The Composition of *Lienüzhuan*:
Was Liu Xiang the Author or Editor?

As with many of the books that passed through Liu Xiang’s (79–8 BC) hands, his precise contribution to *Lienüzhuan* continues to spark discussion and debate. No one disputes the fact that *Lienüzhuan*, the first independent collection of narratives about women, pioneered an absolutely unprecedented literary genre. There were no previous books dedicated exclusively to women’s matters. Even more importantly, *Lienüzhuan* was probably the first Chinese book made up entirely of just independent biographical narratives, either female or male, thereby establishing “miscellaneous biographies” (*zazhuan* 雜傳) as a standard genre apart from history.

Although there were no earlier collections of stories about women, various writings about women existed here and there in earlier documents, and some of these found their way into *Lienüzhuan*. Because earlier transmitted versions of some tales have been passed down to us in other works, in some cases we can reconstruct a story’s exact provenance. Even so, the origins of many narratives in the collection remain unclear. Generally speaking, the manner in which *Lienüzhuan* was composed seems to have been unusually complex, and it is not immediately clear whether we should regard Liu Xiang primarily as the author or editor. This is an important distinction. Whether Liu Xiang wrote *Lienüzhuan* primarily as a work of ideological fiction or cobbled it together from existing documents, the manner of composition should determine how scholars today view and use this seminal text on early Chinese women.

Liu Xiang achieved his place as the prominent scholar of the late-Western Han by writing and editing many important works. Today he is remembered largely for his leading role in a monumental official project to collect and collate standard editions of major Zhou-era books,1 and

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we still use many of his editions. For example, Liu Xiang pared down an unwieldy hodgepodge of 322 sections from Xunzi 荀子 to produce a standard text of thirty-two coherent chapters.

In addition to his official editorial duties, Liu also wrote original works under his own name. For instance, Wujing tongyi 五經通義, now lost, contained his personal views on the classics. Some of his lengthy memorials are preserved in Hanshu 漢書, and these are still considered exemplars of elegant rhetoric. An examination of Liu Xiang’s prodigious oeuvre proves that he was highly capable of both original writing and comprehensive editing, either of which he may have used to produce Lienüzhuan.

Generally speaking, previous scholars have taken four main positions regarding Liu Xiang’s Lienüzhuan. One school of thought, exemplified by Luo Genze 羅根澤, holds that Liu Xiang was merely an editor. Luo forcefully argues that Liu did little more than gather existing writings to produce a coherent collection. A second interpretation holds that Liu took existing stories to form the basis of Lienüzhuan, then extensively rewrote them to make these older tales reflect his own ideas and turn them into clear moral admonitions. The bibliographic expert Yu Jiaxi 余嘉錫 took this compromise position.

The third opinion is the most radical. In his seminal discussion of historiography titled Shitong 史通, Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (661–721) accused Liu Xiang of simply inventing many of the episodes in Lienüzhuan and his other narrative collections and passing them off as real historical episodes.

When it came to creating Hongfan wuxing and the various biographies Xinxu, Shuoyuan, Lienü [zhuan], and Shenxian, all broadly narrate fictional matters and are largely made out of forged language. It was not that his knowledge was incomplete or his talent

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Lisa Raphals, Sharing the Light: Representations of Women and Virtue in Early China (Albany: State U. of New York P., 1998), pp. 87–112, seems to have a similar view of the matter. She discusses five stories in detail, showing how they derived from Warring States precedents, implying that much of the work was taken from earlier sources. Although her ultimate conclusions on the nature of Liu Xiang’s contribution to the text are not stated very clearly, she seems to see Liu Xiang as an editor who compiled Lienüzhuan from earlier sources.

3 Yu Jiaxi 余嘉錫, Gushu tongli 古書通例 (Shanghai: Guji, 1985), p. 106.
insufficient, but because people of the world are gullible. Alas! Future generations should be fearful, for what age lacks people as careless as this? Now transmitted accounts lack veracity and events are inaccessible, and people cannot avoid this. It has reached the point that heterodox accounts deceive posterity, and overcoming this is difficult.

In other words, Liu Zhiji dismisses *Lienüzhuan* as a misleading forgery.

A fourth position is relatively subtle. Shinomi Takao has conducted the most thorough philological analysis of *Lienüzhuan* to date. Shinomi is sympathetic to Liu Zhiji’s highly critical position, although he tempers it. Like Liu Zhiji, Shinomi also claims that Liu Xiang often used historical facts as the starting point for composing fictional stories. However, unlike Liu Zhiji, in his philological analysis Shinomi also often points out precedents for many of the narratives. In his view, some of the *Lienüzhuan* narratives should be regarded as akin to historical fiction, with creative original stories posed against a real historical background, while others are grounded in prior narratives.

Scholarly opinion remains divided on the relative merits of each of these four interpretations, so the question demands further examination.

A fragment attributed to Liu Xiang and preserved in Xu Jian’s *Chuxueji* suggests how Liu himself may have publicly portrayed his creation of *Lienüzhuan*: “The ‘Lienüzhuan,’ as collated by [myself] the official Xiang and by palace attendant Xin. 臣向與黃門侍郎歆所校列女傳.” If this statement is authentic, it would suggest that Liu Xiang publicly billed himself and his son Liu Xin (50 BC–20 AD) as editors of previous narratives rather than authors of an original work. Bolstering this view is the fact that Ban Gu clearly saw Liu Xiang as an editor. He wrote that Liu “gathered and obtained what was recorded about virtuous consorts and chaste wives in *Shijing* and *Shangshu* to be a standard for reviving the state and making families prominent, as well as of evil favorites and the destructive,”

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in order as Lienüzhuan in eight chapters (pian) to warn the son of heaven.

By describing Liu Xiang’s role as “gathering,” “obtaining,” and “putting into order,” Ban implied that Liu was an editor of past texts rather than the author of an original work of creative fiction.

Medieval bibliographies do little to clarify the question. The sixth-century authority Liu Zhao wrote, “Lienüzhuan in eight chapters, by Liu Xiang 樂向撰列女傳八篇.” Liu Zhao used the word zhuan 撰 to describe Liu Xiang’s role, an ambiguous term that can imply either editorial selection or original composition. An anonymous note to the Suishu bibliography also describes the authorship of Lienüzhuan as “zhuan.” Suishu annotations usually employ zhuan to refer to original works of writing, such as Yanzi chunqiu 晏子春秋, and also to collections believed to be made up of previous narratives, such as Xinwu 新序 and Shuoyuan 說苑. Given this ambiguous terminology, the medieval bibliographies add little to the debate.

Looking over the text’s bibliographic history, the most important piece of evidence is the Chuxueji quotation in which Liu Xiang describes himself as editor rather than author. Although at first glance this might seem to settle the matter, in fact substantial doubts still remain. Even if this quotation is authentic, it is not necessarily authoritative. Lienüzhuan was written as an overtly ideological treatise intended to influence the morals and politics of the day. Liu was probably far more interested in impact than veracity. Even if Liu wrote large parts of the work himself, he may have decided to legitimize his forgery by claiming that he had simply copied these stories from earlier documents. The Han dynasty was the golden age (or dark age) of Chinese forgery, and authors of the day blithely attributed their own new works to earlier writers or supernatural origins. Liu Xiang’s son Liu Xin, who seems to have helped his father put together Lienüzhuan, is remembered as one of the most infamous forgers in Chinese history.

many Han scholars toward questions of authenticity, it is very possible
that Liu Xiang was being deliberately mendacious when he claimed
that he was merely the editor of Lienüzhuan. In view of these consider-
able caveats, it seems that even if the Chuxueji fragment is genuine, it
does not conclusively settle the problem of authorship.

Having looked over the relevant material, it is clear that surviving
contemporary records do not mention how Lienüzhuan was written, and
subsequent bibliographic evidence is indeterminate. Nevertheless, an
invaluable piece of evidence remains – the text itself. The contents of
Lienüzhuan ought to include clues as to how it was written. The only way
forward is to subject the text to a close reading in an attempt to uncover
traces of the method of composition. Fortunately, Shinomi Takao has
made this line of research much easier by having undertaken an enor-
mous amount of philological yeoman’s work. His magnificent Ryû Kô
Retsujoten no kenkyû is not only an impressive tribute
to scholarly perseverance, it also highlights invaluable details that re-
veal how this collection was produced. Shinomi’s philological glosses
make it possible to understand how the book was put together, and to
determine whether Liu Xiang should be regarded as author or editor.

Shinomi’s analysis includes examinations of transmitted earlier
versions of every story in the collection. Of course there is always a
chance that he may have missed something, but his work on the key
problem of provenance seems quite thorough. Upon close reading, it
is apparent that the Lienüzhuan stories can be divided into three gen-
eral types. First, some stories are based on a tale recorded in an ear-
erlier work. These narratives are inevitably rewritten to some extent,
often extensively. In many cases, the original “story” is no more than
a terse sentence in Zuozhuan or another early work and in fact is
not a true narrative. Regardless of the length of the original source, Liu
Xiang fleshes out each tale to produce a satisfying narrative complete
with coherent plot, elegant style, poetic accompaniment, and clear
moral. The second category consists of stories based on a historical
character (or more frequently the wife, mother, or daughter of a his-
torical figure) that lack a transmitted earlier version. In other words,
these stories do not have a known precedent, but are nonetheless set
in a particular historical context. Finally, the third category consists of
stories that lack any precedent whatsoever. There is neither any pre-
vious mention of the characters, nor do transmitted texts contain any
earlier version of the story.
Of course dividing Liu Xiang’s narratives into these three categories requires subjective judgments. In some cases, a story’s precedent is so terse that it is hard to decide whether to call it a previous “version” or simply an earlier reference to the same character. Despite these unavoidable ambiguities, this classification scheme still has heuristic value, as shown below. Using this typology, we can classify the stories in *Lienüzhuan* as follows:12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER NUMBER</th>
<th>EARLIER VERSION</th>
<th>EARLIER HISTORICAL CHARACTER</th>
<th>NEITHER EARLIER VERSION NOR CHARACTER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Muyi 母儀</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Xianming 賢明</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Renzhi 仁智</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Zhenshun 貞順</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Jieyi 節義</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Biantong 騰通</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Niebi 節嬰</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
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TOTALS | 61 | 12 | 31 |

This table shows that the text of *Lienüzhuan* encompasses considerable internal diversity, and Liu Xiang seems to have performed different types of authorial or editorial work with each thematic section of our received text—a text that goes back to a Song-era editing. For example, chapter seven (“Niebi”) is well grounded in previous tales of evil women, and every story in the section has a clear precedent in earlier writing. In this chapter, Liu Xiang appears to have acted more like an editor, choosing and rewriting earlier tales to piece together a composite argument for limiting female participation in government.

In contrast, chapter four (“Zhenshun”) seems least influenced by previous writings. Here original portions are most clearly visible. Not only do few of the stories in this section have transmitted precedents, but their values also differ considerably from earlier writings. Zhou au-

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12 The transmitted version of *Lienüzhuan* was heavily edited during the Song dynasty and may not be identical with Liu Xiang’s original. In particular, the order of the stories might be quite different. See Bret Hinsch, “The Textual History of Liu Xiang’s *Lienüzhuan*,” *MS 52* (2004), pp. 95–112. The fifteenth story in chapter one has been omitted from consideration because it is extremely dubious and probably not part of Liu Xiang’s original collection. For a discussion of the authenticity of this story see Shinomi, *Ryū Kō*, pp. 251–54.
thors may have employed some concepts related to chastity, such as inner and outer, but in general they do not seem to have held very strong views about issues such as widow remarriage and female reclusion. The radical ideas expressed in chapters four and five go far beyond mere widow chastity (itself a fairly novel idea at the time), promoting even self-mutilation and suicide in the name of virtue. These extreme views on female integrity seem to have only begun to take hold late in Western Han, and even then were limited to a small, hardline ideological faction. Self-mutilation and suicide in the name of female virtue were definitely far outside mainstream thought and behavior of the time. It would have been virtually impossible for Liu Xiang to find a number of narratives about early Eastern Zhou women who adhered to these radical new moral values. As a result, in this section Liu seems to have worked more as author than editor, creating stories to legitimize his own novel ideological vision by anachronistically projecting it back into the past.

Shinomi has already discussed the origins and contents of each story in the collection. In this article, it would be impossible to recapitulate the contents of every narrative and deal with their previous versions and characters in detail, nor is this even necessary. Instead it is sufficient to examine a few selected stories, each chosen to exemplify one of the collection’s broader structural or stylistic types, to illustrate how different parts of the work were created.

**TYPE ONE: NARRATIVES WITH EARLIER VERSIONS**

*Adhering Closely to a Previous Version*

When Liu Xiang acted as editor, the degree of his intervention into the texts he had at hand varied considerably with each story. The *Lienüzhuan* tale of the daughter of Shanghuai of Qi (Qi Shanghuai nü 齊傷槐女) in chapter six, lifted from *Yanzi chunqiu* 晏子春秋, presents a good example of a narrative that Liu transferred into the collection largely intact. Liu was intimately familiar with *Yanzi chunqiu* because of his editorial work on the text as part of the official collation project. Liu was intimately familiar with *Yanzi chunqiu* because of his editorial work on the text as part of the official collation project. The transfer of this particular story from one narrative collection

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14 Yan Ying 晏嬰, *Yanzi chunqiu* 晏子春秋 (Taipei: Dingwen, 1977) 2, pp. 100–2; Shinomi, Ryū Kō, p. 668.
to another shows how Liu Xiang sometimes did only minimal editing when assembling the collection. The use of such a lengthy previous narrative is somewhat unusual. In most of the cases where Liu Xiang worked from a previous version, he took a very brief account from a historical document and expanded it considerably to create a satisfying narrative. Nevertheless, there are a few instances in which he found long and highly developed previous narratives that suited his purposes, and include them with few changes.

However, even in a case such as this, when Liu was being extremely faithful to an earlier source, traces of his fingerprints are still apparent. There is one extremely significant difference between the two versions. Interestingly, although the original *Yanzi chunqiu* story does not give a timeframe, the *Lienüzhuan* narrative specifies that these events took place during the reign of duke Jing of Qi (r. 547–490 BC). Moreover, the daughter of Shanghuai refers to the reign of duke Jing of Song (r. 516–469) as having been in the past. Liu seems to have added an explicit timeframe to the existing *Yanzi chunqiu* text to make the setting feel more realistic, thereby legitimizing the story in readers’ minds as truly historical.

When we compare these dates, however, it seems that Liu was a bit sloppy and failed to crosscheck his chronology. In fact the reign of duke Jing of Song ended after that of duke Jing of Qi, so the character’s reference to that reign as having happened in the past is blatantly anachronistic. This contradiction is absent from the original *Yanzi chunqiu* version, so the anachronistic timeframe was obviously superimposed onto this narrative after it was first written. Presumably Liu Xiang added a flawed chronology in his *Lienüzhuan* version. By injecting this minor error into the text, Liu unwittingly highlighted his original contribution.

**Rewriting a Previous Version**

Many stories in the collection have their origins in *Zuo zhuan*. A close examination of them reveals how Liu Xiang took relatively terse existing narratives, in which women are often very marginal figures, as the starting point for creating highly developed stories that served his rhetorical purposes. Although Liu Xiang initially gained fame for his familiarity with the *Gongyang* and *Guliang* commentaries, some suspect that he secretly preferred the *Zuo*, which has a far more

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dynamic narrative style. The latter was certainly the favorite of his son Liu Xin, who may have initially studied the Zuo under his father. However, given Liu Xiang’s goals for Lienüzhuan, it was virtually impossible for him to lift stories directly from Zuozhuan, as the style and contents were unsuitable for his project. To create a story that could engage a contemporary audience, and to redirect its content to suit his own moral agenda, Liu usually had to modify stories from the Zuo through extensive rewriting and additions.

The tale of the wife of duke Mu of Xu (Xu Mu furen) from chapter three of Lienüzhuan shows how a story from Zuozhuan was radically transformed into something appropriate for his new collection. The roots of the tale are straightforward. Chunqiu briefly records the destruction of the state of Wei by foreign invaders, a catastrophic event that Zuozhuan fleshes out with a compelling narrative. The narrative begins with a description of the preparations for battle.

In winter, during the twelfth month, Di invaded Wei. Duke Yi of Wei was fond of storks, which were driven about in carriages appropriate for high officials. When time came for battle and the men received their armor they said, “Use the storks. They have an official salary and high position. How can we fight?”

The duke gave Shi Qi his jade semicircle and Ning Zhuang an arrow and had them guard the city saying, “Use these to aid the state. Choose what is most advantageous and do it.”

He gave his wife an embroidered robe saying, “Listen to these two officials.”

Next the battle and its disastrous consequences are described.

Qu Kong was his charioteer and Zibo his guard. Huang Yi was in the vanguard and Kong Ying in the rear. They engaged the Di at Yingze. The Wei army suffered ignominious defeat and was annihilated. The marquis would not leave his banner, which only added to the defeat.
Subsequent passages describe the war’s conclusion and immediate aftermath. First there is a short account of two officials who were taken prisoner but managed to trick their captors into letting them warn compatriots of an impending attack. Then the people of Wei are defeated again as they flee, although some manage to cross a river to safety. The story concludes with the brief appearance of the woman central to Liu Xiang’s rewritten version.

The remnants of Wei amounted to only 730 men and women. There were five thousand when the people of Gong and Teng were taken into account. Duke Dai was enfeoffed and lived in a hut in Cao. The wife of Mu of Xu composed “Dai chi.” 衛之遺民, 男女七百有三十人, 懷之共懸之民為五人. 立戴公, 以處于曹. 許穆夫人賦載馳.

This account of the destruction of Wei constitutes the *locus classicus* for Liu Xiang’s tale. However, the original *Zuo* story is surprisingly different from the *Lienüzhuan* version. *Zuo zhuan* focuses on the war itself – its course, consequences, and the cause of Wei’s defeat. As usual with this work, the narrative is cleverly structured to provide an implicit moral interpretation of events. That is why this episode begins with what at first seems like an irrelevant description of duke Yi’s strange fondness for storks. *Zuo zhuan* uses this eccentricity to symbolize Yi’s decadence, which has disastrous consequences. The sight of storks being driven around in luxurious carriages angers his soldiers, who hesitate to defend such a degenerate ruler. In this demoralized state, Wei’s army is quickly overcome by the invading Di. Wei then falls into chaos as its inhabitants are either taken prisoner or else flee abroad to safety, dramatizing the debauched ruler’s unhappy fate. The episode ends with the new lord of Wei reduced to living in a hut.

The wife of Mu of Xu enters this story with only the briefest cameo after the war is over, and her appearance comes as a minor digression from the main plot. Although Liu Xiang identifies her as the daughter of duke Yi of Wei, *Zuo zhuan* only introduces her as the wife of duke Mu of Xu. She has no part in the action, and is mentioned only because she composed the poem “Dai chi” in which she expressed her sadness over the fall of Wei. The poem gained canonical status through inclusion in the *Shijing* collection, so of course its origin would be of interest to the *Zuo*’s readers. Nevertheless, the *Zuo* commentary does not give a detailed description of the woman, the poem, or the circumstances surrounding its composition. Instead it keeps the reader’s attention directed toward the main point – the disastrous consequences of duke Yi’s bad rulership.
The story is retold in a more dramatic form in the third-century BC collection *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, where it is cloaked in a new style to suit evolving taste in prose. To prove duke Yi’s depravity, the retold version mentions not just his love of storks, but also that he paid excessive attention to his palace women. By enhancing his sins, this version amplifies his decadence and clarifies the moral implications. As in the earlier *Zuo* version, duke Yi’s soldiers hesitate to fight on his behalf. This account, however, has the duke killed and eaten by the cannibalistic invaders. Being mutilated or eaten was considered a terrible disgrace in ancient China, so this gruesome image was not merely a dramatic trope, but also emphasized the horror of his precipitous fall. Significantly, the story concludes not with the poem by Mu’s wife, but with the reactions of a loyal official and neighboring ruler. The woman at the center of Liu Xiang’s narrative, though marginally present in the *Zuo* narrative, has been completely excised from the *Lüshi chunqiu* version. Her original role, guiding the reader’s reactions to events by expressing empathy, is now played by two politically prominent men.

When Liu Xiang turned the *Zuozhuan* account of the fall of Wei into the story of the wife of duke Mu of Xu, he shifted the focus from the duke’s immorality to the woman who warned him of impending doom. This change not only gave the story a completely different protagonist, but it also altered its general moral import. In the *Zuo* original as well as the subsequent *Lüshi chunqiu* version, the stress is on duke Yi’s immorality. In Liu Xiang’s adaptation, the new focus becomes the prescient advice of the duke’s daughter. The basic moral theme is shifted from a ruler’s depravity to a woman’s wisdom. Although Liu was recycling old material, he used the basic building blocks that he had inherited to construct a strikingly different narrative.

This new tale begins not with duke Yi and his beloved storks, but his daughter and her sagacious advice.

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The wife of Mu of Xu was the daughter of Duke Yi of Wei and wife of Duke Mu of Xu. At first the ruler of Xu sought her as a wife, but the ruler of Qi also wanted her. Duke Yi was about to give her to Xu when she said to him via her governess, “In ancient times when rulers had daughters, they used them like precious gifts to ally with large states. Speaking of the present, Xu is small and distant while Qi is large and nearby. Nowadays the strong are considered heroes. If there were bandits and foreigners along the borders and you wanted to maintain order in the realm, wouldn’t it be better if you could go and report matters to a big country where I was living? Now we are abandoning the near for the faraway and leaving the large for the small! One day you may face the disaster of fleeing in a cart. Don’t you care about the altars to the land and grain?” The ruler did not listen and married her off to Xu.

Afterwards Di invaded Wei and destroyed it, but Xu could not help them. The duke of Wei then fled to ford the river and went south to Chuqiu. Duke Huan of Qi came to him so he survived, building a town and settling at Chuqiu. Thereupon the ruler of Wei regretted that he had not heeded her words. After the defeat, the lady of Xu galloped on her horse to condole with the ruler of Wei. Due to her resentment she wrote a poem that went:

I galloped home to condole with the lord of Wei, driving my horses far. 驅馳載馭, 歸唁衛侯, 驅馬悠悠
At Cao an official struggled forward to meet me and I felt grieved. 言至于漕, 大夫跋涉, 我心則憂
You do not think well of me but I cannot stop thinking about it. 既不我嘉, 不能旋反
You disapprove of me but I cannot keep my thoughts away from it 罄爾不贖, 我思不遠.22
The gentleman praises her compassion and forethought.

COMPOSITION OF LIÉNUZHUAN

The eulogy says: “When the daughter of the duke of Wei was not yet married and the rulers of Xu and Qi were being considered, she said to her governess, ‘Qi is large and reliable.’ The ruler of Wei did not listen to her. As a result, later he fled and Xu could not help him. His daughter composed the poem “Dai chi.” 君子善其慈惠而遠識也。頌曰：‘衛女未嫁，謀許與齊，女諫母曰：‘齊大可依。’齎君不聰，後果遁逃，許不能救。女作載馳。

As seen from the enormous differences between the Zuozhuan original and the new version, Liu Xiang extensively rewrote the tale to make it suitable for his collection. In fact, the plot has been inverted. In the original Zuō narrative, almost all of the description concerned the war, which is barely alluded to in the new version. Instead the daughter of duke Yi, the most marginal character of all in the original plot, takes center stage in Liu’s rendition. Moreover, a lengthy excerpt of her poem is quoted at the end, a considerable expansion from the Zuō’s passing allusion to the writer and her poem.

The biggest difference between the two narratives is the woman’s long and eloquent speech in Liu’s rendition, which is completely absent from earlier accounts. This speech seems to have been invented from scratch by Liu Xiang, since it does not exist at all in the Zuō original. In fact Liu had no choice but to invent this speech to make the wife of duke Mu worthy for inclusion in a collection of stories about exemplary women. The mere fact that she wrote a moving poem about her homeland being destroyed might show her to be a talented artist, but this does not necessarily make her a moral exemplar appropriate for Lienüzhuan. Even a bad person can feel sad when her family has been ruined. So Liu added a speech in which the daughter of duke Yi sagely predicted disaster if her father went through with her impending nuptials, and suggested that he use her marriage to ally Wei to a powerful state instead. This speech marks her as both wise and prescient, making her worthy of emulation.

Duke Yi retains his former role as the fool who destroys his country through bad judgment. However, his main blunder has changed. In the Zuō, his odd love of storks symbolizes his immorality and demoralizes his soldiers. Lüshi chunqiu keeps the storks and adds an excessive fondness for beautiful women as an additional sign of decadence. The rewritten Lienüzhuan version, however, has neither storks nor seductive palace beauties. The duke’s downfall now comes because he fails to listen to good advice from a wise and loyal remonstrant.
Comparing the Zuozhuan and Lienüzhuan versions, it is evident that very little of Liu Xiang’s narrative was lifted from an earlier text. Although there were previous accounts of the fall of Wei, their contents make up only a tiny fraction of Liu Xiang’s version. Instead he took a marginal woman who appears very briefly in the Zuo, made her the main character of the tale, then enveloped her within a sophisticated narrative that includes a lengthy discourse on proper foreign relations. Her eloquent remonstration to an immoral ruler was a stock plot device that echoes numerous similar remonstrative speeches on good government from Liu Xiang’s Xinxu and Shuoyuan collections. By masterfully remaking an existing character in earlier literature to suit his own ideological and rhetorical ends, Liu Xiang was able to build up a narrative appropriate for his innovative collection of didactic stories about women.

Aside from the story’s altered plot and structure, the language of the Zuozhuan and Lienüzhuan versions is also quite different, and this linguistic discrepancy provides some telling clues about its general date of composition. Although the wife of Duke Mu lived during the Spring and Autumn era, the prose style of her speech as reported in Lienüzhuan is completely different from anything written so early. Long dramatic speeches became increasingly popular at the end of the Eastern Zhou and were a staple rhetorical device in Western Han literature, as seen in the famous narrative history Shiji and also in Liu Xiang’s other moralistic collections Xinxu and Shuoyuan. In contrast, Spring and Autumn literature tended to be extremely terse and had yet to evolve speechifying to such a high degree of refinement. The grammar and language of the woman’s speech is typical of the so-called guwen style used in the Western Han, which was quite different from the archaic prose style of the Spring and Autumn era. Given the evolved language and style of this oration, it most likely dates from the first-century BC and was probably written by Liu Xiang himself.

So even though the story of the fall of Wei had prior versions, these were only a minor part of the piece included in Lienüzhuan. Liu used the Zuozhuan account as little more than historical background for what is essentially an entirely new story. Although Liu can be considered to have done some editorial work on this piece, to the extent that he integrated some details into his narrative, by and large the bulk of his story about the wise and prescient wife of duke Mu can be considered an original work of ideological fiction. Many of the other stories in Lienüzhuan build on brief precedents in a similar manner. So even when Liu Xiang worked in an editorial capacity, integrating earlier nar-
ratatives into the collection, he often did very extensive rewriting and injected considerable original content.

*Working from a Lost Narrative*

The stories in *Lienüzhuan* do not always have a transmitted prior version. In some cases, Liu Xiang seems to have been working from documents that have since been lost. An excellent example is the tale of Dingjiang 定姜 of Wei 衛 (Wei gu Dingjiang 衛站定姜) in the first chapter.\(^{23}\) The famed classicist Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648 AD), writing about the *Shijing* 詩經 poem “Yan yan” 燕燕, observed that “this poem’s notes take it as a poem about lady Dingjiang 此詩注以為夫人定姜之詩.”\(^{24}\) In attributing his remark to earlier annotations, Kong seems to have been passing on an interpretation from the rich, early exegetical tradition surrounding *Shijing*, much of which has since been lost. This particular interpretation of “Yan yan” was also probably current during the Han and seems to have been the source of the *Lienüzhuan* story.

It is not at all surprising that Liu Xiang was intimately familiar with the *Shijing* commentaries. Although Liu was publicly associated with the *Chunqiu* 春秋 and its exegetes, he had also grown up immersed in ancient poetry. *Shijing* scholarship was a Liu-family tradition dating back to his ancestor Liu Jiao 劉交, king of Chuyuan 楚元 and younger half-brother of the dynasty’s first ruler Han Gaozu 漢高祖.\(^{25}\) Liu Jiao wrote a commentary called *Yuanwang shi* 元王詩 and had his sons educated in the *Shijing*. In addition to *Shijing* studies, Liu Xiang edited *Chuci* 楚辭 as part of his grand collation project, and he mentions it in his own poems.\(^{26}\) Poetic training clearly was important in the Liu family. Liu Xiang’s father Liu De 劉德 wrote poetry, and Liu Xiang also composed original poetry that circulated in literary circles.\(^{27}\)

Not only did Liu read and study *Shijing* poems, he also seems to have been familiar with their commentaries. As was often the case in antiquity, classical texts circulated in rival editions, each appended with different exegeses. Liu Xiang is often believed to have been a partisan

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\(^{23}\) Shinomi, Ryū Kō, pp. 168–69.


\(^{25}\) *Hanshu* states that Liu Jiao had the same father as Liu Bang. Yan Shigu notes that this wording implies that the two were born of different mothers. This would make Liu Jiao a half-brother of Liu Bang; Ban, *Hanshu*, 36, p. 1921, n. 1.


of the Lu 魯 school of Shijing studies. Unfortunately, this line of interpretation is little understood and its commentaries have been lost. Whether or not Liu Xiang adhered to this interpretation, it is apparent from his writings that he had access to Shijing commentaries that have since disappeared. It seems that some exegete recorded the story of Dingjiang in a lost Shijing commentary as a way to read meaning into the enigmatic “Yan yan.” The original commentary apparently inspired Liu Xiang’s narrative, and a reference to the commentary survived into the Tang, where it informed Kong Yingda’s annotation.

The story of Dingjiang exemplifies how Liu Xiang sometimes acted as editor by copying and reworking stories from sources that have since been lost. There are a number of other stories in the collection that seem to be based on Shijing commentaries: wife of the ruler of Xi (Xijun furen 息君夫人), woman Shen of Shaonan (Shaonan Shen nü 召南申女), wife of duke Mu of Xu (Xumu furen 許穆夫人), governor of the woman of Qi (Qi nü chuanmu 齊女傳母), and wife of a man from Zhou Nan (Zhounan zhi qi 周南之妻). These tales might even include details or narrative from some of the lost commentaries of the Lu school.

In creating Lienüzhuan, the importance of Shijing cannot be overstated. Each story ends with a quotation from Shijing that supposedly exemplifies the virtues or vices of the woman in question, followed by an original eulogy (song 頌) written by Liu Xiang to sum up her moral character. For this reason, Liu cannot be considered just an editor for any of the stories in the collection. At the very least, he added a Shijing quotation and eulogy. In almost every case, he did much more as well.

TYPE TWO: STORIES BUILT AROUND AN EARLIER CHARACTER

For about ten percent of the stories in Lienüzhuan, although no prior version has been transmitted to the present, earlier sources mention the name of the main character or one of her family members. Some of these might be lost historical narratives about real people. It is more likely, however, that most are historical fiction written by Liu
Xiang and deliberately positioned within specific historical contexts to lend them credibility.

In almost every one, any claim to historicity rests not with any facts about the female protagonist herself, but rather through her relation to a male family member mentioned in an earlier text. Chapter six includes several of these stories. For example, although the mother of Jiangyi 江乙 of Chu 楚 (Chu Jiangyi mu 楚江乙母) never appears in any surviving record prior to Lienüzhuan, her son was a prominent official mentioned in Han Fei zi 韓非子. Similarly, Liu Xiang describes the discerning woman of rural Chu (Chu ye biannü 楚野辨女) as the wife of one Mr. Zhao (Zhao shi 昭氏). The Zhao were one of the great families of Chu, so linking this obscure woman to a man surnamed Zhao gave her something of an exalted social background without having to be too specific. Then there is the story about the mother of Foxi (or Fuxi) of Zhao (Zhao Foxi mu 趙佛肸母). Although Liu Xiang was the first to mention this woman, he describes her as the mother of an ancient historical figure mentioned in Lunyu 論語, Mozi 墨子, and elsewhere. It seems extremely suspicious that the mothers and wives of so many prominent men went unmentioned in any record prior to the late-Western Han, then suddenly appear ex nihilo in Lienüzhuan as the main characters of such long and elegant narratives, mouthing words that happen to precisely reflect Liu Xiang’s own ideas.

Interestingly, one of these stories is marred by a blatant contradiction that clearly marks it as a later forgery. The story of Boying, wife of king Ping of Chu (Chu Ping Boying 楚平伯嬴), appears amid the largely spurious narratives of chapter four. This tale begins in the usual manner by identifying Boying as the daughter of king Mu of Qin 秦穆王 and the wife of king Ping of Chu 楚平王. However, as Shinomi points out, when we compare the usual dates for these two monarchs, a major inconsistency becomes apparent. According to the conventional chronology, Mu of Qin reigned from 659–621, while king Ping of Chu reigned from 528–516, putting a gap of 93 years between the end of Mu’s and the beginning of Ping’s era. Even if we assume that king Mu fathered this daughter while in his dotage and king Ping was willing to marry a very old woman, the temporal gap is still far too large to bridge. Moreover, the story claims that Boying bore king Ping a son

30 Han Fei 韓非, Han Fei zi 韓非子 (Taipei: Chengwen, 1980) 9, pp. 518, 533; Shinomi, Ryū Kō, pp. 649–51.
31 He Yan 何晏 and Xing Bing 邢昺 et al., annots., Lunyu zhushu 論語注疏 (Taipei: Yiwen, 1955) 17, p. 155; Mo Di 墨翟, Mozi 墨子, annot. Sun Yirang 孫治讓 (Taipei: Huazheng, 1987) 9, p. 278.
who became king Zhao of Chu 楚昭王. This means that she would have given birth to a son when quite elderly.

There are two possibilities that might explain the flagrantly spurious chronology. First, perhaps an anonymous author wrote this ideological fiction centuries earlier. To lend the narrative more authority, he connected the female character with two prominent rulers, but carelessly associated two kings from different eras. Liu Xiang then came across the forged document, accepted it as authentic, and credulously inserted it into his collection.

More likely, Liu Xiang invented the story himself. Its content involves a woman who threatens to kill herself to preserve her chastity, a subject alien to authentic Zhou rhetoric but dear to Liu Xiang. Moreover, this tale repeats prohibitions on contact between the sexes, as found in the “Neize” 內則 section of Liji 禮記.33 Although “Neize” was widely circulated during the late-Western Han, it may not even have been written down yet during the sixth century BC, when the story supposedly occurred.34 Putting language from it into the mouth of a sixth-century woman raised in Qin and living in Chu, both marginal to the Confucian culture that produced “Neize,” is blatantly anachronistic. Given these contradictions in chronology and content, it seems that Liu invented the story of Boying to support his radical ideas about female chastity. He hoped to legitimize new ethical views by projecting them back into the past and attributing them to an ancient woman of high birth. However, when writing this tale, Liu failed to notice his skewed chronology. His error is a forgivable oversight, as each state had a separate royal genealogy and matching them up was often no easy matter. Liu probably took a cavalier attitude toward his dates on the assumption that no one would bother to put together chronologies from two different states and crosscheck his timeframe. This, together with ideological content characteristic of the late-Western Han, strongly suggests that the story was written by Liu Xiang and falsely attributed to antiquity.

With the story of Boying, Liu Xiang’s chronological oversight happens to reveal a fake. His other narratives about the kinswomen of prominent men lack such blatant contradictions, so it is difficult to prove conclusively that they were written by Liu. Even so, the other

women, whom Liu identifies as historical solely through propinquity to historical male figures, seem quite similar to Boying. There are no previous versions of them, nor are the women mentioned in earlier documents. Moreover, the content is often an anachronistic projection of late-Western Han ideas about ideal female behavior into the distant past. It seems likely that most of these tales are historical fiction composed by Liu Xiang and set in the Spring and Autumn period to give them an air of veracity, strengthening their rhetorical force by falsely portraying them as literal historical records.

TYPE THREE: STORIES WITH NO SURVIVING EARLIER VERSION

The final category consists of narratives that lack any evident precedent. For almost a third of the Lienüzhuan tales, not only is there no earlier version, there is not even any previous reference to the character (or her kinsmen) at the center of the story. Of course the authenticity of this class of stories is most doubtful of all, and these are most likely to have been created by Liu Xiang in their entirety.

The number of stories without precedent varies considerably in each section. Since every chapter in the Song edition is built around a general moral topic, the uneven distribution of this category of story suggests that some of Liu’s didactic themes are more thoroughly grounded in earlier texts and ideas than others. Examining where these stories occur also helps reveal the extent of Liu Xiang’s original contribution to each section. As mentioned above, the stories about the evil consorts of ancient rulers in chapter seven are based most securely on prior works. In contrast, chapters four and five include the largest number of narratives that lack any precedent, and happen to laud women who accepted restrictions on their autonomy. The fact that so many of the stories and even characters in these two chapters lack any forerunner in earlier writings reflects the novelty of some of Liu’s ethical beliefs.

Many of the narratives about obscure women seem to be modeled after a genre of tales that was well regarded late in Western Han. In Liu Xiang’s other collections Xinxu and Shuoyuan, a large number of stories concern a wise person of low status who remonstrates with a misguided ruler or another high status person.35 This was a dangerous thing to do, as the ruler in the tale sometimes becomes furious and threatens

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to execute the remonstrant for his temerity. In the end, however, the
ruler always recognizes the wisdom of this good advice and proclaims
the true worth of this lowly sage.

There are numerous permutations. For example, in one *Xinju*
story, a ruler remarks on a musician’s blindness. The musician responds
with an eloquent speech in which he uses blindness as a metaphor for
political faults.\(^{36}\) Another tale describes a ruler who becomes livid to-
ward a bystander who had inadvertently scared away a flock of birds
during a hunting expedition. The enraged noble wants to shoot the
unfortunate spectator as punishment for ruining his hunting. At this
point the ruler’s carriage driver steps forward to tell a story about the
importance of moral leadership, convincing the ruler that it is not a
good idea to murder his subjects.\(^{37}\) In yet another story in the same
genre, a ruler becomes lost in a swamp while hunting. A local fisher-
man shows him the way out of the morass, then treats the ruler to a
well-expressed oration that compares getting lost in a swamp with bad
statesmanship.\(^{38}\) There are many examples of this sort in Liu Xiang’s
 oeuvre, especially since this type of didactic story was clearly in vogue
during his lifetime.

Many of the stories about obscure women in *Lienüzhuan* have a
similar theme and structure. A woman demonstrates her sagacity by
giving a speech in which she urges her audience, usually a man, on the
need to uphold high moral standards. The most famous example is the
tale of Mencius’ mother, who cuts the thread on her loom to accom-
pany a dramatic speech about the importance of diligent study.\(^{39}\) In
many cases, these monologues are addressed to a husband. For exam-
ple, the wife of Zhao Shuai (趙衰) uses an eloquent speech, ornamented
with two appropriate quotations from *Shijing*, to urge her husband to
take back a former wife.\(^{40}\) In another story, an old woman speaks very
articulately to the king of Wei (魏) about female propriety and moral
government.\(^{41}\)

Many of the *Lienüzhuan* stories written in this genre entirely lack
precedent, and their main character is totally unknown. Why do so
many of the stories about obscure women, not mentioned in previous
records, have such similar themes and structures? One possibility is

\(^{36}\) Ye Youming 葉幼明 and Huang Peirong 黃沛榮, eds., *Xinju duben* 新序讀本 (Taipei: Sanmin, 1996), i/17, pp. 29–39
\(^{37}\) Ibid., ii/10, pp. 54–55.
\(^{38}\) Ibid., ii/13, pp. 54–57.
\(^{40}\) Ibid., ii/8, p. 310.
\(^{41}\) Ibid., iii/14, pp. 430–31.
that they are true. A large number of ancient women happened to have behaved very similarly; their long speeches were faithfully recorded and preserved for centuries outside the transmitted records available to us; then Liu Xiang finally brought together such scattered ancient documents and edited them.

It does not, however, seem probable that the words and actions of so many insignificant women would have been preserved for very long. It is more likely that these female characters are so similar because they are fictional products of an author working within the confines of a clearly defined genre. The style and structure of this category of Lienüzhuan stories clearly parallel the tales inspired by wandering persuaders that were popular in antiquity, as exemplified by Zhanguoce 戰國策, a book that also underwent heavy editing and rewriting by Liu Xiang.42 Because of his experience putting together Zhanguoce, Liu was intimately familiar with this specific literary genre. Xinwu and Shuoyuan employ many such tales about men making moralistic speeches to their superiors. It seems likely that Liu’s stories about otherwise unknown women are original works of fiction. Since their style and structure are so repetitious, they were likely written as a group, probably by Liu Xiang himself.

CONCLUSION

After examining three groups of narratives, the overall impression is that Liu Xiang combined editorial work with original writing when he put together Lienüzhuan. In fact, this seems to have been his only alternative. There were no previous books dedicated to women, so he only had at his disposal piecemeal scraps of scattered names, remarks, and narrative. Only by adding a considerable amount of new text could Liu possibly turn this scanty and incoherent hodgepodge into a lengthy story-collection with unified themes, style, and structure.

Liu’s creative contribution seems to outweigh the inherited portion in both length and importance. By writing or heavily rewriting most of the stories in Lienüzhuan, he was able to turn out a series of pointed ideological essays in narrative form. To appreciate this work, we must not forget that Liu composed it as a piece of didactic ideological literature. Liu Xiang was a brilliant rhetorician who put across his controversial views in an impressive variety of media: classical commentary, portent prognostications, memorials, essays, and histori-

cal fiction. Moreover, he lived in an age when the forgery of classical documents was common, and this jaded intellectual milieu seems to have given him a flexible attitude toward historical truth. It is clear that with *Lienüzhuan*, Liu was far more concerned with getting across his own beliefs than upholding high standards of veracity.

Early-Eastern Zhou rules of normative female behavior were far more generous than those formulated in subsequent eras. During the Western Han, due to a radical backlash against the interference of powerful women and their kinsmen in politics, some prominent thinkers became determined to reduce female autonomy. Liu Xiang was the most famous exponent of this new way of thinking. Liu and others advocated restricting key areas of female behavior, thereby containing women physically, financially, and sexually. Those opposed to the machinations of consort kin hoped that keeping women out of politics might salvage the increasingly fragile Han dynasty. Because the theories Liu advocated were relatively new, he could not rely completely on received texts to express his position. To achieve his rhetorical goal, he had no choice but to interpolate a considerable amount of new material into the collection.

This exploration of the composition of *Lienüzhuan* began with an overview of the four major previous views toward the legitimacy of this text. As stated at the beginning, Luo Genze saw Liu as little more than a faithful editor of earlier documents, Yu Jiaxi admitted that Liu had done heavy rewriting on the collection’s stories, and Liu Zhiji attacked Liu Xiang as a forger. Shinomi Takao tends to view Liu as the author of a mix of both original fiction and previous narratives. Of these previous scholarly assessments, Shinomi’s is by far the most subtle, as he repeatedly emphasizes the diversity and textual complexity of the work. As we have seen through close readings of a few stories, it is impossible to characterize Liu Xiang solely as either editor or author of *Lienüzhuan*. He acted in both capacities, playing a slightly different compositional role with each story. In conclusion, we should regard Liu Xiang as both the author and editor of China’s first collection of female biographies, although his original contribution to the work seems paramount.

Given these findings, scholars who rely on *Lienüzhuan* as a historical source should exercise extreme caution. Some historians have approached it with the attitude that Liu Xiang was merely editing narratives written much earlier, and have treated these tales as if they are historical documents. In fact, many narratives seem to date back no further than the closing decades of Western Han and cannot be used
to understand women’s lives in the Spring and Autumn era. *Lienüzhuan* is an intricate mix of fiction and fact. Separating the two strains is far from easy.

Nevertheless, even if we look at *Lienüzhuan* as primarily a work of historical fiction, it still deserves earnest study. Compared with earlier Chinese narratives, this story collection evinces highly sophisticated rhetoric, marking a new highpoint in the technical development of prose, and bringing to it increased length, complexity, and beauty. Furthermore, it demonstrates the intricate problems that challenge our analyses of history and fiction. In China, fiction largely developed out of historical narrative. *Sanguozhi* 三國志 eventually begat *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義 rather than vice-versa. *Lienüzhuan* occupies an early gray area between the extremes of fact and fiction, and thus constitutes another kind of literary genus.

Even though Liu Xiang invented much of the content of *Lienüzhuan*, his collection remains an extremely important intellectual artifact that reveals ideas and values characteristic of his time. In terms of substance, we ought to view *Lienüzhuan* as an eloquent and highly persuasive ideological treatise, one that employs a largely fictional narrative masquerading as literal history. As such, it provides detailed insights into some of the novel ideas about women that were gaining currency in the dynamic, fin de siècle intellectual atmosphere. Radical new concepts such as the desirability of female suicide in the name of virtue were just beginning to emerge. *Lienüzhuan* embedded this new hard-line view of gender ethics within a powerful rhetorical medium, thereby guaranteeing that these ideas would have an influential readership for centuries to come. This work spawned many imitators in the same genre, and its ideas crossed over into other forms of expression, making it probably the most ideologically influential work on gender ever written in China. Even if large sections of *Lienüzhuan* are fictional, many readers, from Liu Xiang’s time onward, took them as literally true, thus exerting a profound impact on the development of Chinese culture.

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