the reader into an open-ended reconstruction of their respective personalities.  

Part 3 shows how Shih-shuo t’i works emerged as a complement to the standard Chinese histories, focusing on the self-fashioning of the intellectual elite instead of political events. This process manifests elements of both continuity and change. On the one hand, the dozens of Shih-shuo imitations produced in both China and Japan over 1,600 years attest to the enduring literary importance of the Shih-shuo t’i; on the other hand, they reveal a subversion of the original genre, since each work evolved in response to different patterns of thought and behavior—particularly with respect to versions produced in non-Chinese environments. Because the Shih-shuo imitations departed from the intellectual milieu of the Wei-Chin period, and also because they served different cultural purposes, they naturally could not meet the high standards of its original work. Nonetheless, by consciously following the Shih-shuo model, they were able to capture and reflect at least part of its vibrant spirit.

To be sure, the Shih-shuo hsin-yü and its imitations did not attempt to describe all of society. Their interest fell mainly on a special group of people, the shih, or ming-shih, the “famous shih.” Shih, as a collective name for the Chinese intellectual elite, had come into existence as early as the Spring and Autumn period (ca. 720–480 B.C.), and it continued to refer to this group throughout the imperial era. Over this long period, the self-image of shih underwent enormous changes; thus I have tried to delineate the social identity of the shih at various times in terms of the materials provided by the relevant Shih-shuo t’i works. I have also sought guidance from various studies dealing with the intellectual life of the periods under consideration. As for the rendering of shih and its other variants, I shall compromise between common translations in English-language scholarship and the original meanings within the Chinese context. Therefore, I shall use the terms gentry, gentlemen, and intellectual elite for shih as a col-
lective social group; *gentleman* or *scholar* for individual *shih*; *scholar-official* for *shih* *ta-fu*; and *literati* for expressions such as *wen-shih* and *wen-jen*.

Significantly, in *Shih-shuo t'ı*, the term *shih* includes women. The *Shih-shuo hsín-yü* not only records their stories in various chapters, but also dedicates to them an entire chapter, “Hsien-yüan” (Worthy beauties). In this chapter, we can see that a strong Wei-Chin flavor has permeated the word *hsien*, or “worthy,” distinguishing it from its conventional signification as a Confucian moral category. Under this heading and, indeed, throughout the entire book, women are evaluated on equal terms with men. They are expected to be active, talented, articulate, and self-confident, rather than passive, mute, and submissive—standards traditionally dictated for Chinese women. Moreover, they are celebrated especially for their indispensable roles as evaluators in the character appraisal of both men and women—roles essentially denied to women prior to the Wei-Chin period. Almost all *Shih-shuo* imitations follow this tradition by including a “Worthy Beauties” chapter, and two such works, both titled *Nü Shih-shuo* (Women *Shih-shuo* [hsin-yü])—one by a male author and the other by a female—focus entirely on women. Although each period in Chinese history had its own particular standards for women, often defined in terms of orthodox Confucian morality, overall, under the influence of the Wei-Chin spirit, *Shih-shuo t’ı* offered diverse images of women, thus providing a more complete picture of their attainments than conventional literary and historical sources.

**Narratological Terms**

Terms such as *character*, *trait*, *personality*, and *characterization* appear repeatedly in this book. What links this sort of English usage to Chinese reality as reflected in the *Shih-shuo hsín-yü*? Let us begin with the word *character*, since the *Shih-shuo hsín-yü* focuses squarely on the practice of character writing.

Etymologically, the English word *character* is a letter-to-letter transcription of the Greek word χαρακτήρ, which is defined as “that which is cut in or marked, the impress or stamp on coins, seals, etc.” Metaphor-
ically, it means “the mark or token impressed on a person or thing, a characteristic, distinctive mark, character.” In its meaning “to impress,” χαρακτήρ is linked to another Greek word, τύπος, which means “impression, figure, type.” In this sense, χαρακτήρ evolved into a narrative term, with “human types” as its referent. The Greek philosopher Theophrastus (371–287 B.C.), one of Aristotle’s disciples, wrote a book titled χαρακτήρες, or “the characters,” in which he categorized human character into thirty distinctive types. Many of them overlap with those among the Shih-shuo hsin-yü chapter titles. Because of this structural similarity between the Shih-shuo t’i and Theophrastan character writing, I feel especially comfortable using the English word character, which fully adopts the Greek word χαρακτήρ in form and in meaning, in my analysis of the Shih-shuo hsin-yü and its imitations.

Since the mid-seventeenth century, the English word character gradually gained another meaning: “The sum of the moral and mental qualities which distinguish an individual or a race, viewed as a homogeneous whole; the individuality impressed by nature and habit on man or nation; mental or moral constitution.” This later definition of the word character has been widely accepted in modern times. For example, the Dictionary of Philosophy defines character as the “totality of mental traits characterizing an individual personality or self.”

This later meaning of character has also entered narrative theory. Roland Barthes thus delimits its narratological meaning: “The character is a product of combinations: the combination is relatively stable (denoted by the recurrence of the semes [voice of the person]) and more or less complex (involving more or less congruent, more or less contradictory figures [traits]); this complexity determines the character’s ‘personality,’ which is just as much a combination as the odor of a dish or the bouquet of a wine.” What sets the original nature of the narrative term character apart from its modern sense is that the former, according to the Oxford definition, is equivalent to “type,” or “trait,” whereas the latter is the sum or combination of traits that determines the character’s “personality”—the way that combinations of ingredients contribute to “the odor of a dish or the bouquet of a wine.”
From a psychological standpoint, a “trait” may be defined as “the unit or element which is the carrier of the distinctive behavior of a man . . . a generalized response-unit in which resides the distinctive quality of behavior that reflects personality.” In his pioneering psycholexical study of 1931, Allport lists 17,953 trait names, such as affectionate, arrogant, brave, calculating, considerate, egoistic, guileful, hostile, humorous, hypocritical, intelligent, irascible, just, lofty, open-minded, reclusive, righteous, rude, sentimental, stingy, tactful, treacherous, vigorous, worthy, zealous, and so forth. While one trait reflects a relatively persistent behavioral feature of a person, traits in combination form a unique personality.

This discussion of traits should help to clarify the two senses of the narrative term character. Originally, character referred to an independent trait, but later it came to denote a variety of combinations of these traits in a single person. Corresponding to these two definitions of the narrative term character are two kinds of characterization: the typal characterization, and the characterization of a “person” in narrative. The former enumerates typical actions dictated by a trait in order to manifest the distinctive quality of this type. The latter, according to most Western studies, such as Barthes’ and Allport’s, seems to be a mere mechanical accumulation of various traits, which, as we will see later, meets a strong challenge in the Shih-shuo hsin-yü.

The Shih-shuo hsin-yü contains both kinds of characterization. If we view its episodes from the perspective of the thirty-six chapter titles, of which most are trait names, then the episodes under each chapter title will present actions that exemplify a particular human type. If we view the Shih-shuo episodes from the perspective of its 626 historical figures, then the anecdotes under each individual, usually traversing various chapters, will serve to reflect his or her personality. This second kind of characterization in the Shih-shuo hsin-yü, the creation of “persons,” suggests a far more sophisticated process than what the Western narratologists cited above have delineated. By analyzing the characterization samples and reading the theoretical discussions in the Shih-shuo hsin-yü, we can see that a mere accumulation of traits fails to present a lifelike human figure. In order to transmit a “person’s” true spirit, the author should portray him or
her in relation to others. Only thus can authentic character be revealed through dynamic interhuman confrontations. To avoid confusion between the two meanings of characterization, I shall refer to the typal characterization in the *Shih-shuo hsín-yü* as the taxonomy of human nature, and use the term *characterization* only for the creation of a “person” in narrative.

Although this study adopts primarily a literary—and especially a narratological—approach, it also ventures into such diverse fields as philosophy, aesthetics, psychology, hermeneutics, and gender criticism. Each of these realms boasts a vast theoretical literature in a variety of Western languages. Although I have drawn on some of this literature in this study, I have relied predominantly upon the *Shih-shuo hsín-yü* itself for theoretical guidance because of its highly reflexive feature.

The principles that dictated the creation of the *Shih-shuo hsín-yü* and its genre came directly from its records of *ch’ing-yen,* “pure talk,” or “pure conversation,” the major Wei-Chin intellectual activity that incorporated discussions of *Hsüan-hsüeh,* character appraisal, and self-awareness. Episodes related to pure conversation and the life of its participants dominate the *Shih-shuo hsín-yü*; hence alternative names for the work include *Ch’ing-yen lin-yü* (Wooded garden of pure conversation) or *Ch’ing-yen yüan-sou* (The valleys and forests of pure conversation). For this reason, my analysis of the *Shih-shuo hsín-yü* and its genre relies primarily on theories abstracted both from the theoretical statements recorded in the text and from the allegorical messages revealed in its quotidian episodes. By the same token, my examination of later imitations heavily relies upon their prefaces, commentaries, and episodes, for, as some scholars have recently noted: “Future scholarship that seeks to be global or comparative, be it literary, cultural, and historical studies, or research in the social sciences, must first develop strategies for analysis and interpretation that allow narratives of historical development different from Western ones an equal opportunity to explain the past and understand links to the present.”

I hope that my study of the *Shih-shuo* tradition may serve as a worthy example of a China-centered approach to the material.