The Textual History of the Yanzi chunqiu

1.1.1 Introduction

The transmitted text of the Yanzi chunqiu consists of two hundred and fifteen stories about the life and deeds of Master Yan, divided into eight pian or fascicles. These eight pian are further subdivided into six ‘inner’ (nei 内) and two ‘outer’ (wai 外) sections. The inner chapters consist of two pian of remonstrances (jian 諫), two pian of questions (wen 間), and two pian of miscellaneous material (za 雜). The outer chapters consist of one pian described as “Stories which are similar to others told of Master Yan” (chong er yi zhe 重而異者); and one pian classified as “Stories that do not accord with classical accounts” (buhe jingshu zhe 不合經術者). Each story is preceded by a title, summing up the main points that are discussed in that tale. These titles are composed from phrases or entire lines selected from the body of the tale, rather than being a repetition of the first line as is common in pre-Han Chinese texts. This suggests that the titles were not originally intrinsic to the individual stories but were added later (possibly at the time when the Yanzi chunqiu was compiled into its present form). The majority of stories describe Yan Ying in conversation with one or more other individuals, and includes introductory information about their location, the time of day, the mood of the persons present, and other contextualizing details. These can serve to place Master Yan's comments within a framework that allows them to be interpreted quite specifically: his statements are not made within a vacuum but are instead the product of a particular time and can be understood within the framework of contemporary historical events. However, there is no story which contains a specific date, even though many are dateable thanks to reference to known historical circumstances. Within each chapter of the Yanzi chunqiu, the material is arranged roughly in thematic order. As a result, there is some violation of chronological sequence and a particular event may be presented completely out of context when considered with respect to the stories placed on either side of it. The determination on the part of the Han dynasty editors of the text to prioritize a thematic presentation also presents certain problems when it comes to material associated with different philosophical schools. The same issue can provoke quite contradictory responses with respect to different schools of thought.

As will be discussed in more detail below, there is every reason to believe that the inclusion of stories presenting Master Yan as a spokesman for ideas from a number of different schools of thought represent an extremely ancient development and hence should be regarded as intrinsic to this tradition.
In spite of the considerable efforts made from the Han dynasty onwards to present Master Yan as a Confucian thinker, this is a highly anachronistic interpretation. The contention that will be made here is that the *Yanzi chunqiu* is not a philosophical text in the strict sense of the term, and should instead be regarded as a biographical account of Master Yan with particular reference to his achievements in the field of statecraft.

1.1.2 The Creation of the Text

In his book *Jianbo gushu yu xueshu yuanliu* (Ancient Books Written on Bamboo and Silk and the Origins of Scholarship) the scholar Li Ling (李零) came up with an analogy that has proved to be of considerable use when discussing the vexed issue of the process of creation for ancient Chinese texts. He compared them to a glass of wine: the individual stories compiled together to create a text are the wine; the edited form in which they have been transmitted to the present day is the glass.\(^1\) In the case of the *Yanzi chunqiu*, the ‘glass’ is relatively easy to comprehend. This text was created, in something approaching the form which has been handed down to modern times, at the very end of the Western Han dynasty. It was compiled by Liu Xiang (劉向) (77–6 BCE), working in the context of the imperial library. Some of what he did is recorded in his introduction to the *Yanzi chunqiu*, which describes the process of editing the text. This will be considered in detail below, where his account is translated in full. Almost all of the ancient texts that have come down to us underwent editing in the Han imperial library. The handful that did not were all produced in a regional context and did not find themselves incorporated into the imperial library collection until later dynasties.\(^2\) Given that the process of creating the ‘glass’ is reasonably well-understood, the questions that remain concern the nature of the ‘wine.’ In what form did the *Yanzi chunqiu* exist as a text before Liu Xiang’s editing work? Was there already a well-established base text upon which he built his edition, or was it largely created by him? This is a particularly vexed question since the transmit-

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1 See Li Ling 李零, *Jianbo gushu yu xueshu yuanliu* (Ancient Books Written on Bamboo and Silk and the Origins of Scholarship) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2008), 213.

2 An example of this is the *Yuejue shu* (Lost History of Yue), which was compiled from a number of pre-Qin, Qin and early Han dynasty documents by two local scholars based in the Jiangsu-Zhejiang region in the early Eastern Han dynasty. For a discussion of the importance of this book as the product of a ‘local’ rather than a ‘metropolitan’ tradition; see Chia-li Luo, ‘Coastal Culture and Religion in Early China: A study through comparison with the Central Plains’ (PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 1999), 18–19.