

## The Wooden Clogs in *Shishuo Xinyu*: Everyday Use, Gracious Bearing, and Official Seclusion

Chunyao Li, Nanfang College Guangzhou, China

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### Abstract

In *A New Account of the Tales of the World (Shishuo Xinyu)*, the footwear described as wooden clogs appears eight times. In the three anecdotes about Zheng Xuan and two other figures, the clogs are ordinary daily items with little cultural significance. By contrast, in the three anecdotes about Ruanfu and the Wang brothers (Wang Xianzhi and Wang Huizhi), the clogs embody the Wei–Jin temperament. Ruanfu’s preference for wooden clogs over wealth suggests his engagement with the external world is aesthetic rather than utilitarian, a stance praised by contemporaries. The Wang brothers’ preference for “high-toothed wooden clogs” signals unrestrained personalities and disdain for secular ritual proprieties. When confronted with a fire, their responses differ: on the one hand, Wang Xianzhi’s magnanimity somewhat exceeds Wang Huizhi’s; On the other hand, this entry also hints at the aristocracy’s dress fashions of the time. The clogs also reflect nobles’ ambivalent attitudes within official life. *Shishuo Xinyu* records Yu Liang, disappointed in politics, wearing wooden clogs to mingle with subordinates; another entry notes Yu Liang wearing wooden clogs to visit hermit Zhai Tang, but donning formal footwear (lǚ) when visiting hermit Zhou Shao, a contrast that illuminates the Wei–Jin era’s nuanced mindset of heroes navigating between officialdom and withdrawal (shi and yin).

*Keywords:* *Shishuo Xinyu*, wooden clogs, Wei-Jin temperament

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## Introduction

In popular stereotype, wooden clogs are seen as a typically “Japanese” form of footwear. In fact, however, the appearance and popularization of wooden clogs in Japan postdate those in China. According to ancient Chinese sources, wooden clogs had already become common and fashionable by the Warring States period. Under Han ritual law, wooden clogs were regarded as relatively casual, informal footwear. From the late Eastern Han onward, however, the social upper strata began to wear wooden clogs for outings and socializing, and this fashion persisted from the end of the Han through the Sui and Tang, covering the entire Six Dynasties period. Wooden clogs appear eight times in *Shishuo Xinyu*. In the entries on Zheng Xuan, Xi Chao, and Wang Shu, the “clogs” are fairly ordinary daily items without strong cultural implication; the three entries concerning Ruan Fu and the Wang brothers reflect the so-called Wei–Jin temperament; and the two entries involving Yu Liang reflect the special mindset of Wei–Jin literati regarding life questions such as official service and withdrawal. The following discussion treats these cases separately.

### The Wooden Clogs as Everyday Items

#### The Wooden Clogs Worn by Zheng Xuan

In the *Shishuo Xinyu*, wooden clogs first appear in the chapter of *Wenxue*. The story records a feud between the classicist Ma Rong and Zheng Xuan. The gist of the original is as follows:

Zheng Xuan studied under Ma Rong but could not see Ma Rong for three years; Ma Rong only had his outstanding disciples instruct Zheng Xuan. Ma Rong attempted to calculate celestial phenomena but could not obtain accurate results, and his disciples could not resolve the problem either. Someone suggested that Zheng Xuan might be able to do it. Ma Rong had Zheng Xuan try, and Zheng Xuan immediately solved the difficult problem, to everyone’s surprise and admiration. When Zheng Xuan completed his studies and took his leave of Ma Rong, Zheng Xuan sighed, ‘Civilization will now flow eastward with Zheng Xuan’, and Ma Rong feared that Zheng Xuan’s fame would surpass his own, which made him anxious. On the other hand, Zheng Xuan feared someone would pursue and kill him. He sat beneath a bridge and pressed his wooden clogs against the surface of the water. Ma Rong intended to use divination to hunt down Zheng Xuan, but after consulting the oracle he told those around him, ‘Zheng Xuan is beneath earth, above water, beside wood’, which indicated he was surely doomed. Ma Rong therefore abandoned the pursuit, and Zheng Xuan astonishingly escaped death. (Liu et al., 2013, p. 118)

We can be fairly certain that this story was invented. In his annotation Liu Xiaobiao writes, “Ma Rong was a widely influential and morally upright Confucian scholar. Zheng Xuan was Ma Rong’s disciple and inherited his learning; how could Ma Rong have harbored malice against him and killed him?” (Liu et al., 2013, p. 118). Liu Xiaobiao’s analysis is persuasive: Ma Rong had no motive to frame Zheng Xuan. Although the tale is probably not historically true, it nevertheless yields some potentially valuable information.

In the latter half of this tale, there is a detail about sorcery: Zheng Xuan walked beneath the bridge and pressed his wooden clogs against the surface of the water; meanwhile, Ma Rong, far away, based on his divination tools, inferred that Zheng Xuan was beneath “Earth”, above “Water”, and beside “Wood”, which signified that he would surely die. In the above detail,

Zheng Xuan used his wooden clogs to conjure himself above the “Water” and beside the “Wood”, and thus escaped unharmed. Since one could readily produce wooden clogs to perform sorcery, this suggests that the wooden clogs were Zheng Xuan’s everyday footwear. Liu Xiaobiao questions the overall authenticity of this story but does not challenge this particular detail (Liu et al., 2013, p. 118). And according to related historical sources such as the *Hou Han Shu*, in the era of Ma Rong and Zheng Xuan, wooden clogs had indeed gradually become commonplace daily footwear for the general public.

In this story, the only part that is difficult to understand is the expression “pressing the wooden clogs against the water surface”. Wooden clogs do not float, so how could Zheng Xuan make them press against the water surface? One possible method is that Zheng Xuan sits beneath the bridge with his legs hanging down, allowing them to touch the water. In this way, his position would simultaneously satisfy the three conditions: beneath “Earth”, above “Water”, and beside “Wood”. Ma Rong, relying on his knowledge of “sorcery”, inferred Zheng Xuan’s doomed fate (Liu et al., 2013, p. 118).

### **The Wooden Clogs Worn by Wang Shu**

In *Shishuo Xinyu*, the story of Wang Shu eating eggs is recorded, and it also mentions wooden clogs.

Wang Shu’s temper was irascible. Once, when he was eating eggs, he tried to stab them with chopsticks but failed, becoming very angry and throwing the egg to the ground. The egg spun and rolled on the ground; he then attempted to press the egg with the teeth of his wooden clogs, but failed again. He grew extremely angry, picked the egg up from the ground, put it in his mouth, bit it, and spat it out. When Wang Xizhi heard about this, he laughed loudly and said, ‘Wang Shu’s father is like this; what is strange about Wang Shu’s behavior?’ (Liu et al., 2013, pp. 588–589)

The plot is simple but amusing: Wang Shu seems to have had difficulty managing his emotions. However, according to the *Jin Shu*, Wang Shu’s temperament was calm; some people insulted him with harsh language, but Wang Shu did not respond and simply looked at the wall, which people praised (Liu et al., 2013, pp. 588–589).

From this record, it appears that for much of the time Wang Shu’s temper did not resemble the egg-eating episode. Nevertheless, the egg-eating story is also recorded in the *Jin Shu*, which is somewhat puzzling. On this, Zhu Bilian argues that the egg-eating story is only one of Wang Shu’s early experiences, “Wang Shu later changed this bad temper” (Liu et al., 2013, pp. 588–589). I think it is possible that other explanations cannot be ruled out. Perhaps, during the egg-eating moment, Wang Shu experienced a relatively rare emotional outburst, which is human and not unusual. Or perhaps the story was “falsely attributed” to Wang Shu. At the end of the tale, Wang Xizhi’s biting mockery of Wang Shu further fuels suspicion that the egg-eating episode may have been embellished or transplanted.

In this story, of course, the discussions above are not essential. The wooden clogs in the tale are not a “cultural prop”; their appearance suggests that this type of footwear may have been a common household item at the time, and Wang Shu may have been accustomed to wearing such shoes during meals.

## The Wooden Clogs Discussed by Xi Chao

In *Shishuo Xinyu*, there is also a record about wooden clogs. The entry tells of a plan by the court to dispatch Xie Xuan to lead a northern expedition to resist Fu Jian's southward invasion. Although Xi Chao did not get along well with Xie Xuan, he nonetheless assessed Xie Xuan fairly, roughly saying: "I have worked with him; regarding a class of matters concerning formal footwear (lǚ, 履) and informal footwear (jī, 屐), he can handle them very well. From this, one can infer that he will surely succeed" (Liu et al., 2013, pp. 255–256). In the above quotation, "lǚ" and "jī" do not refer to specific shoes; they are merely metaphors for "small matters". The whole passage means that "even in details, Xie Xuan handles things very appropriately" (Liu et al., 2013, pp. 255–256). Both "lǚ" and "jī" are footwear, and by juxtaposing these two kinds of shoes when expressing his view, Xi Chao's statement also suggests that in contemporary social life, "jī" (wooden clogs) was a common and ordinary type of footwear.

### The Wooden Clogs as Symbols of Wei-Jin Elegance

#### Ruan Fu, the Waxer of Wooden Clogs

When speaking of the wooden clogs in *Shishuo Xinyu*, the story of Ruan Fu is probably the best known. It states:

Zu Yue loved money, while Ruan Fu loved wooden clogs. ... Someone visits Zu Yue and finds him dealing with his wealth; when the guest arrives, there is not enough time to gather all the wealth, leaving two small baskets behind, which Zu Yue blocks with his body, looking very uneasy. Someone visits Ruan Fu and sees him waxing the wooden clogs, and sighs: 'I don't know how many pairs of wooden clogs one will wear in a lifetime!' His expression is very relaxed and at ease. From then on, people concluded that, in some respects, Ruan Fu surpassed Zu Yue. (Liu et al., 2013, p. 225)

In the tale above, people compare Zu Yue and Ruan Fu and conclude that Ruan Fu surpasses Zu Yue. Why is that? I think there are at least two reasons. First, Zu Yue loved wealth but was secretive; Ruan Fu loved wooden clogs but was very straightforward. Although both men were attached to something, Zu Yue's character had already been twisted, whereas Ruan Fu's mindset was very untroubled; this difference suggests that he was closer to a state of freedom. This is the first reason.

Second, could money not buy wooden clogs? Money can be exchanged for any commodity; in a sense, money's "value" is naturally far higher than that of wooden clogs. Yet, people still hold that "loving wooden clogs" is more about "elegant bearing" or "nobility". The explanation is simple: the wooden clogs Ruan Fu prefers look "useless", but this precisely reflects his attitude toward the external world as aesthetic; Zu Yue's money looks "useful", but this precisely reveals his attitude toward the external world as utilitarian. This is the second reason.

#### Wang Huizhi, the One Who Couldn't Be Bothered to Wear Wooden Clogs

*Shishuo Xinyu* records a tale about Wang Huizhi and Wang Xianzhi:

Wang Huizhi and Wang Xianzhi once shared a room. Suddenly a fire broke out. Wang Huizhi hurriedly rushed out and did not have time to put on his wooden clogs. Wang Xianzhi remained very calm, slowly calling his retinue to help him leave the scene of the fire, behaving exactly as he did in normal times. Based on this incident, people distinguish the bearing of Wang Hui-zhi and Wang Xianzhi.

In this narrative, the narrator distinguishes their temperaments by how they faced the fire. Facing the blaze, Wang Huizhi did not even have time to wear his wooden clogs, which indicates that, at least at that moment, wooden clogs were his everyday footwear. Did Wang Xianzhi also wear wooden clogs? The original text does not say; but from the context, his dress is estimated to be similar to his brother's. Following the narrator's description, I even boldly conjecture: Wang Xianzhi not only wore wooden clogs, but also wore high-toothed wooden clogs. Why? The text says: "Wang Xianzhi was very calm, and slowly called his retinue to help him leave the fire site." Why would he need others to assist him? One possibility is that he had been drinking, or had taken some special medicine. But once he sensed the fire, he knew to escape, which basically rules out the possibility of him being unconscious. Another possibility is that, due to his attire being very special, he needed attendants to assist him.

In the Wei and Jin periods, scholars tended to wear garments that exuded an aura of the immortals, a style that, from the perspective of daily life, was not very convenient. But this "self-chosen trouble" was indeed the fashion trend of the time: from the Wei dynasty to the Jin dynasty, because society was relatively poor or because hierarchical norms could not be fully carried out, people dressed rather casually, and thus the Wei–Jin era formed a peculiar dress fashion. Some literati even scorned rank distinctions, deliberately wearing loose clothing and not grooming their hair (Shen & Wang, 2004, pp. 67–68). Wearing broad clothes and high-toothed wooden clogs would make walking very inconvenient without assistance, let alone running. Hence Wang Xianzhi needed to call his attendants to help him (Ning, 2022).

### **Wang Xianzhi, the One Who Wore High-Toothed Wooden Clogs**

Although Wang Xianzhi slightly surpassed Wang Huizhi, it is undeniable that the two brothers were both figures of considerable "elegant bearing" for their time. The following story comes from *Shishuo Xinyu Jian'ao*, with Wang Xianzhi himself as one of the protagonists. Among them, is "Wang Xianzhi's brother" Wang Huizhi? The original text does not explicitly say, but the possibility is fairly high. "Arrogance" and "elegance" are both elements of the Wei–Jin style. The original reads as follows:

Wang Xianzhi and his brother went to see their uncle; they wore very formal shoes and appeared very polite. After their cousin (that is, their uncle's son) died, they all switched to high-toothed wooden clogs, and their attitudes became very arrogant. Their uncle asked them to sit; they both said, 'Busy, no time.' After they left, their uncle lamented, 'If my son hadn't died, would they dare to behave like this!' (Liu et al., 2013, p. 511)

Zhu Bilian believes that Wang Xianzhi and his brother's attitudes reflect their "snobbery" (Liu et al., 2013, p. 512). I think this claim may be somewhat presumptuous. As is well known, it is difficult to judge relationships among relatives. In the story, Wang Xianzhi and his brother no longer show respect to their uncle, which certainly carries the suspicion of

“snobbery”, but we cannot rule out another possibility: they simply did not like their uncle to begin with. Since a cousin with a similar temperament had already died, there was little need for them to maintain a kinship that existed only in name. This interpretation seems to be more in line with the brothers’ character.

Additionally, this story also corroborates an important etiquette of the time: in more formal occasions, people were required to wear shoes of the *lǚ* (履) type; only in relatively casual settings could people wear the *jī* (屐) type. After their cousin’s death, Wang Xianzhi and his brothers brazenly switched to high-toothed wooden clogs to visit their uncle, and they even refused to stay at their uncle’s house. This behavior undoubtedly violated etiquette, so their uncle’s anger is easy to understand. But was the brothers’ conduct due to their temperament, or were there some other reasons? Based on the available materials, we cannot determine.

### **The Wooden Clogs as a Means to Express Attitudes Toward Official Service or Seclusion**

#### **Yu Liang Exhibits His Elegance on the South Tower**

Regarding the last two stories about wooden clogs, the involved figure is Yu Liang. The first story is found in *Rongzhi*, and its text reads as follows:

When Yu Liang was serving in Wuchang... Yu Liang’s subordinates gathered on the South Tower. Just as the music began to swell, a sound of wooden clogs could be heard from the stairs. Everyone guessed that Yu Liang had arrived. Not long thereafter, Yu Liang came forward with more than ten people; his subordinates rose to retreat, but Yu Liang slowly said: ‘Everyone, don’t hurry to leave; I am very interested in your activities.’ He then sat down and joined in the merriment with them. (Liu et al., 2013, p. 410)

In the above stories, Yu Liang’s appearance has a strong dramatic sense of “you hear the sound before you see the person”. And Yu Liang’s “sound” does not come from his words, but from his footsteps. Because wooden clogs are made from special materials, they have a distinctive feature: the sounds they produce can be high, low, slow, or rapid (Guo, 1990). When Yu Liang walked, the sound of the wooden clogs was loud and brisk, which suggested the owner’s vivid personality. And once people heard the clogs, they immediately guessed that the visitor must be Yu Liang, showing that Yu Liang’s subordinates were very familiar with this volume and rhythm of footsteps. In other words, Yu Liang regularly wore wooden clogs and walked in this way.

#### **Yu Liang Visits Hermits in Wooden Clogs**

The final story about wooden clogs comes from *Shishuo Xinyu Qiyi*. In this story, Yu Liang plays a supporting role, but if one considers Liu Xiaobiao’s annotations, the story is also related to wooden clogs. The original text is as follows:

Zhai Tang and Zhou Shao are a pair of friends who live in seclusion together in Xunyang. Yu Liang went to persuade them to come out to hold office; Zhou Shao eventually agreed, but Zhai Tang persisted in his decision. Later, Zhou Shao, in his official capacity, visited Zhai Tang, who refused to speak to him. (Liu et al., 2013, p. 437)

After the original text in *Shishuo Xinyu*, Liu Xiaobiao added one note:

At first, Yu Liang arrived at Jiangzhou, and, hearing that there was a recluse like Zhai Tang, he went dressed neatly and visited him wearing wooden clogs. Yu Liang's attitude was very respectful; Zhai Tang said, 'What you face is nothing but a wastrel.' Yu Liang highly admired his eloquence and recommended him to his superior. The superior invited Zhai Tang to participate in government service, but Zhai Tang refused to go. Zhang Xuan commented, 'This gentleman is like a dragon concealed within, who will not change his state.' Later, Zhai Tang died at his own home. (Liu et al., 2013, p. 438)

An interesting detail in Liu Xiaobiao's annotations: Yu Liang wanted to invite Zhai Tang to come out and take office, and his attitude was very humble. But why did he wear wooden clogs? According to ritual propriety, visiting important people in wooden clogs is impolite. In the earlier story, Wang Xianzhi and his brothers initially visited their maternal uncle wearing formal shoes. Could it be that, being in official circles, Yu Liang did not understand the basic social etiquette of the time? I suppose Yu Liang had anticipated the recluse's mindset, so he deliberately wore wooden clogs instead of formal footwear. He merely wanted to use the wooden clogs as a prop to move Zhai Tang to come out of seclusion, just as he had successfully persuaded Zhou Shao before. But Zhai Tang remained unmoved, insisting on seclusion until death, and never entered official service.

In another interesting detail about Yu Liang's visit to the recluse: Yu Liang wore formal shoes and persuaded Zhou Shao, but soon after he entered official service, Zhou Shao regretted his earlier decision. In Liu Xiaobiao's annotations, it is said:

Zhou Shao... lived in seclusion with Zhai Tang on Lushan. After Yu Liang arrived at Jiangzhou, hearing that there were two worthy men, Zhai Tang and Zhou Shao, he went to visit them dressed neatly in formal shoes. When Zhou Shao heard that Yu Liang had come, he hid. Yu Liang then visited frequently again, and on one occasion happened to encounter Zhou Shao in the forest, shooting birds, and he urged him again with his previous words. After returning, Yu Liang said: 'Zhou Shao can hold office.' Later, Zhou Shao was promoted to an official. (Liu et al., 2013, p. 600)

That is to say, Yu Liang did not manage to move Zhai Tang with wooden clogs, but he wore formal shoes, gradually approached Zhou Shao, and ended his seclusion. However, not long after, Zhou Shao regretted it. *Youhui* records the following story:

Yu Liang wanted to promote Zhou Shao, but Zhou Shao firmly refused. Each time he went to visit Zhou Shao, Zhou Shao would see Yu Liang and flee through the back gate. Once, Yu Liang visited unexpectedly; Zhou Shao could not escape, and the two sat face to face for a whole day. Yu Liang asked Zhou Shao to entertain him; Zhou Shao provided only very simple food. Yu Liang reluctantly ate but was very happy. They discussed current events together, and finally agreed to undertake a career together. Zhou Shao obtained an official post, but was not happy. One late night, he lamented: 'I have been betrayed by Yu Liang!' After this lament he fell ill and died. (Liu et al., 2013, p. 600)

Zhou Shao's ending is heartrending. From his last words, it seems he harbored deep resentment toward Yu Liang. But isn't ending his life of seclusion also a free-will choice?

My view may be accused of over-interpretation: the informal shoes (ji) and the formal shoes actually correspond to two life choices—seclusion and serving in officialdom. Zhou Shao still had political ambitions, which allowed Yu Liang to take advantage of him. Zhai Tang's commitment to seclusion was very firm; he even severed ties with old friends, but would never be swayed by Yu Liang wearing wooden clogs. Therefore, he could complete his life as a recluse. Zhang Xuan praised Zhai Tang as “a dragon hidden within”, which is a very apt compliment. In the Wei and Jin period, Zhang Xuan and Xie Xuan were equally renowned; people called them “Double Xuan”. How could such people lack discernment?

### Conclusion

In *Shishuo Xinyu*, wooden clogs play three roles. First, they are merely ordinary footwear. Second, they serve as a prop for Wei–Jin scholars to display their bearing. Third, wooden clogs also hint at whether their wearer harbors ambitions to participate in government. Of these three roles, the first carries little cultural connotation; the second is widely known; the third attracts relatively less attention. In the history of Chinese culture, wooden clogs are a very important symbol: they carry an intrinsic hermit-like nonconformist aura and reflect a scholar's attitude of not being bound by ritual propriety. From an archaeological perspective, the earliest wooden clogs in China were unearthed at the Liangzhu culture site; the most exquisite wooden clogs were found in the tomb of Zhu Ran—the Zhu Ran family is one of the “Four Great Clans of Jiangdong” mentioned in *Shishuo Xinyu*. In the Jin dynasty, as Chinese culture's aesthetic orientation shifted, wooden clogs entered their golden age. It is, however, somewhat regrettable that after the Sui-Tang empire was established, wooden clogs gradually became marginalized; by the Song dynasty they had finally degenerated into utilitarian shoes.

The development of wooden clogs in Japan and the popularity of wooden clogs in China happened to be “off-peak” relative to each other. Based on historical records of Sino-Japanese cultural exchange, wooden clogs and their culture were brought to Japan early by the envoys who accompanied the Sui and Tang dynasties, but in the Nara and Heian periods they did not spread widely in Japan. Modern people often mistake wooden clogs for a “Japanese characteristic footwear”, largely reflecting a stereotype of Edo-period Japan. I have another article, using an examination of artifacts, literature, and images, and conclude that the popularity of wooden clogs in Japan began roughly in the Kamakura period.

### Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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**Contact email:** [chunyaochun Yao@aliyun.com](mailto:chunyaochun Yao@aliyun.com)