

Private Knowledge and Local Community in the Xie Xiao'e Stories

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Abstract

“Xie Xiao’e zhuan” 谢小娥傳 (The Account of Xie Xiao’e) is attributed to Li Gongzuo 李公佐 (ca. 778-848). The story is a first person, autodiegetic account, relating Li Gongzuo’s encounter with a heroic young woman, Xie Xiao’e, who avenges the death of her father and husband with Li’s help. The tale had already been transmitted in written form before it came into Li Fuya’s 李復言 (fl. 830-40) hands, who later expanded it into a fuller version titled “Ni Miaoji” 尼妙寂 (Miaoji, the Nun) in *Xu Xuanguai lu* 續玄怪錄 (Sequel to *Xuanguai lu*). The “Xie Xiao’e zhuan” story was later incorporated into *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (The New History of the Tang), an official history compiled in the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127). This paper, following Sarah M. Allen and Jack W. Chen’s approach to Tang tales, examines the Xie Xiao’e story from the perspective of local community and private knowledge. Specifically, the paper first attempts to reconstruct the origin of the Xie Xiao’e story in the form of local gossip. Drawing on different narratives of the story, the paper attempts to map out transmission paths of the story and to show narrative strategies used by different writers as the story travelled across communities.

“Xie Xiao’e zhuan” 谢小娥傳 (The Account of Xie Xiao’e) is attributed to Li Gongzuo 李公佐 (ca. 778-848). The story is a first person, autodiegetic account, relating Li Gongzuo’s encounter with a heroic young woman, Xie Xiao’e, who, with Li’s help, avenges the death of her father and husband. Like many other Tang authors of classical-language stories, except for the stories attributed to him, little is known about Li Gongzuo.¹ From these stories, we can infer that Li held several minor positions including that of retainer in Jiangxi 江西從事, and Xie Xiao’e, as the tale tells us, was a native of Yuzhang 豫章, which belonged, during the Tang, to the same region.²

According to Li Fuya’s 李復言 (fl. 830-40), who later expanded the story into a fuller version entitled “Ni Miaoji” 尼妙寂 (Miaoji, the Nun), “Xie Xiao’e zhuan” had already been transmitted

¹ In addition to the “Xie Xiao’e zhuan,” Li also wrote “Nanke Taishou zhuan” 南柯太守傳 (The Governor of the Southern Branch), “Lujiang Feng’ao” 盧江馮媼 (Mother Feng from the Lu River), and “Gu Yuedu jing” 古岳瀆經 (The Ancient Classics of Peaks and Rivers). For more details of Li Gongzuo’s life, see Donald Gjertson, “Li Kung-tso,” in *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 541-3 and Uchiyama Chinari 内山知也, “Nanka Taiju den’ni tsuite” 南柯太守傳について, in *Sui To shosetsu kenkyu* 隋唐小説研究 [Tokyo: Mokujiisha 本耳社, 1976], p. 381.

² Yuzhang 豫章, belonged to Jiangnan xidao 江南西道 (Jiangnan western circuit), was the seat of Hong prefecture 洪州 in the Tang dynasty. It was located in modern Nanchang 南昌 city in Jiangxi (Tan Qixiang 譚其驤, *Zhongguo lishi ditu ji* 中國歷史地圖集 [Beijing: Zhongguo ditu chubanshe, 1996], 5:57-58). Wang Meng’ou (Wang, 2:35, n. 1) notes that Yuzhang was renamed as Zhongling 鐘陵 in the sixth month of the first year of the Baoying 寶應 reign because of the taboo concerning the name of the Emperor Daizong 代宗, whose name was yu 豫. But since this tale was composed after the Zhenyuan 貞元 reign of Emperor Dezong 德宗, it used Yuzhang again to refer to the place.

in written form before it came into his hands.³ But what distinguishes “Xie Xiao’e zhuan” from many other Tang stories is its later incorporation into *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (The New History of the Tang) (hereafter *XTS*), an official history compiled in the Northern Song (960-1127).⁴

An interesting question rises as to the historiographic status of “Xie Xiao’e zhuan.” On one hand, the credibility of the story as an account of a real historical event has been widely recognized especially since its incorporation into the official history. On the other hand, the tale was selected by the most important modern anthologies of, and scholarly works on, the Tang *chuanqi* tales, which of course, have emphasized its fictionality.⁵ Some recent research has tried to resolve this conflict by coining a new term *zhuanji wenxue* 傳記文學 to categorize the story, placing it somewhere between these two poles.⁶ The dilemma of historicity/fictionality, however, is addressed in Sheldon Lu’s work on the poetics of narrative in China.

³ A modern collated version can be found in Wang Meng’ou 王夢鷗 (1907-2002), *Tangren xiaoshuo jiaoshi* 唐人小說校釋 (2v.; Taipei: Zheng-zhong Shuju, 1983) 2: 31-40.

⁴ The historians given charge of the *Xin Tang shu* were Song Qi 宋祁 (998-1061) and Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-1072), who was an admirer of the *Chuanqi*. Song Qi had initiated work on the *XTS* but could not complete it. He was responsible for many of the biographical chapters. Ouyang Xiu was then summoned to complete the history. See Huang Yongnian 黃永年, *Jiu Tang shu yu Xin Tang shu* (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1985).

⁵ The tale is included in many important anthologies and scholarly work on the Tang *chuanqi* tales, such as Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936). *Tang Song chuanqi ji* 唐宋傳奇集 (Tianjing: Tianjing Guji Chubanshe, 2002), 140-146; Wang Pijiang 汪辟疆 (1887-1966). *Tangren xiaoshuo* 唐人小說 (Hongkong: Zhonghua Shuju Chubanshe, 1978), 93-97, and Li Jianguo 李劍國 *Tang Wudai zhiguai chuanqi xulu* 唐五代志怪傳奇敘錄 (2v.; Tianjin: Nankai Daxue, 1993), 399-401.

⁶ See Liu Zhuoxia 柳卓霞, “Maohe shenli: Li Gongzuo ‘Xie Xiao’e zhuan’, Li Fuyan ‘Ni Miaoji’, *Xin Tang shu* ‘Xie Xiao’e zhuan’ bijiao yuedu” 貌合神離：李公佐《謝小俄傳》、李復言《尼妙寂》、《新唐書》比較閱讀, *Sheibui kexue luntan* 社會科學論壇 7 (2009): 121-126.

Based on a rectified conception of truth and reality, Lu points out that the question of plausibility in narrative “is not to be understood as a correspondence between language and some extra-linguistic reality,” instead, “it has to do with a communication network between the sender/writer and receiver/reader.”⁷ According to Lu, because the official history was the norm against which the truthfulness of other minor types of narrative was measured, some Tang *chuanqi* tales were naturalized through an historical mode of reading, an allegorical mode, or some combination thereof and stories that were resistant to these modes were treated as “fantasy.” Lu argues that “Xie Xiao’e zhuan” was read in the historical mode and eventually appropriated as history because of what he calls the “veridiction marks” and “edifying messages” in the text.

Insightful and solid as Lu’s research is, his reconstruction of the historical conditions of reception may nonetheless be somewhat oversimplified for it takes the official history as the only standard against which all other narratives are measured.⁸ However, as Lu himself pointed out, that plausibility has to do with “a communication network between the sender/writer and receiver/reader.” Official histories are, after all, only one among many forms of private knowledge transmitted to the public realm. In addition to these “official” forms, there are many other narrative forms that work in communities of different sizes. For example, local histories speak to smaller communities. Likewise, gossip and its literary vehicle, anecdotes are also, as Jack W Chen has noted, “embedded within particular communities of knowledge.”⁹

⁷ Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, *From Historicity to Fictionality: The Chinese Poetics of Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 94.

⁸ Sheldon Lu actually noticed this potential danger of “homogeneous horizon of expectations” but he insisted that such a “normative, widespread, and official valorized conception of narrative discourse that directs the production, circulation and reception of writings” suffice his discussion. See Lu, *From Historicity to Fictionality*, 96.

⁹ See Jack W. Chen, “Blank Spaces and Secret Histories: Questions of Historiographic Epistemology in Medieval China,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69 (2010), 1072.

This perspective of local community and private knowledge is gaining more attention in the study of Tang tales. Sarah Allen has argued that “the events related...are usually not subject to public verification, but purport to recount information that could only be known by an eyewitness,” showing that the idea of the Tang tales is based less on pure fictionality than it is on the private and local perspective.¹⁰ Building on Allen’s research, Jack W Chen’s more recent study uses “Huo Xiaoyu zhuan” 霍小玉傳 to illustrate how a private anecdote is relocated in the public sphere in the retelling of this tale.¹¹ Building on Allen and Chen’s research, this paper attempts to apply the perspective of local community and private knowledge to the various stories of Xie Xiao’e. Accordingly, the paper first traces the Xie Xiao’e story back to its origin in the form of a local gossip. Drawing on different narratives of the story, it then aims to provide a more comprehensive account of the process of transmission of private knowledge across different communities.¹²

For the purpose of comparison among different narratives, the course of the “Xie Xiao’e zhuan” by Li Gongzuo is expressed below in terms of sixteen discrete narrative units:

¹⁰ Sarah Allen, “Tang Stories: Tales and Texts,” Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2003, pp. 4-5.

¹¹ Chen, “Blank Spaces and Secret Histories,” p. 1079-1088.

¹² The terms gossip and anecdote in this paper follow Jack W Chen’s definitions. Based on Patricia Meyer Spacks, Chen argues that gossip is “a form of social epistemology, a way of both knowing and belonging to community.” Anecdote is the “narrative form that gossip might take” and it is the “literary vehicle of gossip, as its main interest is not the functional circulation of social information, but the aesthetic pleasure that is taken both in telling and in being told.” See Chen, “Blank Spaces and Secret Histories,” p. 1072-1073.

- L1 The introduction of Xie Xiao'e: she is the daughter of a travelling merchant and marries the "knight-errant" Duan Juzhen 段居貞 of Liyang 歷陽.¹³
- L2 Xiao'e's father and husband are killed by bandits and robbed of all their gold and silks but Xiao'e is rescued.
- L3 Xiao'e wanders about begging, and comes to the Shangyuan County.¹⁴ There she is taken into the household of a kind nun, Jingwu, from the Miaoguo 妙果 Temple.¹⁵
- L4 Xiao'e dreams of her father and husband telling her the names of the murderers in a twelve-character riddle. Because she cannot figure it out, she seeks the help of wise men.
- L5 After being relieved of his post as retainer in Jiangxi, the narrator, Li Gongzuo, comes to Jianye 建業 and ascends the pagoda of the Wagan Monastery, where the narrator is asked by the Master Qiwu to solve the riddle.¹⁶ The riddle is quickly

¹³ In the Tang, Li Yang belonged to Huannan Circuit 淮南道 and was the seat of the He prefecture 和州. It is located in the modern He County of Anhui Province 安徽和縣. (Tan Qixiang, 5:54).

¹⁴ The Shangyuan 上元 County belonged to Run Prefecture 潤州 of the Eastern Jiangnan Circuit 江南東道 in the Tang dynasty. It is located in modern Nanjing city of Jiangsu (Tan Qixiang, 5:55-56). Wang Meng'ou notes that the place was once named Jinling 金陵, moling 秣陵, Jianye 建業, and Jiankang 建康 (Wang, 2:35, n. 6) in the history. It is noteworthy that, a few lines later, the same place is called Jianye 建業.

¹⁵ Li Jianguo, *Cidian* (p. 289, n. 8) notes that the Miaoguo temple was first established in the Three Kingdoms period and was once called Ruixiang yuan 瑞相院.

¹⁶ It is a 350-foot tall pagoda, which stands in the Wagan monastery. There are at least two traditions on the naming of the Wagan monastery. In one tradition, the monastery was known as the Wagan monastery because it was located at the site where potters, or wagan 瓦官, worked during the Jin dynasty. According to the other tradition, however, the monastery took the name Wagan in the 7th century because a monk who loved the Fahua jing 法華經 was buried there beneath a circle of bricks out of which grew lotuses. According to Li Jianguo, (*Cidian*, p. 289, n. 13), the monastery was first known as Wagan si 瓦官寺 but it was mistaken as

- solved and the names of the murderers—Shen Chun 申春 and Shen Lan 申蘭 are revealed.
- L6 Xiao'e writes down the names, swearing to avenge the death of her father and husband. She inquires about the narrator's surname, official title and clan and leaves in tears.
- L7 Xiao'e dresses up as a man and offers to hire herself out. In Xunyang Prefecture 潯陽郡, she works for a household, the master of which turns out to be Shen Lan.
- L8 The properties which Lan had robbed from the Xie family are stored in his house. Xiao'e weeps secretly every time she handles her old belongings.
- L9 Lan's cousin Chun often visits Lan and the two would often be gone for more than a month and return with quantities of money and silks.
- L10 Chun comes to visit Lan carrying some carps and wine. That evening, Lan and Chun have a get-together, during which all of the bandits come and drink heavily.
- L11 Xiao'e quietly locks Chun inside a chamber, cuts off Lan's head and calls neighbors to capture Chun. More than ten accomplices, whose names Xiao'e has secretly kept in mind, are all captured and submitted to execution.
- L12 Prefect Zhang of Xunyang values her resolve and deeds, reports her case in detail to his supervisors, thus exempting her from the death penalty.¹⁷

Waguan monastery 瓦棺寺 because of the brick coffin 瓦棺 legend. Wang Meng'ou (2:36, no. 8) notes that the monastery was established in the Liang dynasty and was initially known as Shenyuan ge 昇元閣. The pagoda was a well-known attraction at the time and it appears in one of Li Bai's poems.

¹⁷ Li Jianguo's version (Li, *Cidian*, p. 288) reads "At the time, Prefect Zhang of Xunyang valued her virtuous deeds." 時潯陽太守張公, 善娥節行. As to the name of the Prefect Zhang, Li Jianguo (*Cidian*, p. 289) notes that according to the "Xie Xiao'e zhuan" of *Quan Tangwen* 全唐文 (*juan* 725), the Prefecture was called Zhang Mian 張覲, in "Duan Juzhen qi Xie Xiao'e" 段居貞妻謝小娥 of *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (The New Book of the Tang), it was Prefect Zhang Xi 張錫, while in the *Yu chu zhi* 虞初志 edition, it was Master Zhang Xi 張公喜. However, Wang Meng'ou (2:37, n. 23) argues that according to Bai Juyi's anthology, there was a Prefect Cui

- L13 Xiao'e returns to her native village. Despite many principal families of the district competing to seek her in marriage, she vows not to marry again and therefore serves as a novice under Master Jiang, the bodhisattva on the Ox Head Mountain.¹⁸
- L14 Xiao'e is officially initiated into the Buddhist priesthood at the Kaiyuan temple 開元寺 in Sizhou 泗州.¹⁹ She uses Xiao'e as her clerical name, showing that she would not forget her origins.
- L14 In the Shanyi 善義 temple at Sizhou, the narrator meets a newly consecrated nun who turns out to be Xiao'e. Xiao'e updates him on her revenge and says that she will repay the narrator's kindness.
- L15 Xiao'e tells the narrator that she will return to the Ox Head Mountain. In a small boat, she sails along the Huai River and roams through the southern provinces. The narrator has never met her since.²⁰
- L16 Approving remarks about Xie Xiao'e given by the narrator.

Li Zongwei 李宗為 points out that the sources of the majority of Tang stories can be divided into several categories: personal experience, news from society, anecdotes about historical figures and famous literati, and legends and strange stories that are

崔 in charge of the Jiang Prefecture 江州 in the twelfth year of the Yuanhe reign 元和十二年 (817).

¹⁸ In Li Jianguo's version (*Cidian*, p. 288), Xiao'e served under Master Jiang 蔣.

¹⁹ *Shou Jujie* 具戒 means she received all the defenses, which are theoretically three hundred and forty-one rules of a Bhiksuni.

²⁰ Li Jianguo's version (Li, *Cidian*, p. 289) notes that the Ox Head Mountain, located in the southwest of modern Nanjing 南京, was an important Buddhist sacred Mountain, where the Monk Farong 法融 established Ox Head school of the Zen Buddhism.

popular among the people.²¹ If one takes what Li Gongzuo says at face value, the source of “Xie Xiao’e zhuan” should be personal experience. However, a comparison with an analogue suggests another possibility:

According to Li Jianguo, Li Shen 李紳 (772-848) also composed a *chuanqi* tale entitled “Xie Xiao’e zhuan,” 謝小娥傳 which unfortunately is no longer extant.²² In *Zaolin zazhu* 棗林雜俎, a Ming dynasty anthology of miscellaneous notes by Tan Qian 談遷 (1593-1657), there is a note to the entry “Gu Kuang” 顧曠²³, which quotes a record concerning Xie Xiao’e in *Linjiang fu zhi* 臨江府志, a Ming dynasty (1368-1644) gazetteer. The note mentions that “Li Shen 李紳, the prime minister, composed a biography [of Xie Xiao’e]” 相國李紳有傳. Li Shen’s life and political career can be found in both the *Old History of the Tang* (*juan* 173) and the *New History of the Tang* (*juan* 181). One would notice that he served as the Surveillance Commissioner of Jiangxi 江西觀察使 in the third year of the Changqing 長慶 reign (823), several years after Xie Xiao’e’s story (according to Li Gongzuo, it spans from 811 A.D. to 818 A.D.). If the dates found in Li Gongzuo’s account are generally reliable, it is possible that Li Shen learned about Xie Xiao’e’s story during his tenure in Jiangxi.

According to Li Jianguo, the Ming gazetteer *Linjiang fu zhi* 臨江府志 adopted materials from Song gazetteers, many of which are preserved in a Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279) gazetteer *Yudi jisheng* 輿地紀勝. One record under the division of *Jiangnan xilu* 江南西路 in this gazetteer reads:

²¹ Li Zongwei 李宗為, “Lun Tangren chuanqi de sucai lai yuan ji yanbian” 論唐人傳奇的素材來源及演變, in *Tangdai wenxue yanjiu* 唐代文學研究 (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin, 1988), pp. 69-71.

²² Li Jianguo, *Tang Wudai zhiguai chuanqi xulu*, pp. 541-543.

²³ See Tan Qian 談遷, *Zaolin zazhu* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2006), p. 511.

[There was a woman by the name of] Xie Xiao'e, whose father was about to escort an amount of gold and silver from Guangzhou 廣州 to the capital. He took his family with him but when passing the Xiao shoal, they met bandits. The entire family was killed. Xiao'e fell into the water but did not drown. She went begging in the market and was hired later by a household of Li, a salt merchant. She noticed that all the drinking vessels they were using were those that once belonged to her father. Only then did she realize that merchant Li was the bandit. Her heart was filled with hatred. Therefore, she purchased a sword and hid it. One evening, Mr. Li purchased wine and the entire household was drunk. Xiao'e killed all the people of the household and reported [the case] to the local authorities. The case was known to the imperial court and an official position was especially ordered for her. Xiao'e would not [accept it] and said, "Having avenged the death of my father, I would prefer to be occupied with nothing. I would like to ask for a small monastery to cultivate myself according to the Way." The imperial court thus built a monastery and let her stay in it. It is now known as the monastery of the Golden Pond District.

謝小娥，父自廣州部金銀綱，攜家入京，舟過蕭灘遇盜，全家遇害。小娥溺水不死，行乞於市。後庸於鹽商李氏家，見其所用酒器皆其父物，始悟向盜乃李也。心銜之，乃置刀藏之。一夕李生置酒，舉室酣醉，娥盡殺其家人，而聞於官。事聞諸朝，特命以官，娥不願，曰：“已報父仇，他無所事，求小庵修道。”朝廷乃建尼寺，使居之。今金池坊尼寺是也。

As is mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Li Gongzuo's "Xie Xiao'e zhuan" was incorporated into the *XTS*, which became an influential version of the Xie Xiao'e story in the Northern Song dynasty. Nevertheless, the above passage from the Southern Song, which presumably has followed Li Shen's account, shows a quite different narrative tradition of the story at the time. The above story

was circulating among the local community and was to be passed down to later generations through local gazetteers.

Because of the fluidity of the text, it is almost impossible to decide which narrative tradition is closer to the original discourse. But a comparison of the two narrative traditions may show us some elements of the core story. Elements shared by these two traditions include that 1) the Xie family is killed on the river while Xiao'e narrowly escapes death (L2, Li Gongzuo's account); 2) Xiao'e hires herself out as a servant and by accident, is hired by the murderer (L7); 3) The properties (physical evidence) of the Xie family found in the new household reveal the true identity of master—he is the murderer (L8); 4) Xiao'e kills the murderer when he is drunk, avenging the death of her family (L10); 5) Xiao'e's story is greatly respected by local authorities and is reported to the imperial court. As a result, she is exempted from the death penalty (L12); 6) Xiao'e becomes a nun (L14). As we can see, the foregoing elements are sufficient to form a rather comprehensive discourse of a female avenger. Thus, it is highly possible that Li Gongzuo heard about such gossip when he was in Jiangxi but chose to present the story as if it had come from his personal experience. As a result, the narrative takes on a private perspective. Admittedly, for most other Tang tales, the structural role of the eyewitness comes into play mainly through the use of a storyteller who frames the narrative. In this narrative, however, the storyteller and the eyewitness become one person.

Having reconstructed the core of the Xie Xiao'e story, the following part uses geographical marks and the theme of riddle-solving as two examples to illustrate the transmission of private knowledge across the public realm.

The *Yudi jisheng* 輿地紀勝 account, as quoted above, consist of two parts—a recounting of the revenge story and a postscript. The one-sentence postscript “It is now known as the monastery of the Golden Pond District” is worthy of special attention: on the one hand, it lodges the foregoing story within a mimesis of the historical real. On the other, it constitutes an “outer story,” a vantage point, that is, in Dudbridge's words, “from which the whole preceding story

can be surveyed.”²⁴ Moreover, the monastery not only serves as the material evidence of an historical event, but also becomes a locus around which the preceding story unfolds. One can imagine, for example, if one visited the monastery at the time, it is very likely that one would be told about the story. Therefore, although the timing of this story is vague, the territorial sense is rather strong. It shows that as the gossip took on this narrative form, it was also immediately connected with the local community.

However, the sense of territory as reflected in the above passage is greatly weakened in Li Gongzuo’s “Xie Xiao’e zhuan.” If one tries to connect together those places in Li’s version, one will notice that Xie Xiao’e journey covered a large part of the lower Yangtze River region, from modern Anhui 安徽 province to Zhejiang 浙江 province. But at the same time, it is difficult to directly connect the narrative with any particular place. As one will see, it becomes even hard to make this connection in later versions. For example, in “Ni Miaoji,” the narrator notes that he read Li Gongzuo’s “Xie Xiao’e zhuan” on a trip to the southern part of modern Sichuan province:

In the Geng xu 庚戌 year of the Taihe 太和 reign (830), I, Li Fuyan from Longxi, was traveling in the South of Ba. I met Shen Tian 沈田, a *jinsbi* candidate in Pengzhou 蓬州. Because [we were] talking about marvelous events, [Shen] took out [Li Gongzuo’s account] to show me. I was able to recite the story after one look. 太和庚戌歲，隴

²⁴ Dudbridge uses the terms “out story” and “inner story” to examine eighth century stories concerning the lay society. Although the tale under examination is not about private and subjective experience of an individual who embarks on an adventure as those examined by Dudbridge, the idea of outer story is still applicable here in the sense that it represents what we would ourselves have seen and heard if we had been present on the scene. For details, see Glen Dudbridge, *Books, Tales and Vernacular Culture: Selected Papers on China* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), pp. 113-33.

西李復言遊巴南，與進士沈田會於蓬州。
因話奇事，持與相視，一覽而復之。²⁵

This postscript signals the spread of the Xie Xiao'e story to a much wider realm geographically and socially. Moreover, Li Fuyan provides extra information on places such as the pagoda of the Waguan monastery in Jianye 建業 first seen in Li Gongzuo's version. It is very likely that when Li Fuyan retold the story to another community that has no direct contact with Li Gongzuo, he felt the need to equip his readers/listeners with more background information. However, some of the above geographical markers were left out by the *XTS* piece. Except for the native places of the characters, the *XTS* piece does not provide much geographical information. Most of the existing place names merely serve as symbols indicating that the heroine was in motion.

The theme of riddle-solving is also used differently across these different stories. It is hard to decide if the theme of riddle-solving was first added to the story by Li Gongzuo. But there is no doubt that the theme was inherited ever since it was employed in Li's version. Wolfgang Bauer notes that the play on characters as a graphic system is found in Chinese literature in numerous varieties ranging from simple allusion to highly artistic riddles, both types of which were not infrequently used for political purposes. This technique of "dissecting particular characters" is used in Li Gongzuo's account, too. Donald Gjertson notes that although plays on the characters appear as early as in the *Zuo zhuan*, the "Xie Xiao'e zhuan" seems to be the first appearance of the device in a fictional setting.²⁶

Why did Li Gongzuo add such a theme? Wang Meng'ou suggests that Li was probably inspired by his contemporary Li Jifu 李吉甫, who composed a story named "Liang datong kuang ming ji"

²⁵ The Chinese text is based on Wang Meng'ou, *Tangren xiaoshuo jiaoshi*, 2: 31-40.

²⁶ Donald Gjertson, "Li Kung-tso," in *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 542.

梁大同壙銘記 (An Account of a grave inscription in Datong from the Liang Dynasty) at the end of the Zhenyuan 貞元 reign. In Li Jifu's story, Zheng Xinyue 鄭欣說 solved a riddle from a grave inscription and was, thereby, able to tell the dates of the grave.²⁷ However, Li Jifu's writing could, at best, be counted as the immediate cause. More fundamental causes probably have to do with the mechanism of storytelling of the Tang tales. From the core story reconstructed above, one will note that Xiao'e was brought to the household of the murder by accident. It could be that in an effort to rationalize this marvelous event, people tend to partially contribute Xiao'e's success to coincidence. Li Gongzuo followed this logic in his version. For example, in his version, we are told that Xiao'e offered to hire herself out to a household, the master of which turned out to be the murderer (L7). By adding the popular theme of riddle solving, this coincidence becomes more dramatic. The using of such a theme also suggests that the story was probably recounted for a particular community that was interested in or was accustomed to this mode of storytelling.

However, the theme is treated differently in "Ni Miaoji" and the *XTS* account. The writer of "Ni Miaoji" explicitly explains why the murderers' names were conveyed in riddles. The words were put into the mouth of Xiao'e's father, who speaks to Xiao'e in a dream, saying "Because you seem like a person full of aspirations in your heart, Heaven allows you to take your revenge. However, the intentions of the netherworld cannot be spoken of in a direct way." 以汝心似有志者，天許復仇。但幽冥之意，不欲顯言。 This can be taken as an attempt to make sense of the riddle theme which the writer had inherited from the earlier versions of the story. Here riddles from the netherworld indicate that Xiao'e's revenge was ethically correct and that her revenge was more or less predestined. Meanwhile, Xiao'e was depicted as having actively out for the murderer. In short, in Li Fuyan's version everything seems to be well-

²⁷ See "Xie Xiao'e gushi zhengque xing zhi tantao" 謝小娥故事正確性之探討 in Wang Meng'ou 王夢鷗, *Tangren xiaoshuo yanjiu, siji* 唐人小說研究 (Taipei: Yiwen Yingshuguan, 1978), 202.

planned and under control. Morality replaces coincidence in organizing the story.

Likewise, the *XTS* account downplays the riddle-solving, and only mentions that Xiao'e got to know the murderers' names from a twelve-character riddle with the help of Li Gongzuo from Longxi 隴西. This version is rather short, devoid of dialogue and dramatic scenes of action. Sheldon Lu argues that the author of the section on Xie Xiao'e in the collective biography of women expurgated fictional elements so that this version "appeared to tell the story of a historical figure and of something that had really happened in the past." The problem with this reading is that we will risk projecting our own concept of superstition onto the people of the Tang dynasty. In other words, what we consider as superstition may be something in which people in the Tang dynasty believed. What distinguishes the two tales and the *XTS* piece is again, private knowledge and the local perspective found in the two tales. In "Xie Xiao'e zhuan," the narrator and the heroine meet twice, the second of which is criticized by some modern scholars for its wordiness. But it is this second encounter that allows the narrator to approach the complete story from a personal perspective. This personal perspective is kept in "Ni Miaoji," not by means of a second encounter but by adding a coda to the tale, which later became a narrative formula in Tang tales. However, such a frame of storytelling is not seen in the *XTS*. As an official historical narrative, the *XTS* version is supposed to transcend the particularities of the social network, for its perspective is that of the state, rather than personal or local perspective. Thus, readers are told that Xiao'e was brought before the local authority and "only then did she start to tell her story" 乃始自言狀. The event was then reported to officials of the higher level. This is the picture of knowledge transmission that the compilers of the *XTS* attempted to present, showing that the story was subject to public verification.

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