

The Difficulties of *shuì/shuō* 說 :

Persuasions, Explanations and Sayings in the *Hán Fēizǐ* 韓非子 and Beyond

The Classical Chinese words *shuì/shuō* 說 (“persuasion”/“explanation” or “saying”) are “homographic heterophones”, as they share the same graphic representation though bearing different pronunciations. Moreover, the character is polysemic, as its two possible pronunciations identify distinct argumentative techniques employed to achieve different expressive effects. *Shuì* (“persuasion”) typically has the form of a plea addressed to a superior in rank, aimed at convincing him to assume a certain behavior or undertake a specific course of action for reasons of political convenience. *Shuō* itself is already dichotomous as it can express two slightly different shades of meaning, “explanation” or “saying”. Consequently, in the sense of “explanation”, *shuō* can be understood as the corollary to a previously given synthetic definition, or the illustrative statement associated with a set of anecdotal examples (Garrett 1993; Lu 1998; Crump 1964; Du 2010). In the sense of “saying”, it identifies a more loosely composed brief narrative with heterogeneous content that can be embedded in other (con)texts and flexibly adapted to suit circumstances and meet different communication purposes. Clusters of this kind of anecdotes might have been used as a sort of repository of “exempla” in a didactic setting; however, far from being purely illustrative or descriptive narratives, they could also be employed as an effective and powerful rhetorical tool to argue against an opponent in a debate (Garrett 1993). *Shuì* and *shuō* gradually evolved into proper literary genres, each presenting a set of clearly identifiable formal and structural characteristics. Examples of these genres can be found in collections of instances of persuasions and more or less neatly organized clusters of anecdotes, handed down in the received literature (Kern 2000; Schwermann 2011). By proposing an analysis of selected cases of *shuì* (“persuasion”) and *shuō* (“explanation”, “saying”) in the late Warring States (475-221 B.C.) text *Hán Fēizǐ* 韓非子, the present paper aims to explore the structural features and rhetorical characteristics of the two genres. After providing an overview of the phenomenology of persuasion as exposed in chapter 12 ‘*Shuínán*’ 說難, attention will be devoted to an extensive analysis of the collection of anecdotes in the ‘*Shuōlín*’ 說林 chapters (22-23) and to the microclusters of persuasions and illustrative explanations preserved in the ‘*Chǔshuō*’ 儲說 chapters (30-35) (Du 2010, Schwermann 2013). As it will be shown, such analysis acknowledges that *shuì* and *shuō* – in both meanings - were perceived as different techniques, and that such techniques could coexist unproblematically not only in the same text, but also within the same chapter as they were consciously mixed and arranged in a more or less coherent whole to pursue different communicative goals.