

Introduction

Early medieval China, spanning the period from the last years of the Eastern, or Later Han dynasty (second century C.E.) to the early Tang in the seventh century, marks an era of profound change in Chinese history. The decline and eventual demise of the Han dynasty in 220 C.E. altered drastically the Chinese political and intellectual landscape. During the period of Wei-Jin Nanbeichao 魏晉南北朝 (Wei, Jin, and the Southern and Northern Dynasties, 220–589) that followed, leaving aside changes on the political front, new currents in aesthetics, ethics, hermeneutics, literature, and religion surged to the fore and left an indelible mark on the subsequent development of Chinese thought and culture. The nine essays gathered here explore from a variety of methodological perspectives the hermeneutic and literary world of early medieval China.

This book should be perused together with its companion, *Philosophy and Religion in Early Medieval China*, also published by SUNY Press (2010), which offers eleven studies on major issues in Wei-Jin *xuanxue* 玄學 (learning of the mysterious Dao), the widespread phenomenon of reclusion among the literati, conceptions of “destiny” (*ming* 命) and retribution, and aspects of religious Daoism and Buddhism. In the Introduction to that volume, we sketched a fuller background, including references to earlier studies and the usage of key terms such as “*xuanxue*” and “early medieval China” itself, which will not be repeated in these pages. What should be reiterated is that the division into two volumes reflects not only thematic interest but also a pragmatic decision. The project was conceived as a multidisciplinary venture. Scholarship does not grow well in insularity; our plan was to bring together in a single book fresh studies on early medieval Chinese philosophy, religion, literature and interpretation, not

only to deepen our understanding of these topics but also to open up a view of the interconnectedness of the early medieval Chinese intellectual enterprise. However, a single volume proved unworkable, given the constraints that publishers face. Still, some of the essays may fit just as nicely in this or in the companion volume. Mu-chou Poo's study here, for example, could be featured in the latter, for it addresses not only the literary but also the ethical and religious functions of ghosts in early medieval China. Victor Mair's chapter in the companion volume, on the early Chinese Buddhist interpretive method of *geyi* 格義, to take but one more example, certainly would not be out of place in this collection in view of its hermeneutical interest. In any event, the two volumes together should provide useful glimpses into the world of thought and culture in early medieval China, which in our view deserves greater attention than what is currently available in English.

Literature reflects the values and power relations that bind together men of letters, the principal (though, of course, not the only) inhabitants of the world of thought in early medieval China. The present volume opens with a fascinating account by David Knechtges of a little-known court "School"—the Hongdu Gate School, so called because it was located inside the Hongdu men 鴻都門 (Grand Capital Gate) of one of the imperial palaces—that came into prominence toward the end of the Han dynasty. There was fierce opposition to the School at the time, for it was seen to subvert the "orthodox" Confucian understanding of literature and also the regular processes of official appointment and promotion. Did the School reflect the interest of the eunuch faction at court? Knechtges takes issue with the common view that it did. The controversy over the Hongdu Gate School brings into view the changes in literati values that were taking shape at the end of the Eastern Han. These changes, as Knechtges also makes clear, have important implications for the development of literati culture during the Six Dynasties.

Obviously, cultural values do not grow in a vacuum. Whether in early China or in ancient Rome, the flourishing of literature was to a significant extent nurtured by patronage. The patron's interest and his relationship with client poets were decisive in shaping the development of literary values, tastes, and genres. This is the story that Jui-lung Su attempts to trace in his contribution to this volume.

Although imperial patronage for intellectual activities has a long history in China, only with the reign of Emperor Wu 武 of Han (r. 141–87 B.C.E.) as Su puts it, "did the Han imperial court become a magnet for men of literary talents" (p. 41). As such talent became increasingly prized, as evidenced, for example, in the rise of the Hongdu Gate

School, on which Su also touches. Imperial patronage under the Han also imposed greater demand on the literati. No longer were the literati free to move from one patron to another, nor were they valued for their political advice; rather, as Su argues, they became in effect attendants who were expected to entertain the emperor or to eulogize the Han Empire. The patterns of literary patronage, however, changed significantly during the Wei dynasty (220–265), not the least because the leaders of the ruling house of Cao—Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220), Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226), and Cao Zhi 曹植 (192–232)—were themselves brilliant poets. Their own literary preference and accomplishment came to set the stage for the subsequent development of Chinese literature, especially pentasyllabic poetry.

The *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*), the landmark study of literature and interpretation in the Six Dynasties, forms the focus of Zong-qi Cai's study. The art of interpretation requires careful "observation" (*guan* 觀), which moves from the literary surface to the perceived deeper meaning of a text. The concept of *guan* is pivotal to traditional Chinese literary criticism. It also plays an important role in Chinese political philosophy, especially in connection with the assessment of human character for public office. What Cai does is to trace the earlier meanings and practices of *guan* in such works as the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳, *Mengzi* 孟子, and the third-century work *Renwu zhi* 人物志 (*An Account of Human Capacities*) by Liu Shao 劉邵 to show how Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 465–ca. 532), author of the *Wenxin diaolong*, developed the concept to include the affective dimension of literary creation as well as what modern critics would call "reception" theory. This is a richly documented paper, which should set a new benchmark for studies in early medieval Chinese hermeneutics.

The *Shuijing zhu* 水經注 (*River Classic Commentary*) by Li Daoyuan 酈道元 (d. 527) is one of the most important but neglected sources to an understanding of early medieval China. Far from being an "objective" historical geography of the Chinese world, as Michael Nylan demonstrates in her study, a poignant sense of nostalgia for unity permeates the work: "Even when there is 'nothing to see,'" as Nylan observes, "Li Daoyuan makes us 'see' the absence as part of the landscape" (p. 68), invoking "an empire of memory" (p. 63) that looks to the distant past for traces of hope and promise for the future.

Li Daoyuan's hermeneutic imagination stands out even more sharply when one compares the *Shuijing zhu* with two other works of the same genre, namely Chang Qu's 常璩 (fl. 265–316) *Huayang guozhi* 華陽國志 (*Gazetteer for the Region South of the Huayang Mountains*), which also has not been adequately examined in the current literature, and Yang

Xuanzhi's 楊銜之 mid-sixth century work, *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記 (*A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*). Whereas the *Huayang guozhi* celebrates the land, people, and customs of the Ba-Shu 巴蜀 region (modern Sichuan), the *Luoyang qielan ji* delights in praising the elite and the landmarks of the Capital. Neither displays any intimation of loss or interest in reconstructing a unified past. Perhaps the different historical contexts in which these works were written account for the divergence, but the more important point remains that a distinct hermeneutic frames each of these three "histories," which in different ways contribute to later constructions of the "Central States" (*zhongguo* 中國) and the "world under Heaven" (*tianxia* 天下). Nylan's nuanced analysis will compel us to look at Chinese historical/geographical writings with fresh critical eyes.

Like Cai and Nylan, Robert Campany is equally sensitive to the hermeneutic interests that drive the world of early medieval Chinese literature. How the authors present their material to their intended audience and how the audience receives that material can hardly be divorced from the process of literary invention. Focusing on such hagiographic sources as the *Liexian zhuan* 列仙傳 (*Arrayed Traditions of Transcendents*) and *Shenxian zhuan* 神仙傳 (*Traditions of Divine Transcendents*), Campany shows how the *practice* of the quest for transcendence proves inseparable from the *story* of transcendence-seekers. Further, though the latter revolves around the adept himself or herself, it is rooted in a community of readers with specific interests and expectations. The self-understanding and self-presentation of the adept as reflected in the extant hagiographic collections are thus socially negotiated and constructed. This is methodologically significant, offering a fuller view of Chinese religion through narrative structure and function.

The last four papers in this volume seek to illuminate specific aspects of early medieval Chinese literature, especially religious writings and the genre of *zhiguai* 志怪, records of strange or "anomalous" phenomena. Timothy Chan traces the history of the motif of celestial flight, focusing on the metaphor of "jade flower" (*yuhua* 玉華) in early Daoist scriptures. Chan negotiates through a formidable body of texts to demonstrate the multiple meanings of the term, which propels once more to the fore the complex relationship between literature and religion. With the rise of religious Daoism, "jade flower" came to embrace a range of new and often cryptic meanings, including low-ranking transcendent beings guarding Daoist scriptures, attendant divine maidens who guide and protect Daoist adepts, a person's forehead, and the radiance that exudes from those who have attained transcendence. These impacted significantly on the description of spiritual flight in both religious and secular writings.

The impact of Buddhism on the Chinese literary scene is equally strong. During the Liang dynasty (502–557), poetry that depicts visits to Buddhist temples began to make its presence felt, thanks in no small measure to the imperial leadership and patronage of Emperor Wu of Liang 梁武帝 (r. 502–549) and his two sons. Temple visits, of course, signal religious devotion, and “temple-visit poetry” became an avenue to express the poet’s spiritual journey. The arrival of Buddhism significantly transformed the Chinese spiritual landscape; yet, as Cynthia Chennault shows in her masterful analysis, the poetic construction of “Buddhist landscapes” also underwent a subtle change during that time, increasingly becoming more introspective as the early medieval period drew to a close. Whereas the earlier lyrics tended to focus on the magical splendor and auspicious features of temple buildings and their environs, later temple-visit poetry reflects the poet’s deepening awareness of impermanence and the workings of karma, which transformed his perception and interpretation of place and the phenomenal world at large.

No less rich in meaning than “jade flower” is the figure of the fox in Chinese literature. Daniel Hsieh traces the origins and evolution of the fox spirit in *zhiguai* stories of the Six Dynasties. Like Timothy Chan, Hsieh not only marshals an impressive array of evidence but also explores the interstices between ethics, religion, and literature. Although the figure of the fox may appear unsavory or sinister to the modern popular imagination, its role in traditional China is more complex. Though there were distinct foxes, the composite fox of early medieval China, not unlike the “trickster” in other traditions, Hsieh argues, was an “in-between creature” (p. 225), a “liminal” being (p. 244) capable of trickery who could also rise above its “animal nature to take human form” and even attain “transcendence and immortality” (p. 226). From this perspective, fox stories from the Six Dynasties betray the doubts and hopes of the literati in confronting their desires and aspirations.

Finally, the volume concludes with an essay by Mu-chou Poo on the role of ghosts—another type of “liminal” figure—in early medieval Chinese literature. Stories about ghosts in the pre-Qin period consistently depict them as being fearsome and vengeful; during the Six Dynasties, however, like the fox, ghosts assumed a range of complex roles, interacting in various ways with the living. Ghost stories, as Poo shows, provided a vehicle for Six Dynasties *zhiguai* writers to articulate their views and voice their concerns about justice and morality, sometimes with a good dose of humor. Like the fox stories, the tales of ghosts serve as a prism that refracts the fears and hopes of the literati, their attitude toward life and death, and ghosts and spirits, and above all their sense of self and

place in an uncertain world. Poo's study complements those of Zong-qi Cai, Michael Nylan, and Robert Campany especially in its attention to authorial intention and readership, and the relationship between literature, religion, and society. It may also be compared with the study by Chi-tim Lai on the management of divine justice in early Celestial Master Daoism (Tianshi dao 天師道) in the companion volume.

Although the nine studies presented here deal with different topics, they stand together in bringing out the forces of transformation that engulfed the world of literature and interpretation in early medieval China. As the studies by Su and Knechtges demonstrate, changes in the patterns of literary patronage and literati values helped refashion literary interests and modes of expression. During the Wei-Jin Nanbeichao period, discussions of literature and interpretation made a justly celebrated entrance into Chinese culture, which reflects a heightened self-consciousness on the part of the literati. New sensibilities began to inform the literary heart-mind, be they of religious Daoist or Buddhist provenance, or reflecting a deep longing for an imagined unified past. One-dimensional figures of old such as the fox and ghosts took on new personae, as the intellectual and cultural landscape grew in complexity and openness.

Early medieval China, of course, is often described as a period of transition, a time of change and renewal that laid the foundation for the efflorescence of medieval China reunified under the Sui and Tang. It is generally recognized that new developments on virtually all intellectual fronts took shape during the period of "disunity." New philosophical and literary ventures challenged long-established norms. Li Daoyuan's innovation to the commentarial form is a good case in point—its personal, romantic lyricism departs radically not only from the scholastic *zhangju* 章句 interpretation favored by earlier Han scholars but also the "philosophical" *yili* 義理 approach of Wei-Jin thinkers such as Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) and Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312), the subject of several essays in the companion volume. Discourse on literature and new poetic forms such as landscape poetry equally testify to the profound changes that emerged, many of which were deeply influenced by the rise of religious Daoism and Buddhism. These are but examples. The essays presented here address some of these new currents; but perhaps more important, they also draw attention to the social and hermeneutic undercurrents that direct change on the intellectual stage. In reconstructing the space in which meaningful communication is performed and in scrutinizing the relationship between performer and audience in the production of meaning, they yield a richer understanding of the world of thought in early medieval China.

As in the companion volume, no attempt has been made to standardize the translation of Chinese terms. For example, “*guan*” 觀 is rendered “observe” or “observation” in Zong-qi Cai’s study but “contemplation” in Chennault’s. Contextual considerations may result in different translations, and different authors may read the same term in different ways. Far from being a problem that requires fixing, this is an advantage that collaborative ventures enjoy, for the different considered readings invite deeper reflection on the subject. Chinese characters are provided for important terms and extended quotations, so that the reader can engage the primary sources directly. Transliterations are omitted generally for phrases that exceed four characters. The Chinese texts cited are punctuated in the way the authors understand them. All Chinese terms are given in *Hanyu pinyin*, except for the names of some authors who publish in English (e.g., Wing-tsit Chan), titles of books and articles, and some proper names (e.g., Taipei, Yangtze). Wade-Giles transliterations are also kept in quotations, to preserve the integrity of the original.

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