

a report on this on my weblog, see <https://digitalorientalist.com/category/coding/>). I found that only very few things are left unexplained—for example, what the expression $r'w+$ on p. 212 means, which I had to find out for myself. I also discovered that just as there is an *open* command for opening a text file, there is also a *close* command, but this is not used in the chapter, leaving me in doubt whether to use it or not. Nonetheless, this chapter was informative enough that I was able to take my own code even beyond what Haro Peralta and Verkinderen offer, leading me to think that this chapter makes a great start for anyone interested in using computing technology to manipulate large texts.

Chapter ten takes us into the classroom. Joel Blecher details his experience of using an English translation of a biographical dictionary of early hadith transmitters with about 500 entries in an undergraduate course. “Practically,” Blecher writes, “[the course] meant students undertook close readings of primary sources and critical review of secondary literature while also mining data, creating a database, and using online visualization software” (p. 233). Each student extracted relevant information from the dictionary into a web form that parsed it to a spreadsheet. Blecher reports on the challenges of such a project, most notably the need to comb through the data anew and clean everything up to make it more uniform and suitable for a computer to read. He then shows some different visualizations that his students came up with, using RAW and Palladio.

The last chapter, by Dwight Reynolds, returns to a more theoretical reflection, namely, how we can disseminate our knowledge, both to the general public and to future generations of scholars. The main point Reynolds wishes to make is that “we must constantly be planning for obsolescence and technological change” (p. 265). The most important recommendations he makes in this regard is to store our data in several different formats and to get institutions to commit not only to host our data now but also to maintain it.

This book offers a solid introduction to the application of computing technology in Islamic Studies. Two recurrent themes are that many things called “Digital Humanities” can be accomplished with software that we already use or is easy to operate, and DH is not the solution to everything. As Dwight Reynolds notes, if we are not careful “we are essentially producing highly sophisticated searches of poor quality data” (p. 253); and as Till Grallert explains, this is chiefly because quantification of cultural history “generates a dangerous sense of exactitude that obfuscates the inherent fuzziness” (p. 196).

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Literati Storytelling in Late Medieval China. By MANLING LUO. Seattle: UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PRESS, 2015. Pp. xvi + 242. \$50.

The last half of the Tang Dynasty was one of the great turning points in Chinese history. The transition to the Song saw a reconfiguration of the elite, as success on the imperial examinations replaced aristocratic pedigree to become the primary criterion for government service. The great clans lost their centuries-old monopoly on power and prestige, and in their place arose the literati: scholar-statesmen from diverse backgrounds whose collective identity was defined by education, examination success, and office-holding. How did this literati class, whose dominance would endure to the end of the imperial era, conceive of itself and the world around it during the period of its ascendancy? What were the pressing concerns, desires, and anxieties of late medieval men of letters?

These are among the important questions addressed by *Literati Storytelling in Late Medieval China*, Manling Luo’s original and insightful new study of late Tang narratives. Researchers from across the humanities and sciences have long stressed the crucial role of narratives in the construction of personal and communal identities. To a large extent, the stories we tell about ourselves shape who we think we are, and reveal the kinds of people we would like to be. This understanding of narrative’s psychological and social functions may help explain the proliferation of stories during the late Tang, when “tales of the marvelous” (*chuanqi*), historical anecdotes, narrative poems, and “transformation texts” (*bianwen*) were produced and consumed in unprecedented quantities. Late Tang literati were not only great poets;

they were avid and gifted storytellers, as befitted a group seeking to understand and negotiate its place in a changing world.

Literati Storytelling takes an innovative, hybrid approach to this vast and heterogeneous corpus. First and foremost, it brings together kinds of texts that have traditionally been treated separately, as either historical documents or works of imaginative literature. Such a division has been problematic for a number of reasons, not least because it is such a modern one. Recognizing the need to account for both fictive *and* documentary aspects of Tang narratives, Luo approaches them as forms of a single social practice. This is storytelling, which she defines as “the literati tradition of sharing accounts about characters and events of the past in casual conversations, as well as the gathering and transmitting of such narratives in writing” (p. 5). Tracing their discrepant treatments of recurrent themes in a series of perceptive and historically informed close readings, the study reveals how late medieval literati grappled with the problems that mattered most to them. In the process, it tells a larger story about storytelling’s social function—how it “enabled late medieval scholar-officials to create communal discourses for defining themselves in response to the new reality of literati life” (p. 5).

The book is tightly organized, with each of its four chapters examining a key focal point of literati anxiety and desire, and each chapter section exploring a distinct iteration of the main theme. The first chapter, “Sovereignty,” reads stories about Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756) and his tragic love affair as venues for reimagining royal authority in the post-An Lushan period. Xuanzong was an ambivalent figure for late Tang writers—both the model ruler of a golden age and the debauched libertine who lost his kingdom for a beautiful woman. The most famous version of his tale is Bai Juyi’s (742–846) “Song of Lasting Pain” and the accompanying prose account by Chen Hong (*jinsi* 805). The chapter begins with a stimulating reading of these pieces that argues that their image of Xuanzong as romantic hero should be understood as an effort to salvage his reputation at a time when his grandson, Xianzong (r. 805–820), was presiding over a brief restoration of central power. To this end, these tales make Xuanzong an exemplar of the romantic spirit that was increasingly important to literati self-definition (the subject of the book’s third chapter). Most importantly, the study shows that “Song of Lasting Pain” was an instance of a larger phenomenon of literati identification with Xuanzong, examples of which range from offhand mock-comparisons in poetry to the voyeuristic virtual enjoyment of Consort Yang through her fetishized personal effects. This imagined “cultural intimacy” (p. 26) with the ruler, Luo argues, bespeaks the confidence of late Tang literati in their own political prospects.

The following three sections explore differing approaches, in a variety of genres, to Xuanzong as a figure of sovereignty. Section two compares three collections of anecdotes—*Ci Liu shi jiuwen* by Li Deyu (787–849), *Minghuang zalu* by Zheng Chuhui (d. 867), and *Kaiyuan Tianbao yishi* by Wang Renyu (880–956)—all of which foreground Xuanzong’s “political intimacy” (p. 34) with his officials as the determining factor in his rise and fall. The favored intimates differ in each case: for Li Deyu it is great statesmen; for Zheng Chuhui, gifted writers; and for Wang Renyu, Hanlin academicians (who, as Luo observes, embody a fusion of literature and politics). The study convincingly connects these preferences to the biographies of the compilers, suggesting they functioned as forms of self-promotion. The stories discussed in the following section (a prose account and two long poems) tell of a golden age under Xuanzong and provide explanations for its disappearance, all from the perspective of an aged survivor of the Kaiyuan-Tianbao reign periods. Speaking through the figure of the old man, Luo argues, the authors can avoid direct criticism of their rulers, while positioning themselves as privileged interpreters of historical patterns. The final section turns to a “transformation text” recovered from Dunhuang, “The Story of Ye Jingneng,” in which Xuanzong lavishes favor on a Daoist adept, who then cuckolds him and flees the mortal world. By emphasizing the ruler’s impotence in the face of the eponymous hero, literati could imagine the limits of sovereign power and its susceptibility to satire or refusal. The first chapter thus shows how literati storytellers treated Xuanzong as a “flexible emblem” (p. 42)—lover, patron, representative of a golden age, and vulnerable mortal—through which they explored possible (and possibly subversive) relations to royal authority.

Late medieval scholars were equally concerned with power dynamics within their own group, which they delineated in stories about officials from the past, the subject of chapter two. More specifically, the chapter investigates “modes of literati sociality” (p. 60) disclosed by stories preserved in four historical miscellanies. What were the particular virtues or practices that held together past

literati communities? As Luo demonstrates, each collection offers a different answer to this question. According to Liu Su (fl. 806–820), compiler of the *New Tales of the Great Tang*, moral conduct, objectively judged, was the fundamental connective tissue. By contrast, in Zhao Lin's (ca. 802–ca. 872) *Records Prompted by Conversations*, it was the prestige earned through official rank. This differs from the vision of Fan Shu (fl. 875–888), whose *Master Cloud Creek's Discussions with Friends* privileges poetry as a community-forming practice that transcends officialdom. Finally, Wang Dingbao (870–940), in his *Collected Words*, elevates examination culture above all else. These distinct modes of sociality all accord with the backgrounds and life circumstances of the compilers, who, the study argues, represented distinct subgroups within the larger literati community: lower-born scholars (Liu Su), great clans (Zhao Lin), non-officeholders (Fan Shu), and examination participants (Wang Dingbao). The chapter thus reveals four competing constructions of the past, each of which aims to define the basis of the present community in transition, and all of which share an optimism concerning the direction of the transition itself.

Post-rebellion literati showed an unprecedented interest in extra-marital affairs, which figure centrally in some of the most famous Tang narratives and are the subject of chapter three. Pieces like “The Story of Li Wa,” “The Story of Huo Xiaoyu,” and “The Story of Yingying” will be familiar to most readers of Tang literature. They have been the subjects of important studies (by Stephen Owen, Paul Rouzer, and others), which have explored ways in which a new “culture of romance” (Owen) challenged the patriarchal order with new valuations of voluntary love. By comparing these pieces with a wide selection of less-discussed stories on the same theme, *Literati Storytelling* produces important new interpretations that stress the limits of subversion in Tang romance. Yes, the stories often portray romance as a destabilizing and potentially destructive force; and yet most often it is treated as a temporary diversion leading back to the patriarchal status quo, which it thereby affirms and reinforces. A clear example is provided by stories about a young literatus running off with a woman from an older colleague's household. Despite the challenge to his authority, the senior comes around in the end, forgiving the transgression and granting the junior his sexual trophy. Another example is found in tales of adulterous women like “The Story of Hejian” and “The Story of Feng Yan,” through which literati bonded around a shared fear of female sexual freedom and around “collective, continuous efforts to exorcise the threat, literally and textually” (p. 122). The same pattern structures “The Story of Li Wa,” in which the courtesan's success at rehabilitating the young hero, beaten and forsaken by his father, “demonstrates that only by incorporating romance into the patriarchal family can its patrimony be secured” (p. 112).

A pattern of “subversion and submission” is thus revealed that provides the background for a brilliant reading of “The Story of Yingying,” with which the third chapter concludes. The famous complexity of this tale results, the study argues, from its exploration of the “gender-specific struggles of coming to terms with the immorality of romance” (p. 128). For Zhang, the male protagonist, romance is socially sanctioned as a formative step in male personal development. Not so for Yingying, an unwed girl from a good family, whose affair with Zhang can only lead to scandal and stigmatization if it is not promptly “normalized.” Zhang ostensibly knows this. So it is difficult to understand why he not only refuses to marry the woman he so ardently pursued, but breaks off the relationship and gossips about it with his friends. However, Luo's broad perspective shows that Zhang's behavior actually accords quite well with the norms of Tang romance, understood as a pattern of subversion and submission. Zhang treats the romance as a phase he has grown out of, leaving Yingying for a “proper” arranged marriage, and criticizing the liaison as youthful folly. The study also provides compelling explanations of a number of the story's other most puzzling points. Why, for example, does Zhang divulge Yingying's letters, centerpieces of the story that testify so eloquently to her plight and his callousness? Luo argues convincingly that their function is to “authenticate” the account, thereby validating an unseemly topic as a potential source of moral lessons, as well as aesthetic pleasure. But perhaps most confounding of all is Yingying herself, especially her abrupt and unexplained decision to sleep with Zhang, after having excoriated him in the preceding scene for his improper advances. Rather than offering a psychological interpretation, Luo presents the sudden about-face as a symptom of the social contradiction Yingying embodies. Both virtuous and romantic, she can find no place within conventional storylines, in which the two qualities are implacably opposed. Her decision to sleep with Zhang therefore has to appear as a transformation rather than a transition; it can only come out of nowhere.

The fourth and final chapter turns from sexuality to the supernatural, investigating how post-rebellion literati conceived of themselves in relation to the larger cosmos. Stories of strange events, the chapter argues, allowed scholar-officials to imagine the limits of the social system in which their lives were embedded, and “the possibility and impossibility of moving beyond” (p. 136). In tales about fate and the inevitable coming-to-pass of prognostications, the ups and downs of official careers are attributed to cosmic law. This would have provided needful consolation to men whose fortunes in fact depended on powerful and potentially capricious social superiors. It also encouraged submission to “officialdom qua fate” (p. 143) by allowing for the possibility of limited mobility within the system on the basis of insider knowledge and social connections. Such mobility is the focus of return-from-death stories, which are particularly interested in skillful negotiations with the underworld bureaucracy. Literati protagonists ingratiate themselves with infernal judges—the equivalents, Luo points out, of “social seniors”—by identifying shared antagonists and offering valuable services. Bonding and bribery are winning strategies: the judge makes an exception and the hero returns to the land of the living.

A different kind of mobility is imagined in tales about literati who decide (or decline) to “leave the world” and become immortals. What is perhaps most striking, at least among the examples Luo discusses, is how “they reproduce the hierarchy of officialdom in the world beyond” (p. 161), and how this winds up valorizing worldly success. We are introduced to “winners” in the earthly system who forego the option of immortality; more surprising, however, is the example of Bai Youqiu, a failed examinee who reaches the realm of the undying only to be offered the job of a janitor (he pleads homesickness and departs). However, if leaving the world was not a way to improve one’s social station, it could allow for the fulfillment of other wishes (noble marriage, for example). More generally, Luo concludes, it was “a means of achieving flexible mobility and control over [one’s] destiny” (p. 163), though one might also see it as a rejection of alternatives to officialdom as the literati’s one true home. Something similar could be said of the dream stories treated in the chapter’s final section, in which the heroes live out ideal bureaucratic careers, only to awaken and recognize they were illusions. Specifically, in “The World Inside a Pillow” by Shen Jiji (c. 750–c. 800) and “The Governor of the Southern Branch” by Li Gongzuo (fl. 797–818), the dream worlds appear as miniature or compressed versions of the real. The effect, Luo argues, is to call attention to the artificiality and relativity of ordinary perceptions of time and space, and thereby to afford a kind of demystifying “epistemic mobility” (p. 163). However, like the travels to immortal realms, such mental movement has clearly defined limits. “Epistemic mobility after all does not entail any real change of reality but a better acquiescence to it” (p. 170). The chapter’s analyses thus suggest that late Tang literati imagined the possibility of seeing officialdom from various perspectives, of knowing it and skillfully navigating it, but not of “moving beyond” in the sense of envisioning alternatives to its constraints. In the end, for the authors of these stories at least, officialdom was destiny.

The four chapters of *Literati Storytelling* thus elucidate various ways in which late Tang literati imagined sovereignty, sociality, sexuality, and the cosmos as key domains of a relationally defined collective identity. The study demonstrates both the diversity of approaches to these “significant others” and their centrality across a wide range of narrative sources. It concludes that late Tang scholar officials were generally optimistic about their relations to the emperor and to each other, thus identifying with the system of officialdom that was coming to define, if not to dominate, their lives. The realms of sexuality and the cosmos, by contrast, allowed them to imagine ways of negotiating and even, to a very limited extent, challenging social constraints. From these findings the study draws the broader conclusion that, considered in relation to the larger socio-political context of the Tang-Song transition, late Tang narratives should be seen as constituting a “myth of empowerment” for a rising literati class. That is, they helped scholar-officials accommodate themselves to the emergent reality of an officialdom-centered existence, encouraging them to “buy into” a future that was hovering on the horizon. This is an important argument, based on careful interpretation of a large quantity of evidence; it is one that future studies of late Tang literature and history will need to take into account.

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