

History as Parable. Indirect Persuasion in the *Lüshi Chunqiu*

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Abstract

The paper presents an analysis of the persuasive use of the narrative in the *Lüshi Chunqiu* using approaches of rhetoric narratology and rhetorical criticism. Twenty-one narratives are identified as vehicles of indirect persuasion and put on the mimetic and thematic scales to show how their relation to reality and history corresponds to their rhetorical use in discourse. Three of those narratives, exhibiting typical traits of historical anecdotes, are analysed in detail in their original context, to prove their parabolic function. The author argues that parabolic use of the narrative, including fables and parables, but also anecdotes and historical anecdotes, forms an important part of the Warring States period tradition of political and philosophical discourse. The author further proposes to use the term “parabolic narrative” to describe all such instances of using narratives in indirect persuasion. These can be found not only in the *Lüshi Chunqiu*, but also in other important works of the period, such as *Zhuangzi*, *Zhanguo*, or *Han Feizi*.

Keywords: *Lüshi Chunqiu*, *yuyan*, anecdote, parable, fable

Zgodovina kot parabola: posredno prepričevanje v delu *Lüshi Chunqiu*

Izvleček

Prispevek podaja analizo prepričljive rabe pripovedi v delu *Lüshi Chunqiu* s pomočjo pristopov retoričnega pripovedništva ter retorične kritike. V sklopu te študije bo avtor enaindvajset zgodb iz omenjene knjige obravnaval kot sredstva posrednega prepričevanja ter jih umestil v mimetično in tematično lestvico, da bi pokazal, na kak način se njihov odnos z resničnostjo in zgodovino sklada z njihovo retorično rabo znotraj diskurza. Tri od teh pripovedi, ki kažejo značilne lastnosti zgodovinskih anekdot, bodo podrobneje razčlenjene znotraj njihovega izvornega konteksta, z namenom dokazati njihovo parabolično vlogo. Avtor zagovarja trditev, da je parabolična raba pripovedi, vključno s fabulami in parabolami kot tudi anekdotami in zgodovinskimi anekdotami, predstavljala pomemben del tradicije političnih in filozofskih razprav obdobja vojskujočih se držav. Avtor nadalje predlaga rabo izraza »parabolična pripoved« za opisovanje prav takšnih primerov rabe pripovedi za posredno prepričevanje. Teh namreč ni mogoče najti samo v delu

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Lüshi Chunqiu, ampak tudi v drugih pomembnih delih iz istega obdobja, kot so *Zhuangzi*, *Zhangguoce* ali *Han Feizi*.

Ključne besede: *Lüshi Chunqiu*, *yuyan*, anekdota, parabola, fabula

Introduction

Much has been written in recent years about the preponderant use of the narrative in persuasive discourse of the Warring States period in China. Most attention has been paid to how anecdotes, mostly historical, are used in these texts to convey meaning or illustrate a certain point (see Schaberg 2001; van Els and Queen 2017; Goldin 2020). What seems to be missing is a closer look at the use of various types of narratives in indirect persuasion. The phenomenon concerns not only fables and parables, but also historical anecdotes, and is an integral, not marginal, part of the rich and complex persuasive tradition of pre-Qin China.

The purpose of the paper is to show that persuasion in the political and philosophical discourse of the Warring States period is not all about using history as *exemplum*, but is as much about parabolic communication. Examples of this can be found not only in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, but also in such texts as the *Zhangguoce* 戰國策, *Han Feizi* 韓非子, and the *Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋. My analysis focusses on this last work.

Method

The texts which are subject of this analysis are short, conversational narratives (Fludernik 2009, 47). A narrative can be defined as: a *semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way* (Onega and Landa 1996, 3). The approach adopted in the present paper, however, focuses not on genre analysis of the narrative or its use of rhetoric tropes, but rather on the study of its function in rhetorical discourse. In order to do that, I borrow from the toolboxes of rhetoric narratology (see esp. Fludernik 2009; Phelan 2020) and rhetorical criticism (Rowland 2009; Iversen 2014; Sternberg 1982), especially Close Textual Analysis (CTA). I view the anecdotes in *Lüshi Chunqiu* as instances of deliberative discourse, recognizing the instrumental function of the narrative (Jasinski 2001, 430). Using James Phelan's MST model (the Mimetic–Synthetic–Thematic aspects of the narrative), I am interested principally in the mimetic and thematic aspects of the narrative (Phelan 2020), in other words, firstly in how it mirrors the real world and relates

to real life experiences of the listeners/readers, and secondly, in what the anecdote does in the communicative framework of the text in which it is embedded.

For the present paper, all 298 narratives present in the *Lüshi Chunqiu* were analysed in their original context, twenty one of them were chosen for CTA, and three of those further selected for a detailed presentation in the paper.

The *Lüshi Chunqiu*

Lüshi Chunqiu was written by a group of scholars under the auspices of Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (?–235 BCE), a merchant and powerful statesman of the state of Qin 秦, sometime between 241 and 238 BCE. It is a vast compendium of knowledge on how to be a successful ruler and leader, combining elements of different schools and traditions of thought, mostly Confucian, Daoist, and Yinyang. Most probably, the book was created as an argument in the ideological power struggle between Lü Buwei and King Zheng of Qin 秦王政 (Ying Zheng 嬴政, the later First Emperor of Qin 秦始皇), during the first years of his independent, adult reign.¹ The king exiled Lü in 237, and two years later the politician committed suicide while in exile, presumably to avoid persecution by the king.

Lüshi Chunqiu is a unique text in the heritage of pre-Qin literature, and as such was until recently neglected in mainstream research, both in China² and abroad³. However, there are several reasons why I consider *Lüshi Chunqiu* the best text to show parabolic use of the narrative in pre-Qin discourse.

First of all, unlike almost all pre-Qin classics (*Analects* 論語, *Mengzi* 孟子, *Zhuangzi*, *Mozi* 墨子, *Xunzi* 荀子, *Han Feizi*, etc.) the *Lüshi Chunqiu* is not a compilation of Warring States and later fragments of texts, but an original piece of work preserved almost as it was written some 2,250 years ago. This is proven by its regular and highly coherent structure, which sets it apart from the bulk of extant texts of the period. The work is divided into three parts: *Records* (*Ji* 紀), *Views* (*Lan* 覽), *Comments* (*Lun* 論).⁴ *Records* are devoted to the “Way of Heaven”

1 See publications by authors included in Wang Qicai’s 2015 collection of Chinese scholarship on the *Lüshi Chunqiu*, especially: Miao Yue 繆鉞 (Wang Qicai 2015, 227–31), Wang Fanzhi 王範之 (ibid., 24–25), Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (ibid., 172), and Xiu Jianjun 修建軍 (ibid., 468–70).

2 See Wang Qicai’s introduction to his 2007 monograph for a summary of 20th century publications (Wang Qicai 2007, 1–6).

3 *Lüshi Chunqiu* was first translated into English only in 2000 by John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, and the first English-language monograph devoted to the *Lüshi Chunqiu* is Sellmann (2002).

4 All English language translations of *Lüshi Chunqiu* in this paper are after Tang Bowen’s translation (Tang 2010).

(*tiandao* 天道) and the obligations of the ruler aiming at preserving the harmony bestowed by Heaven. The part is composed of twelve books (*juan* 卷), with five chapters in each. *Views*, which explores the intricacies of human relations, shows the realm of Man (*ren* 人). This part consists of eight books, with eight chapters in each. Finally, *Comments*, focusing on the significance of the Earth (*di* 地), is composed of six books, with six chapters in each.⁵ The Heaven—Man—Earth triad⁶ creates the cognitive framework of the whole text. As discussed by Lü Yi 呂藝 (Wang Qicai 2015, 446), the book and chapter numbers of each part are also significant, as they carry a wealth of symbolic meanings connected with each of the three notions: 12 and five are the numbers of Heaven, eight is associated with the Eight Trigrams (*bagua* 八卦) and their role in shaping the affairs of Man, while six symbolizes the Earth. Such a regular and carefully conceived structure attests to the originality of the bulk of the text as we know it today.

Each book and chapter have a title which corresponds closely to its content (unlike most other pre-Qin works), and the content usually consists of an opening exposition (statement), followed by several narratives to illustrate the point, and sometimes a brief conclusion. No other known text of the period exhibits such coherence and regularity.⁷

This is important in the present study, as it creates high probability that the narratives embedded in the discussions in each chapter function in their original, intended communicative framework. And this in turn makes it possible to determine their most probable intended meaning. As rhetorical devices, their meaning is determined by the context in which they are embedded. And only if the context is known can we offer a plausible interpretation of what they were intended to do as symbolic sites of action in the discourse.

5 Slight discrepancies from this model in extant version of the text include the addition of the “Post-script” (*Xuyi* 序意) at the end of the last book of *Records*, so that it is composed of six and not five chapters, and the lack of one chapter in the first book of *Views* (*Youshilian* 有始覽), so that there are seven, not eight chapters in this book.

6 Note that the order of the three parts is different from the sequence of the three essences (*sancai* 三才) as described in “Shuogua” 說卦 of the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), and generally present in ancient Chinese thought: Heaven – Earth – Man. Knoblock and Riegel in the *Introduction* to their 2000 translation of the work (Knoblock and Riegel 2000, 33) propose to pair *Views* with the Earth, and *Comments* with Man, thus preserving the Heaven—Earth—Man order. However, this does not seem to correspond with the content of the work (especially the last four chapters of the last book, devoted entirely to farming), and is not supported by Chinese scholarship, see Lü Yi 呂藝 and Hong Jiayi 洪家義 in Wang Qicai (2015, 394, 444–46).

7 Several later works borrow from the structure from *Lüshi Chunqiu*, most visibly the *Huainanzi* (which also duplicates a sizeable part its content), see Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 and Mu Zhongjian 牟鍾鑑 in Wang Qicai (2015, 56–59, 290).

Many of the very same anecdotes are present in other works, such as the *Zhuangzi*, *Han Feizi*, *Huainanzi* 淮南子 or *Liezi* 列子. Sometimes, the context in which they are embedded is markedly different from *Lüshi Chunqiu*, often quite unclear, and sometimes, especially in *Liezi*,⁸ they function as stand-alone texts which are thus very difficult to interpret. *Lüshi Chunqiu* offers today's researcher the comfort of a coherent work in which interpretative markers of the narratives are very clearly communicated in the text.

Secondly, the *Lüshi Chunqiu* is not an echo of oral persuasive tradition. David Schaberg in his famous study of the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 and the *Guoyu* 國語 (Schaberg 2001) shows how far the received oeuvre of pre-Qin authors stems from the tradition of oral transmission. But this is not the case with *Lüshi Chunqiu*, which did not function in any oral form before it was written down. *Lüshi Chunqiu* was the effect of conscious effort of a team of scholars who wrote it for their intended audience of future rulers and statesmen,⁹ and published it, exposed to public view in the capital of Qin. It was a book, not an oral tradition, and as such, we can analyse the rhetorical devices it employs with confidence that they reflect strategies intended for coherent, written texts of political and philosophical persuasion.

Fables, Parables, Historical Anecdotes, and *Yuyan*

Chinese scholarship on the use of the narrative in the Warring States period centres around the rather troublesome term *yuyan* 寓言, which in popular discourse usually denotes the literary genre of fable,¹⁰ and more rarely, parable. If for the moment we look at the narrative from the perspective of genre analysis, however, there are not so many fables in the preserved literature of the period at all. Among

8 See esp. chapter eight *Shuifu* 說符 of *Liezi*.

9 See Wang Qicai (2007, 85). Knoblock and Riegel (2000, 54) even suggest that the work was “inspired by a vision of a universal empire”.

10 It is important to distinguish between the modern and traditional understanding of *yuyan*. In 1902 the term was used by Lin Shu 林紓 to render the Western notion of a fable in his translation of Aesop's fables as *Yisuo yuyan* 索寓言. From then on the connection between *yuyan* and the literary genre of fable was firmly established. However, *yuyan*, as first used in Chapters 27 and 33 of the *Zhuangzi* and in its commentaries in pre-modern Chinese literature, denotes indirect communication in far more vague terms, in no way linked to a specific literary genre. *Yuyan* in *Zhuangzi* commentaries is explained by Guo Xiang 郭象 as “borrowing from the outside” (*jiewai* 借外), by Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 as “transferring to others” (*ji zhi ta ren* 寄之他人), and by Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 as “entrusting others with something” (*tuo zhi ta ren* 託之他人). The term was sporadically used in later centuries, especially in Tang dynasty poetry, but did not gain much significance outside the context of the *Zhuangzi* until modern times.

the four texts with the highest number of narratives, the *Zhanguo*, *Zhuangzi*, *Han Feizi* and *Lüshi Chunqiu*, fables (understood as narratives in which the main protagonists are personified animals, objects or mythical creatures, and which carry a certain moral or philosophical lesson) are only present in the first two. I found four in *Zhanguo*,¹¹ eight in *Zhuangzi*,¹² and none in *Han Feizi* and *Lüshi Chunqiu*.

Classical Chinese literature offers us far more parables. This genre is generally understood as a narrative which communicates a certain moral or philosophical lesson in an indirect way. Its main difference with fable is that its protagonists are humans, and that the narrative itself is rooted in common experience of the listeners. Instead of a fantastic story about talking animals, gods or mythical creatures, a parable offers a narrative much closer to common human experience, a story which could be considered plausible. A good definition of parable from the point of view of Gospel research is offered by a German theologian Ruben Zimmermann:

A parable is a short narrative (1) fictional (2) text that is related in the narrated world to known reality (3) but, by way of implicit or explicit transfer signals, makes it understood that the meaning of the narration must be differentiated from the literal words of the text (4). In its appeal structure (5) it challenges the reader to carry out a metaphoric transfer of meaning that is steered by co-text and context information (6). (Zimmermann 2009, 5.2)

It is difficult to estimate exactly how many parables are included in *Zhuangzi*, *Zhanguo*, *Han Feizi* and *Lüshi Chunqiu*, as many of them hover on the fringes

11 These are: the tiger and the fox (狐假虎威), the mussel, the heron and the fisherman (蚌鵝相爭), the hound Lu and the hare Qun (韓子盧與東郭逵), and the lesser-known on the image of wood and the image of clay (土梗與木梗). All four narratives can be found in James Irving Crump's translation of *Zhanguo* (Crump 1996) on pages: 226, 496, 170, and 303–04.

12 These are: the Peng, the cicada, and the dovelet (鵬, 蜩與學鳩); a second version of the same fable with Peng and a marsh sparrow (鵬與斥鴳); "Penumbra and Shadow" (罔兩問景); boring holes in Wonton (儻, 忽與渾沌); Cloud General and Vast Obscurity (雲將與鴻蒙); the Amorphus (Xiangwang 象罔) finding the Yellow Emperor's lost pearl of mystery (玄珠); Overlord of the North Sea and the Earl of the River (北海若與河伯); "the unipede and the millipede" (夔謂蚘); "the frog in the broken-down well" (培井之鼃). For the fables listed above, I provide Chinese names of protagonists (without quotations) or quotes from passage openings (with quotation marks). The fables can be found in the translation of *Zhuangzi* by Victor H. Mair (1998), under the following *Zhuangzi* chapter/passage numbers and page numbers: *Zhuangzi* 1.1 and Mair, 4–5; *Zhuangzi* 2.13 and Mair, 24; *Zhuangzi* 7.7 and Mair, 71; *Zhuangzi* 11.5 and Mair, 97–100; *Zhuangzi* 12.4 and Mair, 105; *Zhuangzi* 17.1 and Mair, 152–59; *Zhuangzi* 17.2 and Mair, 159–60; *Zhuangzi* 17.4 and Mair, 161–63.

of historicity, and therefore do not fulfil the second of Zimmermann's conditions. My own findings give fifteen parable-like narratives in *Han Feizi*, twenty eight in *Zhanguo*, twenty one in *Lüshi Chunqiu*, and about 110 in *Zhuangzi*—a text unmatched for its rich use of the parable in pre-Qin literature. This gives a pool of 174 parables in total, across the four texts.

If we compared these statistics with various counts of *yuyan* presented in Chinese publications on the subject, the difference would be quite striking. Chen Puqing (1987, 17) estimates pre-Qin *yuyan* at more than one thousand, including more than 300 in *Han Feizi* alone. Gong Mu (1984, 155) mentions that there are more than 200 *yuyan* in *Lüshi Chunqiu*. Ning Xi (1992, 53, 82), who uses much stricter criteria, identifies 160 *yuyan* in *Zhuangzi*, and more than fifty in *Zhanguo*, still notably more than in my own count of fables and parables.

The cause of such discrepancies lies in the fact that most researchers publishing in Chinese treat *yuyan* in much wider terms than just fables and parables, using the term to denote various narratives used persuasively, or more specifically, to describe instances of indirect, parabolic use of the narrative in persuasive contexts (Jacoby 2018, 79–87). There are more such instances in pre-Qin texts than there are fables and parables. *Yuyan* in this broader meaning corresponds closely to how it is originally defined in the *Zhuangzi* and its commentary tradition, and at the same time fits in with the “metaphoric transfer of meaning that is steered by co-text and context information” as defined by Zimmermann above. This takes us away from literary genre analysis and moves us in the direction of rhetorical analysis of the narrative in persuasive discourse.

Parables and “Quasi-parables” in *Lüshi Chunqiu*

Just 21 one out of 298 narratives present in *Lüshi Chunqiu* can be called indirect, i.e. are vehicles of meaning other than the surface meaning of the plot. In order to create cognitive coherence between the surface plot of these narratives and the context in which they are embedded, the reader is challenged to interpret them beyond the surface meaning, and discover the message intended by the authors. For reasons of space, only three of these narratives will be discussed here in detail to show fully how the effect of indirect persuasion is achieved.

Ten of the 21 narratives can be classified as quite generic parables. They are fictional, and their protagonists are unnamed. The plot is imaginative and entertaining (several are humorous), and the context makes it absolutely clear that they are used as tools of persuasion. These are: two warriors who eat their own flesh

(j. 11.4 *Dangwu* 當務), a man who lost an axe (j. 13.3 *Quyong* 去兪), a woman who hides her belongings from her parents-in-law (j. 14.7 *Yube* 遇合), a man who loses his sword on a boat (j. 15.8 *Chajin* 察今), a child who can't swim (j. 15.8 *Chajin* 察今), a Rong barbarian (j. 16.3 *Zhijie* 知接), a man from Qi coveting gold (j. 16.7 *Quyong* 去宥), a man who likes dragonflies (j. 18.3 *Jingyu* 精諭), a man who loots a bell from Fan (j. 24.3 *Zizhi* 自知), and a lofty dog and its owner (j. 26.1 *Shirong* 士容). The setting (time, place) of the narratives doesn't really matter, nor does the identity of the protagonists. We could even imagine that some of these stories might have been considered true, but this again does not influence the function of the narratives in their persuasive context.

Another eight narratives are anecdotes in which the protagonists are well-known, historical or legendary figures. These narratives are: Mozi observing a man dyeing raw silk (j. 9.4 *Shenji* 審己), Liezi arrow shooting (j. 9.4 *Shenji* 審己), King Tang of Shang teaching hunters to set trapping nets only on one side not to kill all animals (j. 10.5 *Yiyong* 異用), Zhuangzi commenting on a "useless" tree and a dumb goose (j. 14.8 *Biji* 必己), Niu Que killed by robbers (j. 14.8 *Biji* 必己), a peasant detaining Confucius's horse (j. 14.8 *Biji* 必己), Dongye Ji demonstrating chariot-driving skills in front of Duke Zhuang (j. 19.5 *Shiwei* 適威), and Tang Shang who is doubted by a peasant (j. 26.1 *Shirong* 士容). These narratives are typically anecdotal, but not historical. Their setting is as vague as in the case of the previous set of parables. Similarly to them, the context makes it clear that rather than merely telling a funny or interesting story, the narratives are used indirectly in persuasive context to stimulate the readers and strengthen the message. Therefore, functionally we could call them "quasi-parables", as they are used in the discourse persuasively in much the same way as the ten "generic parables" discussed before.

The last three narratives present a true challenge to our understanding of how history was used in persuasive discourse of the Warring States period. They are neither parables, nor "quasi-parables" with historical/legendary protagonists. They can be classified as historical anecdotes, and still, they are used not as *exemplae* of what to do or not to do, but indirectly, with a "metaphoric transfer of meaning".

Three Historical Anecdotes and Their Parabolic Use

The first of the three narratives is found in the *Views on Caution Against Greatness* (*Shenda* 慎大覽第三) in the second chapter: "Weighing the Advantages" (j. 15.2 *Quanxun* 權勳). The main message of this chapter can be summed up in its opening paragraph:

... Without giving up a small gain, a great gain cannot be obtained. Without discarding small loyalty, great loyalty cannot be sustained. Therefore, a small gain is a curse to a great gain, and small loyalty, the curse to great loyalty. A sage therefore discards the small and takes the great. (Tang 2010, 162)

不去小利則大利不得，不去小忠則大忠不至。故小利，大利之殘也；小忠，大忠之賊也。聖人去小取大。(Zhu and Su 1995, 533)

The chapter consists of four narratives which are intended to illustrate the point made in the opening paragraph. The first narrative is set in the year 575 BCE when King Gong of Chu 楚 (in the text: Jing King Gong 荆龔王) is defeated by the Jin 晉 army at the battle of Yanling (鄢陵). The plot is built around the commander of the Chu army, Zi Fan 子反, who evidently had an alcohol problem. Right before the battle he asks his servant Yang Gu 陽穀 to serve him something to drink, and is given alcohol. He refuses it at first, but after repeated assurance of the servant that it's not really alcohol, begins to drink and can't make himself stop before becoming intoxicated. After the battle is lost, the king visits him in his tent despite Zi Fan's efforts to hide away, and discovers the state he is in. Disgusted and disappointed, he orders the withdrawal of the army, and upon its return has Zi Fan punished by death, and his corpse displayed publicly (Tang 2010, 162; Zhu and Su 1995, 534).

Read as a stand-alone anecdote, it could be interpreted in a variety of ways. The most straight-forward reading would be a warning against the pitfalls of addiction, or against drinking irresponsibly, or generally, against acting irresponsibly before an important task. If the reader focusses not on Zi Fan, but on the king, the reading could be that a leader cannot succeed without responsible members of the team.

The authors of the *Lüshi Chunqiu* however, chose to use the narrative in a far more sophisticated way. It's neither Zi Fan nor the king who are the true protagonists of the story, but the servant Yang Gu. The message is that he made a grave mistake, incurring a great loss through a small gain. The small gain was hoping to satisfy Zi Fan by serving him the alcohol that he loved. The big loss, of course, was the defeat in battle, the disgrace and ultimate execution of Zi Fan.

The anecdote does not communicate this content through its surface meaning. We would fail to interpret it correctly if we were to use it as an historical *exemplum*, even though the characters are historical, and the battle was recorded in historical sources.¹³ The plot functions not on an informative level of recounting

13 The battle at Yanling is mentioned in *Zuozhuan*, *Shiji* 史記, and in *Han Feizi*.

history, but as a powerful vehicle for a message of the chapter “Weighing the Advantages”. Its function is to strengthen the message; the reader should be shocked by the reckless and irresponsible behaviour of Zi Fan, and identify with the king who is enraged by the failure of his commander. The little, white lie of an overzealous servant starts a whole chain of events which ends in tragedy. The contrast between the small action of serving a drink and the huge disaster of a lost battle is underlined. The narrative amplifies the warning of the chapter: if you go for small gains instead of concentrating on the main target, the consequences might be far-reaching and grave.

The second example of a historical anecdote used parabolically can be found in the last chapter of the same book—“Studying the Present” (j. 15.8 *Chajin* 察今). Again, it is a war story involving the Chu army, but this time on its war expedition to the Song 宋. Scouts are sent to gauge the depth of the Yongshui 灊水 river which the army needs to cross. A ford is found and marked by the scouts. At night, the army arrives and crosses the river at the designated place. It turns out, however, that in the meantime the waters rose, and more than a thousand soldiers drown.

The story shows either negligence on the side of the commanders (shouldn't they order checking the depth of the river again before crossing?), or a tragic mistake (things like this could always happen) or, perhaps, bad luck (what are the chances of such an unfortunate timing between the reconnaissance of the scouts and the arrival of the army?). In any case, the reader would naturally think about the reasons for the tragedy and the responsibility for the mistake. In the *Lüshi Chunqiu*, however, this narrative communicates an unexpected message: do not cling blindly to the rules set in the past.

We know this because of the context in which the narrative is placed. The chapter “Studying the Present” consists of two, longer theoretical expositions and three narratives. The one on the drowning Chu soldiers is embedded within the expository text, while the other two narratives are placed at the end of the chapter.

“Studying the Present” opens with the following statement: *Why are there rulers who do not follow the rules of the early kings? This is not because these rulers are unvirtuous but because the rules cannot be copied* 上胡不法先王之法，非不賢也，為其不可得而法 (Tang 2010, 177; Zhu and Su 1995, 580). The main message of the chapter can be summed up in two further quotes from the paragraph which follows the narrative on the Chu army:

When the world and the times change, it is time to change the rules ...
It is therefore necessary to follow rules in whatever one undertakes and

to change the rules with the times. If this is understood, mistakes can be avoided. (Tang 2010, 178–79)

世易時移，變法宜矣。。。。故凡舉事必循法以動，變法者因時而化。若此論則無過務矣。(Zhu and Su 1995, 581)

We are guided by this context to interpret the narrative as a warning against conforming blindly to rules that were set in the past, when the circumstances were different to the present situation. The authors of the *Lüshi Chunqiu* chose to strengthen this message indirectly with the narrative on the Chu army commanders who believe that the water in the ford is as shallow as it was when the scouts checked it. If we were to remove the narrative from its historical context, replace the Chu army on their way to attack the Song with “army A traveling to country B”, the narrative would become a typical parable. Its historicity makes it more credible, and thus more convincing, but from the rhetorical CTA point of view, whether a parable or a historical anecdote, the narrative in this particular context is the site of the same symbolic action.

The third and last example analysed in this paper comes from “Discretion”—the first chapter of book 24, *Comments on Discretion* (j. 24.1 不苟論第四·不苟). The narrative is set at a key time in history. The would-be founder of the Zhou dynasty, King Wu, is standing with his commanders on the outskirts of Yin, the capital of the Shang dynasty, preparing for the decisive battle. The attack will change the history of All Under Heaven. And here is what happens:

When King Wu brought his army to the outskirts of the Yin capital, the lace of one of his socks came loose. His five assistants were by his side, but none of them would tie the sock lace for him. They said, “We are here to assist the ruler and not to tie the sock lace for him.” King Wu had to lay down the flag of white feathers in his left hand and the golden battle-axe in his right to tie the lace with much effort. (Tang 2010, 318)

武王至殷郊，係墮。五人御於前，莫肯之為，曰：「吾所以事君者非係也。」武王左釋白羽，右釋黃鉞，勉而自為係。(Zhu and Su 1995, 1005)

Juxtaposing a momentous historical event and a story of a loose sock and no-one to tie it might sound humorous or even grotesque to the modern reader. We don’t know if this was the intent of the authors of *Lüshi Chunqiu*, especially as they follow the narrative with quite a serious-sounding section quoted below:

Upon hearing what had happened, Confucius later commented, “This was why the five men became assistants to the king and what an unworthy ruler would not tolerate.” Therefore, the king is sometimes no better than a commoner, and a man who owns the world is no better than the ruler of an ordinary state. (Tang 2010, 318)

孔子聞之曰：「此五人者之所以為王者佐也，不肖主之所弗安也。」故天子有不勝細民者，天下有不勝千乘者。(Zhu and Su 1995, 1005)

It is not as easy to understand the persuasive use of this narrative as is the case with the two previous examples. The “Discretion” chapter is composed of a one-paragraph exposition and four historical anecdotes. The remaining three tell different stories of the relations between rulers and their officials. The common denominator for all four narratives is the theme of professional responsibilities at a given, official post. The subjects, but above all the ruler, should never go beyond what is in the “job description”. The second idea presented in the exposition is that the ruler should not only listen to the advice of loyal subjects but most of all show through his deeds that he puts the advice to effect. These two ideas seem to form the interpretative framework in which the narrative of King Wu is placed.

King Wu chose the right persons to be his five assistants—their refusal to help him with the sock shows that they understood their mission correctly. King Wu not only accepted their refusal, but also humbly did what was the right thing to do: he laid down “the flag of white feathers in his left hand and the golden battle-axe in his right” and tied the sock himself, “with much effort”, as is underlined in the text.

The narrative without this context seems to present a surprising or even shocking story of how devoid of empathy were King Wu’s five assistants and how humble the king himself was. The authors of *Lüshi Chunqiu* invite us to interpret it differently, however, as a critique of leaders who demand of their subordinates what they shouldn’t, and who forget that they themselves are sometimes “no better than a commoner”. Understood in these terms, rather than showing King Wu’s merits, the narrative presents a critique of the king, with the conclusion that the firm stance of his assistants helped him correct his mistake in time. And maybe this is exactly why he managed to defeat the Shang and establish his benevolent rule based on the principles of *li* 禮 and *yi* 義.

The narrative challenges our understanding of propriety and duty. Through this, it strengthens the force of the warning communicated in the “Discretion” chapter.

The Parabolic Narrative Model

There are four types of narratives used indirectly in a persuasive context that were mentioned in this paper: fables, parables, anecdotes, and historic anecdotes. How these narratives differ from each other is their mimetic aspect, i.e. relation to real world and real experiences. A fable represents what in literary studies can be called an unnatural narrative,¹⁴ while on the other end of the unreal–real scale we can find historical anecdote, which is firmly based in historical context. If we placed all of these narrative types on a thematic scale, fables and parables would occupy one end of the scale, as texts used in indirect persuasive communication, while the bulk of extant historic anecdotes would need to be placed on the “direct communication” end of the scale, as *exemplae* strengthening the message through straight-forward analogy. Presented in graphic form, the positioning of various types of narratives on the mimetic and thematic scales could appear as below:

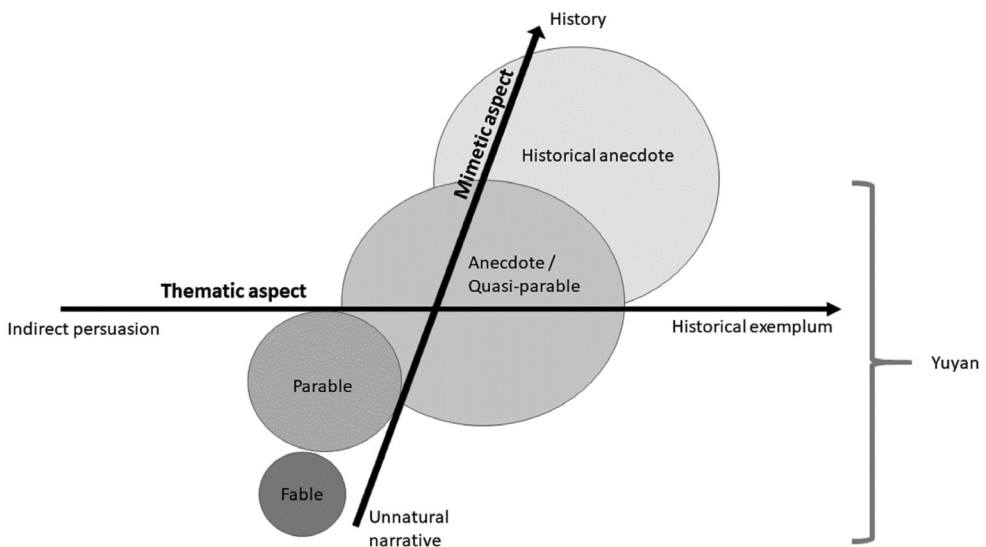


Fig. 1. The Parabolic narrative model.

Most historical anecdotes and many anecdotes with historical protagonists are used directly in persuasive contexts in both the *Lüshi Chunqiu* and in other texts

14 For an in-depth discussion on unnatural narratives in premodern literature, see von Contzen (2017).

of the period. However, what the eight “quasi-parables” and the three historical anecdotes from *Lüshi Chunqiu* demonstrate is that not only are the boundaries between fiction and history blurred, but also those between parabolic communication and direct persuasion.

This fact has not been widely recognized in modern scholarship on late Warring States period literature. Those scholars who take on the analysis of the anecdotal tradition, such as authors of the aforementioned, important publication *Between History and Philosophy: Anecdotes in Early China*, edited by Paul van Els and Sarah A. Queen, usually concentrate on the mimetic aspect of the narratives, failing to recognize their parabolic use in much of the discourse of the period. This results in pushing parabolic communication in *Lüshi Chunqiu*, *Zhuangzi*, *Han Feizi*, *Zhanguo*, and several other texts to the margins of research, while in truth it forms an important, if not central part of late Warring States period political and philosophical discourse. At this point it might be useful to bring back the Chinese term *yuyan* yet again, as it shows recognition of the thematic dimension, i.e. the parabolic use of various narratives.

I propose that all narratives used indirectly in persuasive contexts in the thematic dimension, regardless of their identification in the mimetic aspect as fables, parables, anecdotes or historical anecdotes, should be called parabolic narratives. In this way, the pitfalls of using terms relating to literary genres in rhetoric analysis of persuasive discourse can be avoided.

Conclusion

The aim of the paper was to show the use of different types of narratives in indirect persuasion of the Warring States period. I consider *Lüshi Chunqiu* as the best text for such an analysis, due to its well-preserved, coherent structure of persuasive content in which various types of narratives are embedded.

The analysis of narratives present in the *Lüshi Chunqiu* in their original communicative framework shows that they occupy different positions across the mimetic and thematic dimensions. Three historic anecdotes used parabolically, and to a lesser extent eight further anecdotes used as “quasi-parables”, prove the fact that in the political and philosophical discourse of the Warring States period, history was being used in indirect persuasion similarly to the fantasy and literary fiction of fables and parables.

Therefore, in research into pre-Qin narratives I consider it insufficient to focus solely on anecdotal narratives interpreted through the lens of “continuum of

historicity”.¹⁵ This would result in disregarding the parabolic function that many narratives clearly demonstrate, especially in texts such as *Zhuangzi*, *Han Feizi*, *Zhanguo*, and, of course, the *Lüshi Chunqiu*.

It is thus necessary to broaden the understanding of Chinese pre-Qin anecdotal tradition to include the term parabolic narrative, to cover all types of narratives used instrumentally in indirect persuasion, whether they are fables, parables or historic anecdotes. They should be evaluated in their thematic dimension, as deliberative discourse in which form and content “collaborate to create meaning and effect persuasion” (Browne 2009, 76).

The parabolic use of narratives is not a niche phenomenon, but an important one representative of persuasive discourse in the Warring States period. As such, it should not be omitted from discussions of the literary and rhetorical traditions of this period of Chinese history.

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15 This term is used by van Els and Queen in “Anecdotes in Early China” in their edited volume *Between History and Philosophy: Anecdotes in Early China*, (van Els and Queen 2017, 10); by Paul R. Goldin in his chapter “Non-deductive Argumentation in Early Chinese Philosophy” in the same volume (van Els and Queen 2017, 50–51), and again by Goldin in Goldin (2020, 23).

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