Chinese Onomasticons of Posthumous Names: Between Ritual Practice and Historical Exegesis

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Abstract

This paper provides a brief introduction to Chinese posthumous names. This name system is based on the opposition between positive and negative evaluations of the deceased. It was employed as a means for negotiating legitimacy and shaping the historical record. This article also provides information on the "Order of Posthumous Names Explained", a chapter of the *Neglected Zhou Scriptures*. This chapter is a canonical source for the study of Chinese posthumous names. It is commonly seen by scholars as an ancient onomasticon used to assign posthumous names. This paper argues that, in its present form, this chapter is a complex medieval compilation of multiple earlier sources. This paper counters the narrow interpretation of onomasticons of Chinese posthumous names as manuals for assigning names to the deceased. Instead, it postulates that onomasticons of posthumous names were also used as aids in the interpretation of history. They provided meaningful moralistic interpretations for the posthumous names attested in historical sources.

Keywords: posthumous names, China, history, anthroponymy, onomasticon

Introduction: Beautiful and Displeasing Posthumous Names

Chinese historical texts from antiquity and the medieval period usually do not mention rulers by the names they used during their lives. Instead, designations such as *King Weilie of Zhou* 周威烈王 (r. 425–402 BC) or *Emperor Jing of Han* 漢景帝 (r. 157–141 BC) are used. The words *Weilie* and *Jing* in these two examples are the so-called "posthumous names" (*shi* 諡) that were assigned to these rulers after their demise. Such names tended to be a male privilege. However, in some periods, they were also assigned to powerful female figures such as *Empress Zhang* 章太妃 (d. 363 AD), mother of *Emperor Ai of Jin* 晉哀帝 (r. 361–365). Posthumous names are meaningful. While most of them are laudatory epithets, some express lament or even condemnation. For example, the posthumous names given above can be translated in the following manner: *Weilie* 'fiery and awe-inspiring'; *Jing* 'brilliant'; *Zhang* 'exalted'; and *Ai* 'piteous'. Some readers may have noticed a hint of lament in the last example. If so, there is good reason: Emperor Ai of Jin was poisoned to death (*Jinshu* 1974, 208–209; Sima Guang 1956, 3194, 3198). This historical fact may well have informed the choice of his posthumous name. Starting from early antiquity, apart from rulers, posthumous names were also given to rulers' relatives and court officials (Wang Shoukuan 1995, 95–167).

It has been traditionally held that posthumous names in China were assigned soon after death, when the heirs and servants of the deceased assembled to evaluate his moral qualities and then select a posthumous name that they felt would most accurately summarize his life (*Shiji* 1959, 236; Nienhauser 1994, I:136). However, there is some reason to believe that the selection of posthumous names may have never followed such an impartial moral evaluation, if for no other reason than the heirs and servants of the deceased may have been the least suitable candidates for passing objective judgement on the departed's life. Instead, there is evidence that during the formative period of this naming practice, the choice of posthumous names was dictated by ritual conventions and by fashion (Ess 2008). For example, of the 56 rulers mentioned for the period of the eighth century BC in the *Grand Scribe's Records* 史記, six (10.71%) had the name *Huan* 桓 'stout', and another six (10.71%) were called *Wu* 武 'martial'. By comparison, during the sixth century BC, the most common posthumous names for Chinese rulers were *Ping* 平 'even' which was given to seven out of seventy-eight rulers (8.97%); seven were named *Dao* 悼 'lamentable' (8.97%); and six received the name *Jing* 景 'brilliant' (7.69%) (Grebnev 2013).

At its core, a posthumous Chinese name consists of two components: (1) an evaluative designation; and (2) an aristocratic title. In addition to these two elements, posthumous names are often preceded by the name of the ruler's state. This topographic information helps to distinguish them from rulers of other states who may have borne the same name. Table 1 demonstrates how this construction system operated using the above-mentioned examples:

NAMES: A JOURNAL OF ONOMASTICS
Yegor Grebnev

Table 1: Antemortem Appellations, Posthumous Names, and English Translations

Family and Personal Name	Posthumous Name Group					English	
	State Name	Evaluative Designation		Title		Conventional Transliteration	Literal Translation
Ji Wu 姬午	*Zhou* 周	*Weilie* 威烈	'awe-inspiring and fiery'	*wang* 王	'king'	*King Weilie of Zhou*	'awe-inspiring and fiery King of Zhou'
Liu Qi 劉啟	*Han* 漢	*Jing* 景	'brilliant'	*di* 帝	'emperor'	*Emperor Jing of Han*	'brilliant Emperor of Han'
Zhou shi 周氏 'Lady Zhou'		*Zhang* 章	'exalted'	*taifei* 太妃	'empress'	*Empress Zhang*	'exalted Empress'
Sima Pi 司馬丕	*Jin* 晉	*Ai* 哀	'piteous'	*di* 帝	'emperor'	*Emperor Ai of Jin*	'piteous Emperor of Jin'

Note: The title *di* 帝 is the short form of *huangdi* 皇帝 'emperor'.

The "Order of Posthumous Names Explained" 謚法解, a chapter in the *Neglected Zhou Scriptures* 逸周書, is commonly seen as the earliest and most authoritative source for the study of Chinese posthumous names (Wang Shoukuan 1995, 220–241).[1] However, its history, as we shall see shortly, is quite complicated. The introductory part of the chapter claims that posthumous names were established as a system of labelling the moral character of the departed during the early years of the Western Zhou (mid.-11th century BC–771 BC). This period is generally regarded as the dawn of Chinese cultural institutions. Given that fact, it may not be surprising that authors of the text indicated that the system of posthumous names originated at that time. However, the exact origins of posthumous names may have begun earlier. They may have been influenced by the earlier practice of "temple names" (*miaohao* 廟號), which were given to rulers posthumously (Pan Min & Sun Quanman 1995; Peng Yushang 1999). There is also some debate over whether posthumous names were initially "posthumous" at all. Early Chinese sources tended to omit the names of living rulers, referring to them simply by their titles, such as *wang* 王 'king' or *gong* 公 'duke' or 'lord' instead. An additional distinguishing appellation was only added for departed rulers (Van Auken 2023, 68–70). There are, however, a small number of inscriptions that departed from this convention and mentioned such appellations for the rulers who were still alive. These exceptions have led some scholars to suggest that what we understand as posthumous names may actually have been used during the rulers' lifetimes. This suggestion is especially convincing for the Western Zhou period. In an influential study, Guo Moruo (1954) suggested that the system of posthumous names only became established during the Warring States period (453–256 BC). Today, it is commonly accepted that initially, posthumous names were simply laudatory labels (Wilkinson 2022a), and it was probably not until the fifth or the fourth century BC that some of them acquired negative, judgemental connotations (Falkenhausen 1996). It is at this point in time that can we start to speak about posthumous names as a proper evaluative system of nomenclature, made up of positive and negative monikers.

Traditionally, posthumous Chinese names are divided into "beautiful" (*mei* 美) and "displeasing" (*e* 惡 or *chou* 丑). Sometimes, an additional category of "neutral" (*ping* 平) posthumous names is also used. The category of displeasing names includes expressions of lament and condemnation. Perhaps no other posthumous Chinese name is more illustrative of this negative category than *You* 幽 'tenebrous'. Four rulers in the early period from the tenth to the eight centuries BC are known by this name. Three of them died a violent death which suggests that the name *You* may have had connotations of lamentation or grief. Among these, the most famous is *King You* 幽王, the 'tenebrous king' (r. 781–771 BC), the last ruler of the Western Zhou.[2] King You is the icon of tragic licentiousness leading to the collapse of statehood. According to Chinese lore, he was bewitched by his consort Bao Si 褒姒. As a result, he failed to protect the state of Zhou against its invaders and consequently lost his life. This demise signaled the end of the glorious Western Zhou period. After the ruler's fall, the weakened royal house of Zhou relocated to the eastern enclave of Chengzhou 成周. This relocation marked the beginning of the Eastern Zhou period (770–256 BC) of Chinese history (Pines and Chen Minzhen 2018).

In the past, it may have automatically been assumed that King You was condemned to being called 'tenebrous' soon after his death. Nevertheless, it is far more likely that the negative connotations of the posthumous name *You* were derived from King You's bad reputation, and not vice versa (Grebnev 2013). It was probably not until the fifth century BC that the name *You* became a "displeasing" one. Evidence for this hypothesis comes from the circumstances surrounding the death of *Duke You of Jin* 晉幽公 (434–416 BC). The Duke ruled the state of Jin when it had already been effectively partitioned by the aristocratic lineages of Wei 魏, Zhao 趙 and Han 韓. As the division took place, it was only a matter of time before the formal dissolution followed and the ancient line of the Jin rulers were overthrown by their former subjects. However, such revolt challenged the norms of political and ritual subordination. To justify this usurpatory transition, it was necessary to provide an alternative accounting of how the Jin ruling lineage had lost its legitimacy. Posthumous names were instrumentalized to address this need. Using this naming system, a negative image of Duke You was

created in the historical record and an acceptable explanation for the demise of the Jin rule was given. The blame was put on the Duke's impropriety. Here is how the circumstances of the Duke's death are described in Chapter 39 "Hereditary house of Jin" (Jin shi jia 晉世家) of the *Grand Scribe's Records* (the translations here and below are mine):

> 幽公淫婦人，夜竊出邑中，盜殺幽公。魏文侯以兵誅晉亂，立幽公子止 [...] (Duke You was engaged in an adulterous relationship with a woman; when he secretly went out of town at night, bandits killed Duke You. Marquis Wen of Wei pacified the tumult in Jin with troops and erected Duke You's son Zhi as the ruler of Jin [...]). (*Shiji* 1959, 1687)

Several elements in this account bear close reminiscence to the story of King You of Zhou: both rulers' reigns coincided with the decline of their dynasties; and both leaders' weakness for engaging in carnal pleasures proved fatal to themselves and their states. However, this story appears to be a work of fiction. In a different chapter, the *Grand Scribe's Records* offers an alternative, simpler, account of Duke You's death: "Wei executed Duke You of Jin and installed his younger brother Zhi" (*Shiji* 1959, 704). Here, the state of Wei does not appear as a noble pacifier amid the tumult in Jin, but instead as the murderer of its legitimate ruler. This shorter account may be more credible. Considering that the powerful decision-makers in Wei set up their own candidate to serve as the ruler of Jin, it stands to reason that they could also impose a posthumous name with negative historical connotations on a ruler they had killed. By making the defeated Duke You of Jin appear similar to the infamous King You of Zhou, they could have sought to legitimize the gradual dissolution of Jin.[3] As others have observed, the assignment of posthumous names may be an effective means for stronger political powers to enshrine their condemnation of adversaries (Yu Keping 2019; Wilkinson 2022b).

Not surprisingly, posthumous names remained an important instrument of power throughout much of Chinese history. An insightful example comes from the period of transition from the Sui 隋 (581–618 AD) to the Tang 唐 (618–907 AD) dynasty. Although the Sui Dynasty was successful in unifying northern and southern China, it was unable to retain power for more than two generations. The dynasty's second, and last significant, ruler was Yang Guang 楊廣, who was killed in a coup in 618 AD. Soon afterwards, competing parties claiming to the highest authority proposed several different posthumous names. One of these suggestions, *Yang* 煬 'scorching,' was put forth by a relative of the deceased emperor and the future founder of the Tang Dynasty, Li Yuan 李淵.[4] This posthumous name clearly belongs to the "displeasing" kind. In the "Order of Posthumous Names Explained", it is described as follows: "the one who is fond of his harem and withdraws himself from ritual is called *Yang* 煬 'scorching'" (Takigawa 1955, 60). This interpretation repeats the motif of fatal licentiousness also found in the examples of King You of Zhou and Duke You of Jin.

Another posthumous name for the deceased Yang Guang was proposed in the court of Yang Dong 楊侗 (600–619 AD), Yang Guang's grandson. Despite his inherited right to rule, he was too young to wield power himself and was easily manipulated by General Wang Shichong 王世充 (567–621 AD). Yang Dong's associates proposed a "beautiful" posthumous name *Ming* 明 'bright' to celebrate the continuing succession of Yang Guang's line. The "Order of Posthumous Names Explained" defines *Ming* as "the one who does not follow slander and accusations" (Takigawa 1955, 53). Finally, another posthumous name for Yang Guang was suggested by Dou Jiande 竇建德 (573–621 AD), a military leader who had initially supported Wang Shichong, until Wang began to usurp imperial power. Dou Jiande gave the deceased Yang Guang the posthumous name *Min* 閔 'lamentable.' Although this is also a "displeasing" name, unlike the one advanced by Li Yuan, it emphasizes the suffering that the deceased ruler inflicted on the people. According to the "Order of Posthumous Names Explained", *Min* may be interpreted as "the one who brings sorrows and pain to the people" (Takigawa 1955, 60). Since the privilege to bestow a posthumous name to a ruler belongs to the legitimate successor, these three different posthumous names were effectively competing bids for imperial authority. They also encapsulated different historiographic interpretations of Yang Guang's reign. Eventually, Li Yuan defeated his rivals and founded the long-lasting Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD). Consequently, Yang Guang was remembered as the 'Scorching Emperor of Sui'—a disgraced ruler who abandoned his primary obligations for carnal pleasures.

Questioning the Antiquity of the Onomasticons of Posthumous Names

The three different posthumous names proposed for Yang Guang show how seemingly abstract labels (e.g., 'bright,' 'scorching,' 'lamentable') can encompass specific moral and political evaluations. However, the corresponding Chinese words (*ming* 明, *yang* 煬, *min* 閔), just like their English counterparts, do not overtly convey the historical meanings behind them. Since these meanings are not immediately obvious, they had to be fixed in writing. This is the rationale behind a peculiar genre of onomasticons, the so-called "orders of posthumous names" (*shifa* 謚法). As explained before, the above-mentioned chapter "Order of Posthumous Names Explained" from the *Neglected Zhou Scriptures* is the best known example. Such onomasticons became available no later than the second century BC. This is apparent from the chapter "Biographies of the Thirteen Sons of Emperor Jing" 景十三王傳 in the *History of Han* 漢書. This chapter contains a passage that discusses the circumstances surrounding the departure of Liu De 劉德 (d. 130 BC). A son of *Emperor Jing* 景帝 'brilliant emperor', he was given the posthumous name *King Xian* 獻王 'eminent king'. The passage describes the rationale for choosing this posthumous name, quoting a line from an early version of the "Order of Posthumous Names": "The one who is clearly minded and perspicacious in knowledge is called Xian 'eminent'" 聰明睿知曰獻 (*Hanshu* 1962, 2411). This line is very close to an entry in the "Order of Posthumous Names Explained": "The one who is clearly minded and astute in wisdom is called Xian 'eminent'" 聰明叡哲曰獻 (Takigawa 1955, 54). However, it would be premature to conclude from this similarity that the chapter in the *Neglected Zhou Scriptures* is the same text as the one consulted by Han courtiers in the second century BC. In the following sections, I examine the structural inconsistencies in the "Order of Posthumous Names Explained" against the important but relatively unknown external evidence from medieval onomasticons of posthumous names preserved in the 13th century encyclopaedia, *Jade Sea* 玉海. Through this text-critical analysis, I conclude that the "Order of Posthumous Names Explained" is not an intact ancient text, but a multi-layered medieval compilation.

"Order of Posthumous Names Explained" from the *Neglected Zhou Scriptures* as a Medieval Compilation

Let us briefly consider the structure and contents of the "Order of Posthumous Names Explained". Its main part provides interpretations for various posthumous names, both positive and negative. Most of this information is presented in the form of a long table divided into two horizontal rows. This tabular layout was, however, not preserved in the *Neglected Zhou Scriptures*. Here, the text was re-arranged in a rather chaotic linear format. The more meaningful tabular arrangement can still be found in the *Correct Meanings of the Historical Records* 史記正義 which was compiled by Zhang Shoujie 張守節 in 736 AD. Each entry in this tabular onomasticon follows the same standard form with six-character phrases, e.g.: 短折不成曰殤, "The one who died early not having matured is called *Shang* 'prematurely departed'" (Takigawa 1955, 58).

The tabular onomasticon is followed by a short set of non-tabular entries. Two of the shorter entries are largely identical in meaning to the longer six-character interpretations presented in the main onomasticon, but they feature four-character phrases, such as 辟地為襄, "The one who expands the lands is *Xiang* 'cultivating'" (Takigawa 1955, 61). Interestingly, some of the other shorter entries are also formulated as six-character phrases, but they blatantly contradict the information presented in the longer main onomasticon, providing negative evaluations for the names interpreted there as positive. Consider the following entry from the main tabular onomasticon: 聖善周聞曰宣, "The one whose sagacity and kindness are known throughout is called *Xuan* 'glorious'" (Takigawa 1955, 57). Its counterpart in the non-tabular section is quite different: 施而不成為宣, "The one who practices benefaction but does not succeed is *Xuan* 'glorious'" (Takigawa 1955, 61). These instances of similarity and difference (both in content and format) suggest that the short set of non-tabular interpretations may have originally come from a different source(s) unrelated to the tabular main onomasticon.

This hypothesis is further corroborated by the concluding line in the "Order of Posthumous Names Explained". Although this line is missing from the version in the *Neglected Zhou Scriptures,* it is preserved in the one recorded in the *Correct Meanings of the Historical Records*. This concluding line suggests that the onomasticon was compiled from two earlier sources. It reads as follows:

以前《周書謐法》；周代君王並取作謐，故全寫一篇以傳後學。

The text above is "Order of Posthumous Names" from the *Zhou Scriptures*. The rulers of the Zhou period consulted both when assigning posthumous names, therefore, I copy them as one chapter in order to transmit to future scholars. (Takigawa 1955, 62)

The expressions "consulted both" and "copy as one chapter" seem to suggest unambiguously that the copyist compiled the text by combining two earlier ones together. However, if this "Order of Posthumous Names" was compiled from two different earlier texts, can we deduce what these earlier texts might have been? Potential evidence can be extracted from the *Jade Sea*, an encyclopaedic work compiled by Wang Yinglin 王應麟 (1223–1296 AD). In one of its sections, Wang Yinglin provides extensive quotes from the studies of two earlier authors, Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513 AD) and Su Xun 蘇洵 (1009–1066 AD), written in preparation of their own onomasticons of posthumous names (Wang Yinglin 1987).[5] These studies survey even earlier onomasticons and explain the rationale for Shen Yue's and Su Xun's novel arrangements. Reading extracts from Shen Yue and Su Xun in Wang Yinglin's composition is not easy. Wang Yinglin copied the passages that he found interesting without explaining their context. He pasted disjointed fragments from the original sources and later commentaries into the *Jade Sea,* and interspersed them with his own notes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, with the exception of Lou Jin's (2005) important article, this compositional maze has had relatively little impact on the study of posthumous names. A careful study of Wang Yinglin's notes, however, can substantially clarify the history of the "Order of Posthumous Names". It can show that this chapter is a complex medieval compilation, and not an intact ancient text, as usually assumed (Wang Shoukuan 1995, 220–241).

During the medieval period, the *Neglected Zhou Scriptures* was known in two different versions. The first was known as the *Zhou Scriptures from the Tomb-Mound at Ji* 汲冢周書. As its name suggests, this book was believed to have been discovered in the late third century AD along with several other palaeographic texts (Shaughnessy 2006a). The second version, presently lost, was known simply as *Zhou Scriptures* 周書 or *Zhou Scriptures in Modern Script* 今文周書 (Grebnev 2022a). Little is known about this lost version, but it appears to have been smaller in length (8 scrolls as opposed to 10 scrolls) and badly preserved. The "Order of Posthumous Names" in this version was divided into two chapters: 56 and 57. Already by the fifth century AD, the text of chapter 57 had been entirely lost, and chapter 56 only survived in a fragmentary form, containing just a little more than ten entries. This fragmentary chapter 56 is the likely source of several of the non-tabular entries that contradict the larger main tabular onomasticon in the "Order of Posthumous Names Explained" (Grebnev 2022b). Therefore, the source of the tabular onomasticon, the most informative part of the "Order of Posthumous Names", has to be sought elsewhere. According to Li Bi 李璧 (1159–1222 AD), whose note is also preserved in the *Jade Sea*, the "Order of Posthumous Names" in the *Zhou Scriptures from the Tomb at Ji* is the same as the so-called *Duke of Zhou's Order of Posthumous Names* 周公謐法 (Wang Yinglin 1987, 1035). This was one of the onomasticons of Chinese posthumous names known during the medieval period but lost today.

Following this line of evidence, it appears that the "Order of Posthumous Names Explained" may well be a fusion of the *Duke of Zhou's Order of Posthumous Names* and the partially preserved chapter 56 from *Zhou Scriptures*. If this is the case, the text must have been put together no later than 736 AD, when the "Order of Posthumous Names Explained" was extracted from the *Zhou Scriptures from the Tomb at Ji* and incorporated into the *Correct Meanings of the Historical Records*. Figure 1 illustrates the probable relationship between the different chapters that bear the title "Order of Posthumous Names" in the two medieval versions of *Zhou Scriptures*.
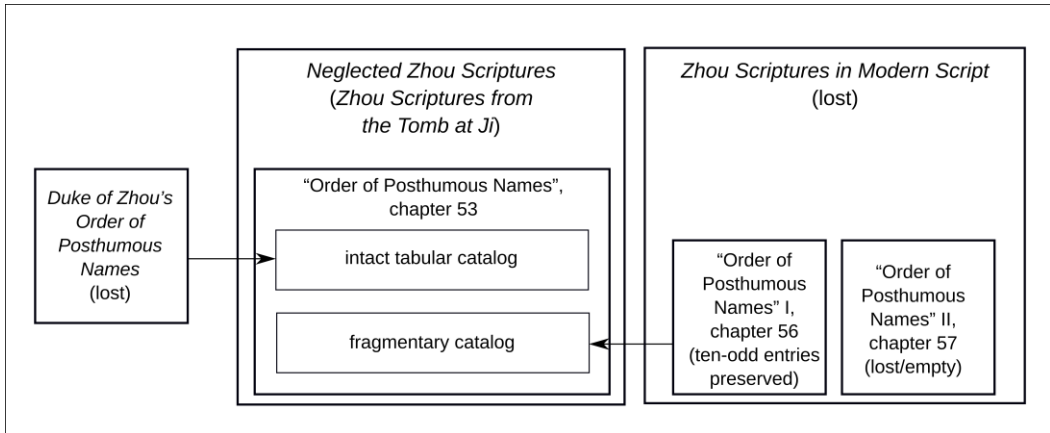
Fig. 1. Probable Sources of the Different Parts of Chapter 53, "Order of Posthumous Names Explained" from the *Neglected Zhou Scriptures* (*Zhou Scriptures from the Tomb at Ji*)

Based on the evidence presented here, it seems logical to conclude that the "Order of Posthumous Names Explained" cannot be regarded as an ancient text.

The complexities do not end here, however. The *Duke of Zhou's Order of Posthumous Names*, which is the probable source of the tabular onomasticon in the "Order of Posthumous Names Explained", had a complicated history of its own. This history can be largely reconstructed from the notes of Su Xun, who studied the text while preparing his own compilation. According to Su Xun, *Duke of Zhou's Order of Posthumous Names* was based on He Chen's 賀琛 (481–549 AD) onomasticon of posthumous names, which in turn was derived from an earlier onomasticon by Shen Yue. Shen Yue compiled his onomasticon by relying on several earlier ones. These sources included an onomasticon by Liu Xi 劉熙 (fl. late second century AD); an onomasticon compiled by Lai Ao 來奧; the so-called *Extended Order of Posthumous Names from the Zhou Scriptures* 廣周書謚法 ; and a two-chapter text that Shen Yue called the "current" *Order of Posthumous Names* 今謚法. This later text was examined by Shen Yue in some detail. Based on a citation in a colophon note, it appears that at least one of its two chapters was culled from an early edition of *Zhou Scriptures*, where it was included as chapter 42. Another part of the text may have come from an early version of *Ritual Records of Dai the Elder* 大戴禮記. (Note that the version of this collection available today does not contain an "Order of Posthumous Names".) Before reaching Shen Yue, the "Current Order of Posthumous Names" had also incorporated a commentary from another author, Zhang Jing 張靖 (fl. 265–280 AD) (Lou Jin 2005).

The historical information presented above is summarized in figure 2 below. As it shows, the version of "Order of Posthumous Names Explained" which has been preserved today was probably re-compiled multiple times during the medieval period. It is important to stress here that my attempt to reconstruct the history of the "Order of Posthumous Names Explained" must be inevitably taken as speculative. Certainty is not possible when delving through multiple layers of lost texts.
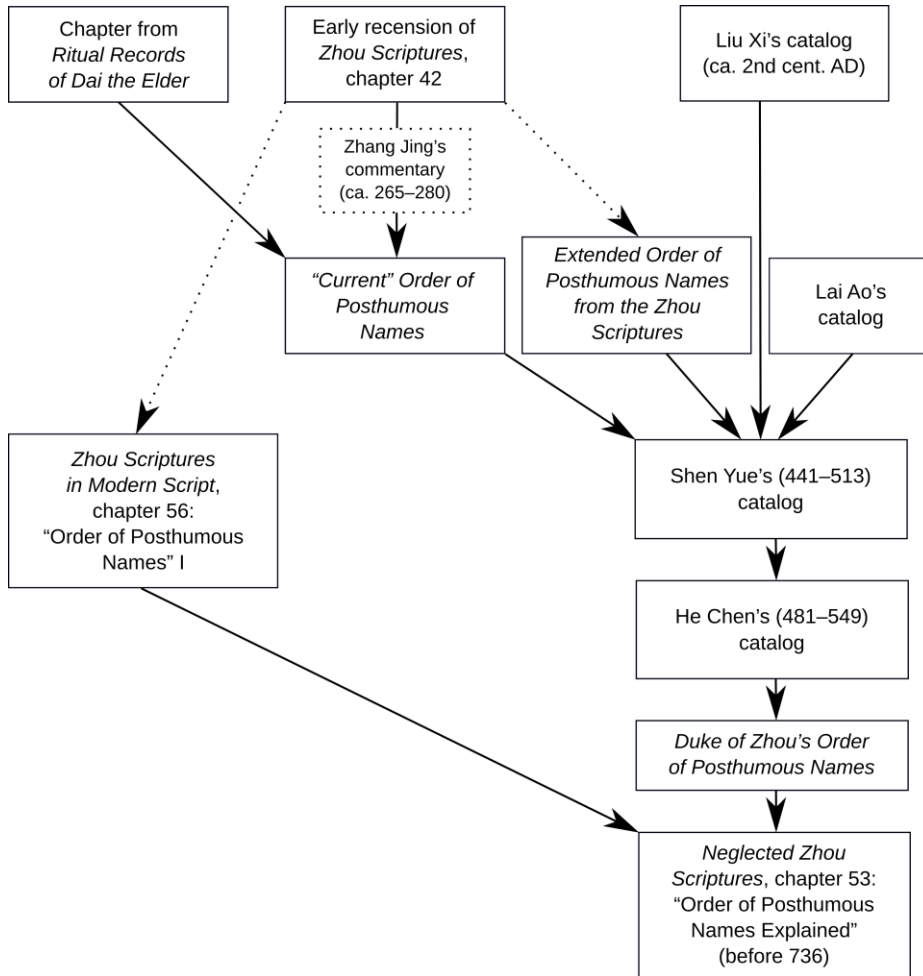
Fig. 2. Potential Textual Sources of the "Order of Posthumous Names Explained"

Conclusion: Reading and Writing History through the Onomasticons of Posthumous Names

The complex history of the "Order of Posthumous Names Explained" demonstrates that the educated members of medieval Chinese society repeatedly revised and updated their onomasticons of posthumous names. The question is why? One of the reasons may be the incompleteness or inaccuracy of existing onomasticons. For example, Su Xun, the author whose useful critical remarks were presented above, was commissioned by the government to compile an onomasticon without the posthumous names that, for some reason, were considered "not usable" 不可用者 (Wang Yinglin 1987, 1034). Curiously, less than a century earlier, in 983 AD, the scholar Hu Meng 扈蒙 was commissioned for similar project driven by a diametrically opposite motivation. In this case, 55 new names were to be added to the existing onomasticon. Clearly, the understanding of what constitutes a good onomasticon of posthumous names was subject to change. In other cases, revisions seem to have been motivated by the need to insert commentaries or indicate historical precedents that corresponded to specific

explanations. Whatever the exact motivations may have been, the compilation of such onomasticons was a complex exercise which involved studying and comparing the posthumous names recorded in older and more recent historical sources; as well as making subjective judgements about the cases when contradicting interpretations were recorded for the same posthumous names.

An onomasticon of posthumous names was, therefore, a work of historical scholarship. However, this scholarship was not impartial. The interpretation of posthumous names was influenced not only by personal evaluations of historical characters, but also by the shifting ideological agenda of the government. As a result, the onomasticons of posthumous names accumulated a wealth of moralizing evaluations of historical figures.[6] Consequently, such onomasticons were often consulted not only as guides for selecting names for the newly departed, but also as reference material for the study of Chinese history. It may not be accidental that the most intact version of "Order of Posthumous Names Explained" is not preserved in the *Neglected Zhou Scriptures* from which it originates, but as an appendix to *Correct Meanings of the Historical Records*, a commentary to China's earliest comprehensive history. Many parts in the "Order of Posthumous Names Explained" only make sense if considered from within the context of historical exegesis. For example, apart from the interpretations of posthumous names as such, the onomasticon also provides explanations of the aristocratic titles used in conjunction with posthumous names (e.g., *wang* 王 'king'; *gong* 公 'duke'; *hou* 侯 'marquis', etc.). Obviously, onomasticons were not needed to select the proper aristocratic titles for deceased members of the elite. Therefore, the most likely reason for the inclusion of such explanations was to allow the students of history to extract as many edifying meanings from the historical record as possible.

To conclude, the onomasticons of Chinese posthumous names were not infallible prescriptive manuals that were carefully preserved without change from the foundational antiquity. They were a dynamically evolving collective project that aimed to enrich history and provide moralizing interpretations based on the opposition between positive and negative judgements. These judgements themselves changed along with the consistently re-assessed historical events. Taken together, these factors explain why the system of posthumous names never stopped evolving in the medieval period.

Notes

[1] A full translation of the onomasticon is available online (Grebnev 2024).

[2] Other rulers are Duke You of Lu 魯幽公 (fl. early tenth century BC); Count You of Cao 曹幽伯 (834–826); and Duke You of Chen 陳幽公 (853–532). The former two, like King You of Zhou, were murdered (*Shiji* 1956, 1525, 1571). Duke You of Chen, however, may have died a natural death (*Shiji* 1956, 1576). Although three cases in four hardly make a statistically representative set, the name *You* may have been a preferred choice for those rulers who died an unnatural death.

[3] Another account of Duke You's death comes from a passage from the lost *Bamboo Annals* 竹書紀年. This passage is quoted in the *Guide to the Obscure Places* 索隐, a commentary to *Grand Scribe's Records*. It mentions that "the lady [of Duke You of Jin] Qinying treacherously killed the Duke in the chambers of Gao" 晉夫人秦嬴賊公于高寢之上 (Fan Xiangyong 2011, 58). This record relates Duke You's death to his dangerous affairs with women. In this point, it is in agreement with the less credible account that appears in chapter 39 of *Grand Scribe's Records*, which claims that Duke You suffered a violent death as a result of his adulterous affairs. The *Bamboo Annals* were probably compiled from the official chronicle of the state of Wei (Shaughnessy 2006b). Consequently, it is not surprising that its record is advantageous for Wei.

[4] Formally, this posthumous name was proclaimed by Yang Guang's grandson Yang You 楊侑 (r. 605–619 AD). However, in practice, the underage emperor was only a marionette of Li Yuan. Two months after Yang Guang's assassination, Yang You "renounced" his imperial privileges to Li Yuan (Sima Guang 1956, 5791).

[5] Although Shen Yue's catalog has not been preserved, Su Xun's catalog still survives (Su Xun, n.d.), albeit without the prefatory material cited by Wang Yinglin. Shen Yue's catalog was apparently called *Precedents of Posthumous Names* 諡例 (Wang Yinglin 1987, 1034). The full title of Su Xun's imperially commissioned composition was *The Order of Posthumous Names Compiled During the Jiayou Era* 嘉祐編定諡法 (Wang Yinglin 1987, 1033). This title is derived from the era name Jiayou 嘉祐 (1056–1063), the last period in the reign of Emperor Renzong 仁宗 (1010–1063) of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). Su Xun's work was commissioned in 1061.

[6] As recently shown by Dong Changbao (2013), one can "reverse" these onomasticons, identifying the historical figures that may have served as prototypes for particular interpretations.

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