Xiaoshuo as a Cataloguing Term in Traditional Chinese Bibliography

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Abstract:
Xiaoshuo has long been used as a Chinese equivalent for “fiction” by students and scholars of traditional Chinese literature since the early 20th century. In this paper, however, I will argue that xiaoshuo, which was never used in pre-modern China to designate the type of writings known today as “fiction”, was primarily used as a cataloguing term in traditional bibliography to refer to any writings which were considered to be worth preserving but were considered to be incongruous with any one of the mainstream schools of Master’s writings. For this purpose, the author traces the use of the word “xiaoshuo” in early Chinese classics and bibliographical books of dynastic history, and explores the etymological rationale underlying “xiaoshuo” as a cataloguing term in classical Chinese.

Keywords: xiaoshuo, fiction, cataloguing term, bibliography, etymology

Abbreviations

CSJCJB Congshu jicheng jianbian 著書集成簡編
GJCS Guoxue jiben congshu sibaizhong 國學基本叢書四百種
GJL Gujin shulu 古今書錄
HSWZ Hunshu yuanchu 漢書原註
LXQJ Lu Xun quanji 魯迅全集
MSWZ Mingshi yuanchu 明史原註
QQTSM Qianqingtang shumu 千頃堂書目
SKQS Siku quanshu 四庫全書
SSJZ Shuohu yaozhu 論説書目
SSWZ Siku yuanchu 四庫原註
SWZ Shuowen jiezi 說文解字
TSJZ Jiu Tangshu jingjizhi 新唐書經籍志
TSYWZ Xin Tangshu yuanchu 新唐書原註
XZSSL Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue 中國小説史略
Since the New Literary Movement in the early 20th century, the word *xiaoshuo* has been used by Chinese literary critics and historians as a Chinese equivalent for “fiction.” Inspired by Western accounts of literature, they made a historical study of *xiaoshuo* as an independent literary genre like poetry, prose and drama in the history of Chinese literature.

"History of literature," [written], however, is a Western concept introduced to China towards the end of the 19th century. As noted by Helmuts Martin (1968) in his "Oumeinew zhonggawenxueshi jieshao" [An Introduction to Histories of Chinese Literature Written in Western Languages] the first book on history of Chinese literature was written by the German sinologist W. Schott and published in 1854. In Russia, in 1860 a brief history of Chinese literature by B. a. Bac was published. The last ten years of the 19th century saw the publication of at least three books devoted to historical study of Chinese literature, such as Koji Teikichi’s ([1866-1849] *Shina Bunakaku-shi* [History of Chinese Literature](1897)), and Herbert A. Giles’ ([1845-1935] *A History of Chinese Literature* (1897), and Sasagawa Runpu’s ([1870-1894], also known as Sasagawa Taneo) *Shina Bunagaku-shi* (1898), which was actually an enlarged version of his *Shina shotenshu gokyoku shinho* [A Brief History of Chinese Fiction and Drama] published in 1897. A Chinese version of this book was published in China in 1903, and in the following year came out the arguably first Chinese-written history of Chinese literature entitled *Zhonggaw xiexunshen* [History of Chinese Literature] by Lin Chuanjia (1877-1921), a young scholar of only 20 years old from Metropolitan University [Jingshi daxuetang]. In the preface, he admits that he has been inspired by Sasagawa Runpu to write this book.

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the EACS Conference 2002, Moscow, August 26-28. My thanks go to Dr. Tommy McClellan, Dr. Julian Ward, Dr. William Dolby, Dr. Frances Weightman, Dr. Brian McClellan, and Professor Ye Shumin for their insightful suggestions. My gratitude also goes to the two anonymous readers for their meticulous review and critical comments. Needless to say, errors that remain are my alone.

2. As noted in an essay entitled "Menace wentan" [A Layman’s Remarks on Literature] written by Lu Xun ([1981: 6/93]) in 1934 and later included in "Objects and ideas" [Essays from a Semi-concession] ([1974: iii-iv]) and written as inspired by Sasagawa Taneo (1870-1949, also known as Sasagawa Taneo) *History of Chinese Literature* ([1897]), and Herbert A. Giles’ ([1845-1935] *A History of Chinese Literature* ([1897]), and Sasagawa Runpu’s ([1870-1894]) *A General Outline of History of Chinese Fiction* ([1923-1924], which were combined into a single-volume and published under the title *Zhonggaw xiaoshuo zhonglu* [A Cataloguing Term in Traditional Chinese Bibliography] in 1923-1924, which were combined into a single-volume and published under the title *Zhongguowen xiaoshuo zhonglu* [A Cataloguing Term in Traditional Chinese Bibliography]. Since Lu Xun, as noted in Hegel, there have been "scholarly attempts to see the term as synonymous with the modern concept of fiction." However, the application of the Western concept of fiction to the study of *xiaoshuo* recorded in early Chinese historical, philosophical and miscellaneous writings

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5. Hegel ([1994: 194]).

has resulted in the confusion of xiaoshuo with fiction, and the identification of fictional elements from xiaoshuo writings and treatment of them as fictional works has, inevitably, albeit inadvertently, made an impression that Chinese fictional writings began around the Warring States Period (475-221 BC), as shown in works by Tan Zhengbi (1935), Li Jianguo (1980), Jiang Shuge (1984), and Rao Longsun (2000).

There is nothing wrong in tracing the history of xiaoshuo to the Warring States Period, or even earlier times, but one must be clear, from the outset, that “fictional elements” extracted from other genres of writings are by no means “fictional works”. Essential to the quality of being fictional is imagination. “The word ‘fiction’ itself,” as noted in Main, “implies imaginative creativity since it comes from a word meaning ‘to form, shape, invent, fabricate, conjure up in the mind’.” In line with this observation, he defines “fiction” as “a type of narrative characterised by events, personages, and circumstances possessing the qualities” which are “something feigned, fabricated, fashioned, imagined, or invented.” Xiaoshuo as meaning fictional writings, in the true sense of this term as defined by Main, came about centuries later with the rise of chuanqi (transmissions of the magic) of the Tang dynasty (618-907) when telling a story was no longer merely a matter of setting down facts, actual or supposed, concerning real or imagined persons, or simply rewriting old folktales and marvels without refinement.

Whether there was fiction, “consciously written”, before the rise of chuanqi in the Tang or the introduction of Buddhism around the first century from India remains as an issue for further debate and discussion, but one thing certain is: the word xiaoshuo was never used in pre-modern China as a generic term for fiction; instead, xiaoshuo was primarily used as a cataloguing term in traditional Chinese bibliography to refer to any writings which were considered to be worth preserving but were considered to be incongruous with any one of the Nine Bibliographical Categories.

The first known use of the term xiaoshuo was made in the Wutong [External Objects] section of the Zaopian [Random Writings] chapter in the Zhuangzi [The Writings of Zhuangzi] to refer to a fable about Ben Gongzi [Prince of the State of Ben] fishing with a huge line baited with fifty bulls. Standing at the top of Mt. Kuaiji, he casts the fishing line into the East Sea, and waits patiently year in and year out for fish to take the bait, but to no avail, until towards the end of one year when he catches huge fish. After great efforts, he pulls the fish ashore, cooks it up, and salts it for thousands of people to eat.

This story was not included in the Zhuangzi merely for entertainment, but possibly more as a satirical metaphor to ridicule those who went canvassing from one state to another, “to fish for fame and reputation by polishing and peddling ‘xiaoshuo’,” as shown in a brief comment immediately after the story in the Zhuangzi:

The canvassers of later generations were all struck with awe and recounted the tale to each other. If one, holding high a fishing rod and line, goes fishing in a ditch or a pool, he may catch small fry, but it would be difficult for him to catch big fish. It follows that if one polishes xiaoshuo to fish for fame and reputation, he will be far from obtaining dada [the Great Wisdom]. Therefore, those who have never heard of the way Prince of the State of Ben fished will still have a long way to go in pursuit of long-lasting fame.

Although the Zhuangzi did touch upon an important aspect of xiaoshuo, that is, its function for the gaining of “fame and reputation”, it stopped short of explaining the term further, which renders it difficult for us to make an accurate inference of its concept of xiaoshuo. However, from the context where “xiaoshuo” occurs in opposition to “dada”, the term xiaoshuo was used in the Zhuangzi to refer to arts or writings of lower value and taste, in contrast to profound and elegant works of poetry or philosophy. Thus it is far from being a
generic term to designate the type of writings which would later develop into what is known today as "fiction".

This concept of xiaoshuo used in the *Zhuangzi* in contrast to dao bears striking resemblance to the Confucian idea of "xiaoshuo" expressed through the mouth of Zixia in the *Zizhuang* chapter of the *Lunyu.*

Even xiaodao is sure to have something worth looking at, but the gentleman does not take to it for fear of being bogged down in the mire if he wishes to reach a long distant destination.20

When we compare shuo with dao, we find that these two Chinese characters share the same semantic property of "expressing in words", and are thus treated as synonymous when referring to "jiangdu" [tal] or "baozhu" [discourse].19

A term related to xiaoshuo is also found in the Zhengning chapter of the Xunzi, where all the then current non-Confucian schools of thoughts are degraded as "strange talk of petty schools" xiaojia zhexueshuo in contrast to the greatness and profundity of "discourses on the Way by the sage" [Zhizhe banzuo].

A second recorded appearance of the word xiaoshuo is found in the *Xiuwen* [A New Treatise] by Huan Tan (?-56 BC), where it is used in a more specific sense to designate "a type of writing" [weishou].

By putting together fragmentary and trivial talk [conceng xinyong], and drawing on parables and fables at hand, the xiaoshuo writers make up short pieces of writing [duanshu], which contain messages worth reading on how to discipline oneself and manage one’s family affairs.21

It is generally agreed among scholars of traditional Chinese literature that xiaoshuo as a concept for a type of writing can be traced back to the *Xia Lu*. As compared with the use of xiaoshuo in the *Zhuangzi*, this definition, which covers at least three important aspects (style, content, and value) of a genre, is much more specific and informative. Stylistically, xiaoshuo writings are short and fragmentary, in content and theme, they are parables and fables, and small talk on trivial topics; in function, they carry didactic value, being said to aid self-regulation and household management.


Although Ban Gu made some comments on the fifteen works, these are too brief to be of any substantial help for us to draw any sound inference of their contents. Since none of the works listed survived even until the Tang period, we can only guess what kind of writings they might have been from his discussion of the origin of xiaoshuo in the explanatory postscript to the xiaoshuo list:

The xiaoshuo tradition probably originated from street-talk and alley-conversation gleaned by lianshu. "Confucius said: ” Even xiaodao is sure to have something worth looking at, but the gentleman does not take to it for fear of being bogged down in the mire if he wishes to reach a long distant destination,” although they do not reject it altogether, either. They have sayings and chats of petty schools gathered together for future reference. Even in the opinions of woodcutters and utterances of mad men, one may

19 There are at least three different interpretations of the word ‘xiaodao’: (1) shuo (heretical doctrines), (2) xiaojia (non-Confucian classics) and (3) xiaojia (advice and skills in agriculture, gardening, medicine or divination). See Luoxiu Zhuangzi (p. 95) for this annotated quotation.
20 This translation is adapted from Liu, 1970: 151 and Shengyiand, 2001: 222.
21 For this explanation, see *Huiyin Dizhao* Vol. 4: 3964-3966 and 3979.
22 See the *Cizi*: 325.
23 The *Xiuwen*, which is listed as containing 17 juan in the *Shouwen jingzi* (SSJJZ): [The Bibliographical Section of History of the Yixu Dynasty], was lost sometime during the Tang dynasty. For this quotation given by Li Shan (ca. 600-680) as part of his annotation to a poem by Jiang Yan (444-505) included in juan 31 of the Weixuen, see *Wenxuan* (439).
Although the xiaoshuo list in SSJJZ is made basically in line with that of HSYWZ, there are also some distinctive features about SSJJZ. The most outstanding is the removal from the xiaoshuo section of records of historical facts, which were mixed up with miscellaneous writings in HSYWZ. With historical elements reduced to a minimum, it seems that after Han, xiaoshuo began to emerge as a tool primarily for entertainment, explanation, and edification. Even in works which were “predominantly aphoristic or discursive in content,” there appeared “in them examples of the narrative content which was to become the central feature of the xiaoshuo in the future.” These are signs of xiaoshuo developing into a genre independent from historical and philosophical writings.

Around seventy years after SSJJZ the first Chinese work of historiographical criticism entitled Shitong [Generalities on History] by the Tang scholar Liu Zhiji (661-721) appeared. As an orthodox Confucian historian, he did not conceal his contempt for xiaoshuo writings. He classified earlier zhengshi [official dynastic history] into six schools according to form and style with xiaoshuo writings expulsed from the category of zhengshi because of their “lack of reason” [weih] and “distortion of the truth” [sun shi].

Miscellaneous works of the Jin dynasty, such as Yulin [A Forest of Tales], Shizhuan [Records of Darkness and Light], and Sunshenji [In Search of Spirits] do not belong to the same group. Included in them are either witty yet petty talk or accounts of strange beings like spirits and ghosts. The contents are low and vulgar so that Yang Xiong would not spare a glance for. They talk about the chaotic and supernatural which Confucius would not bother to speak of.

Although he treated xiaoshuo with disdain as xiaoshuo [miscellaneous historical writings] in distinction from zhengshi, he admitted that “they formed a school of their own and could exist alongside with the dynastic history as complementary to it.” In order to show the differences between zhengshi and xiaoshuo, he attempted a division of xiaoshuo into ten groups: pianji [biased records], xiaoshuo [minor records], yidi [anecdotes], suojun [notes on trivial matters], jingshi [local chronicles], jiuzhi [family history], brieyuan [ancestral biogra-

[28] Ban Gu denied xiaoshuo the dignity of being considered as one of the nine Han schools of learning, as he claimed: “Only nine of them are worth looking at” [he guan zhe ji jia er yi]. For this comment, see CSJCB, Vol. 1: 45. 
[29] The quadripartite system of bibliographical classification [jing shi zi ji], which was first developed from the Wei dynasty and then employed by Wei in his SSJJZ, has been the most widely accepted standard for bibliographers of ancient works in China since then.
[30] None of them dated earlier than the Jin dynasty (265-420) except Yan Danzi which is traditionally considered to be a Han product. For the xiaoshuo list in SSJJZ, see CSJCB, Vol. 1: 1-75.
For the xiaoshuo, he discussed briefly their origins and thematic features and gave representative works. Needless to say, Liu Zhiji conducted this xiaoshuo classification from a historiographical perspective rather than for cataloguing purposes, but his influence, as we will see, is far from being confined to the historiographical area.

During the Later Jin dynasty (936–947), of the Five Dynasties (907–960), a history known as Jiu Tangshi (Old History of the Tang Dynasty) was compiled under the supervision of Lung Xu (587–646). The Jiu Tangshi jingjizhi (The Bibliographical Section of Old History of the Tang Dynasty) is essentially an abridged and modified version of the Guojin shuju (A List of Books of the Past and Present). There are thirteen titles in ninety juan listed in the xiaoshuo section of TSJJZ, which differs from that of SSJJZ only in that works no longer extant by that time are removed and Bowuzhi (Knowledge-broadening Records), a zhiguai work in 10 juan which was "formerly classified as miscellaneous writings," is added to the xiaoshuo list.

The Xiu Tangshi yicenchi (The Bibliographical Section of New History of the Tang Dynasty), compiled by the great Song scholar Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072), marks a further verification of xiaoshuo as a cataloguing term in bibliographical compilation of official history. With many new titles added, the xiaoshuo list in TSXYZ is increased to thirty-nine works, far longer than Ban Gu’s list of fifteen works, Wei Zheng’s list of twenty-five, and Liu Xu’s list of thirteen. Among those newly added to the xiaoshuo list are twenty-four zhiguai works dating from the 3rd to 6th century, which had otherwise been categorised as belonging to the zazhuan (miscellaneous biographies) section of the shi category in SSJJZ and TSJJZ. Of the twenty-four zhiguai works, fifteen of them in 115 juan are devoted to accounts of ghosts and spirits, such as Lijizhuan (Accounts of Marvels), Zhenyizhuan (Accounts of Identified Marvels), and Xu Qiuji (A Sequel to Records of Qingie), and nine of them in 70 juan to karmic retributions, such as Ganyingji (Records of Divine Retributions), and Jingyiji (Tales Exemplifying Marvels). This rearrangement built up for the first time a close link between zhiguai titles and the xiaoshuo genre in traditional Chinese bibliography, and resulted in a xiaoshuo section that contained "predominantly imaginative narratives of the sort we comfortably recognize as fiction."44

The inclusion of tales and accounts of ghosts and spirits in the xiaoshuo section in TSXYZ is believed to have been more motivated by Ouyang Xiu’s personal desire to purge unreliable materials from the histories than by any of revolutionary thinking on his part about the nature of xiaoshuo.45 It is also possible that when compiling the catalogue for TSXYZ, Ouyang Xiu was inspired or influenced by Liu Zhiji, who called for a thorough distinction and exclusion of zashu from zhengshi. It is now difficult to say for sure out of what motivation or under whose influence that Ouyang Xiu performed this reshuffling. It is clear, however, that with writings ranging from anecdotes, jokes and assorted sayings to accounts of the supernatural and tales of the marvellous, all incorporated into the xiaoshuo section, this rearrangement opened up the xiaoshuo catalogue to an even wider scope of writings, much of which had long been undifferentiated from Masters’ and historical writings.

The expulsion of records of the strange from the shi category and the incorporation of them together with miscellaneous notes, anecdotes, jokes and sayings into the xiaoshuo section of the zi category in TSXYZ at least show the need the Song scholars felt to distinguish zhengshi from zashu, and their inclination to include in the xiaoshuo section any item (narrative, descriptive or expository) that did not fit well elsewhere. Although Ouyang Xiu included zhiguai works in his xiaoshuo section, he failed to give a definition of xiaoshuo, nor did he subdivide this genre. As a result, the defining features of xiaoshuo and the relation between xiaoshuo and zhiguai remained vague.

The Songshi yicenchi (The Bibliographical Section of History of the Song Dynasty), which was compiled under the supervision of Taotuc (1143–1355) of the Yuan dynasty (1206–1368), is based on the Gujinnan (The Dynastic History of the Song) which came in four instalments. Following TSXYZ, books are arranged by authors rather than by titles, which "caused doubt and confusion."46 Even more confused and jumbled is its xiaoshuo catalogue, which, as noted by Lu

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42 See Jin Tang Shi Juzi, 1975. 2036 for the xiaoshuo list in JKSJJZ. This work is generally attributed to Zhang Hua (AD 232–300).
44 For the xiaoshuo list in TSXYZ see GSJCB, Vol. 002: 54-56.
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Xun and Cheng Yizhong,⁴⁶ include picture albums and shihua [poetry talk], and even writings about numismatics, horticulture, and antiquities.⁴⁷ With books like Bijiaotu [Picture of the Eight Streets], Lidai qianpu [Coins of Previous Dynasties], Huamulu [Records of Flowers and Trees], and Nangong shihua [Poetry Talk of Nangong], categorised as xiaoshuo, the domain area of this cataloguing term became even more blurred and confused in SSYWZ than in SSJJZ and TSYWZ.

It was not until the Ming dynasty when the bibliophile Hu Yinglin (1551-1602) attempted the earliest systematic classification of xiaoshuo in the history of Chinese literature.⁴⁸ He divided xiaoshuo into six categories: zhiguai, chuantqi, zalu [miscellaneous records], congfan [assorted remarks], bianliang [evidential research], and zhengui [moral admonishments].

Xiaoshuo, as a genre, is further divided into several subtypes. The first is zhiguai and works of this type are Songshen, Shupu [Stories of Marvels], Xuanshi [Records from the Central Chamber], and Youyue [Assorted Anecdotes from the Youyang Caves], the second is chuantqi and works of this type are Feiyuan [An Unofficial Biography of Zhao Feiyuan], Taichen [An Unofficial Biography of Lady Yang], Cuijue [The Story of Yingjue], and Huamu [The Story of Hu Xiaoyu], the third is zalu, and works of this type are Shishuo, Yuulin, Suanjuan [Miscellaneous Notes from Dreams of the North], and Yinhua [Records of Tang Anecdotes], the fourth is congfan, and works of this type are Rongzhai [Random Jottings of Rongzhai], Mengyi [Pen Talk from Mengzi], Dongwen [Accounts of What Has Been Seen at the Eastern Valley], and Daoshan [Pure Talk of Daoshan], the fifth is bianliang, and works of this type are Shupu [Uncut Red Jades], Jile [Collected Chicken Bills], Zixia [Jottings Collected for Leisure Time], and Bingjue [Records of Dreaming Snoopicos].

The last is zhengui, and works of this type are Juanzi [Family Instructions for the Yan Clan], Shufu [Examples Set by Yuan for Following Generations], Quanshu [Records of Admonitions and Exhortations], and Xingxiu [Assorted Records of Introspection].⁴⁹

Realising that there were overlapping areas between the subcategories of xiaoshuo, he warned immediately after this classification:

The two sub-genres congfan and zalu are most easily confused with each other. Besides, they usually possess certain features also found in the other four sub-genres. As compared, however, they are less self-contained, and are thus not to be blended into any one of the four subtypes. As for zhiguai and chuantqi, it is even easier for them to be confused with each other, for one can find both types of tales in one work, and even in one tale one can find features shared by both genres. Therefore, attention should be paid to the dominant features while classifying a piece of work with both zhiguai and chuantqi elements in it.⁵²

This classification of xiaoshuo is conducted more from a bibliographical point of view than from a historiographic one. The six types of xiaoshuo cover an extremely wide range of writings, but as indicated by the titles attached to each of the six sub-categories of xiaoshuo, only the first three types are narratives possessing fictional elements, while the last three are basically non-narrative items in the form of biji [literary sketches].

Hu's definition and classification of xiaoshuo seem to have been ignored by the compiler(s) of the Mingzhai yirinzhua [The Bibliographical Section of History of the Ming Dynasty],⁵⁰ which displays no substantial difference from TSYWZ and SSYWZ in terms of xiaoshuo classification.⁵¹ Although miscellaneous notes, anecdotes, and sayings on trivial matters are largely excluded from the xiaoshuo section in MSYWZ, some academic works without a story to tell, as Shi Liang observes,⁵² "conspicuously and surprisingly" find their way into this section. The discursive and miscellaneous features of xiaoshuo and the confusion of narratives with non-narrative remained unchanged throughout bibliographies of official dynastic histories.

During the reigns of Emperor Qianlong (1736-1795) of the Qing dynasty (1616-1911), Ji Yun (1724-1805) was put in charge of editing Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao [The Complete Library of the Four Treasures, SKQS hereafter]. As part of the project, a bibliography entitled Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao [A General Annotated Catalogue of the Complete Library of the Four Treasures, ZMTY hereafter] was compiled. This was the most comprehensive official bibliography ever compiled in traditional China. In ZMTY, xiaoshuo was split into three subtypes: zalu [miscellaneous accounts], yuwen [records of anomalies], and suoyu. Classified as zalu are such titles as Shiishuo, Suanjuan, and Yinhua, Daoshan, and...
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The Chinese character "shuo," which means "talk" and "discourse," is much richer semantically. As for the origin of Xiaoshuo writings, possibly, there could be nothing more revealing than a componental analysis of the character. Seen from its internal structure, "shuo" is composed of two parts with the left-sided radical "嘴" deriving from the radical "kou/mouth" and the right-sided part "才" denoting "talk." Thus, "talk," constitutes the basic meaning of "shuo." This seems to indicate that Xiaoshuo materials may have originally existed orally as "street talk and alley conversation" before coming into the written form, as suggested in HSYWZ.51

Apart from meaning "talk," "才" is also seen as synonymous with the character "言" and in this case pronounced as "yu." Significantly, "才" as one of the eight diagrams for divination in the Yijing [The Classic of Changes], is further interpreted in SWJZ, as referring to "才" (shaman/shamanism) and "mouth" "kou," which might accounts for the supernatural connotations the character "才" had at that time. Even in the Hanfeizi [The Writings of Hanfeizi], one can find items in the "Chuanshuo" [A Collection of Talk] and "Shuolin" [A Forest of Talk] chapters taking on fantastic or supernatural features.

Considering the etymological association of "才" and "言" through "才", it would not be difficult for us to see the reason why the origin of Xiaoshuo is traced as far back as to the divinatory of the Zhou times in HSYWZ.60

Although there is no way of telling exactly what the fifteen books listed as Xiaoshuo in HSYWZ are about, it is still possible to infer from their titles and survided fragments preserved in Pre-Qin texts that they are more or less related to the practice of witchcraft, magic arts, and sacrificial rituals performed by shamans and "masters of esoteric techniques" [fangshi], as noted by Zhang Heng (AD 78-139), who referred to Xiaoshuo as "a magic art of witch doctors and Necromancers" when talking about Yu Chong's "Shou Shuo" in the Xijingfu [The Western Capital Rhaposody].61

Now let us turn to the character "才." This character is interpreted in SWJZ as "才," which means "to explain or clarify." This character, according

50. "才: cong zhi hua" [Afterword to Believe It or Not] by Sheng Shuyan, see Tongren congshu jianyi (p.472).
51. For this interpretation, see Tang, 2002: 1169.
52. For this explanation, see SWJZ at note 55.
53. For detailed studies of the relationship between superstitiousness and Xiaoshuo, see Zhao Zhenxiang, 2000; Wan, 2003.
54. "才: cong zhi hua" [Afterword to Believe It or Not] by Sheng Shuyan, see Tongren congshu jianyi (p.472).
to Hu Shiyìng." Also had the meaning of "telling stories" in Pre-Qin times, and 
xiānshuò was thus originally "fragmentary and trivial talk" by and about shamans 
and masters of esoteric techniques. It is by no means fortuitous that Pre-Qin 
works with their titles containing the word "shuo" are all sorts of tale or talk 
collections and that Masters’ writings are interspersed with xiānshuò materials 
such as myths, jokes, fables, parables, legends, and folk tales. These xiānshuò 
items, short and simple as they appear, are pregnant with meaning, and the 
incorporation of them into philosophical works not only makes some otherwise 
insipid and obscure writings easier to understand, but more interesting to read as 
well.

This entertainment function of xiānshuò also has its semantic basis inheren-
t in the character "shuo". Apart from meaning talk, tell, and explain, this 
character, like its component "shì", share the same semantic property of 
"entertaining" as the character "yuè", and in this case is pronounced as 
yuè. In fact, these two characters are interchangeable in classical Chinese. As noted in 
the Qing philologist Duan Yucai, "Shuowen" means "yuèyì... Shuowen" has the 
meaning of kàijié [divert somebody from boredom/vormentient], hence the 
interpretation of shuo as yuè[ happy]."

Seen from the denotations and connotations of "Shuo" carried in its 
etymological associations with "shì", "yì", "shì", "yìu", and "lǎo", the word "xiānshuò" might be understood as "short and petty tale or talk, fictional or factual 
narrative or non-narrative, meant for entertaining people and/or explaining 
social or supernatural phenomena." This definition covers the most common 
features of what are categorised as xiānshuò in traditional Chinese bibliography. 
This understanding of xiānshuò remained largely unchanged in traditional 
Chinese bibliography throughout dynastic histories until the Western concept of 
"fiction" was introduced to China at the turn of the 20th century.

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Glossary

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Chinese Character</th>
<th>Han Characters</th>
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<tr>
<td>bиехуан</td>
<td>别伝</td>
<td>Hanhu yuwenzi</td>
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<td>番記</td>
<td>漢書藝文志</td>
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<td>Bouzushi</td>
<td>博物志</td>
<td>韓非子</td>
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<td>鄭汝НЕ</td>
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REFERENCES


Xiaoshuo as a Cataloguing Term in Traditional Chinese Bibliography


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