

Eremitist proponents of Mysterious Learning, invoking relativistic and socially egalitarian rhetoric to be found in the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, adduced the kinds of pretensions embodied in a system such as the “Nine Grade” as justification to avoid the irredeemably corrupt aristocratic society at court. In the face of such challenges, “discovering” a taxonomy like that of the *Zhonghuangzi* in a text attributed to a disciple of Laozi demonstrated that the author of the Great Mystery himself could not have shared the scruples of eremitist polemicists. In other words, the received *Wenzi* “proves” that the *Laozi* cannot be used to denounce the very concept of social hierarchy on principle, a message that would have been very useful to political leaders throughout the medieval era.

This observation is less a criticism of Paul van Els’s monograph than a suggested avenue of study from the point of departure that he provides. As van Els aptly demonstrates, the received *Wenzi* is an early medieval source, and should be placed within that context to facilitate maximally fertile and instructive interpretation. By working through the extraordinarily complex text-historical and philological challenges that the *Wenzi* presents, van Els has provided newly broadened vistas that he and other investigators may fruitfully explore in the study of this valuable and intriguing text.

ANDREW MEYER
CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK, BROOKLYN COLLEGE

The Halberd at Red Cliff: Jian’an and the Three Kingdoms. By XIAOFEI TIAN. Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series, vol. 108. Cambridge, MA: HARVARD UNIVERSITY ASIA CENTER, HARVARD UNIVERSITY, 2018. Pp. xvi + 454. \$49.95.

The title of this book makes us expect a study of key events of early medieval Chinese history; and to a certain extent, this is what the book contains in its pages. But once we open it, we find that this is not only a book about the past; it is also about the present: it shows how early medieval materials, through their multiple metamorphoses, have shaped and keep on shaping historical imagination in China. These studies on famous third-century literary topics indeed transgress the arbitrary chronological divisions that historians often impose onto their objects. In principle, the book deals with Jian’an (196–220), the last reign era of the Han dynasty, and with the Three Kingdoms (220–280), the period that formally started after the fall of the Han dynasty; but instead of tying its analysis to this time framework, the book focuses on some of the fragmentary memories that these periods left to posterity: the Bronze Bird Terrace, where Cao Cao’s concubines and entertainers were to be lodged after the death of their lord; the Seven Masters of Jian’an, a group that encompassed the most important literary figures of the early third century; and the battle of the Red Cliff, which marked the beginning of the Three Kingdoms era. “We can only get to know the past in remnants,” claims the author; “and even when we hold an authentic physical object in our hands, tangible as it is, we recognize that it, too, needs a human voice to give it an identity and a story, to articulate what it is, and from whence and where it came” (p. 345). *The Halberd at the Red Cliff* thus follows these remnants in their full chronological scale—and that scale is Chinese history from the third century until today.

Although the early medieval “remnants” that Tian chose for her book are well-known literary topics of the Jian’an era and the Three Kingdoms, widely present in poetry, storytelling, and visual representations, she warns the reader that her focus is not “literary history.” Her focus is community making. From the third century until today, she claims, “the question remains the same, namely, how to construct a community through writing and reading” (p. 8). “Literary” and “artistic” materials indeed have a particular status in Chinese history. In Tian’s learned analyses of literati poetry during the whole imperial period, the reader will be able to see that “aesthetic questions” never remained locked within the boundaries of “literature” and “art.” To understand this, we should bear in mind the social conditions of poetic writing in imperial times: on the one hand, poetry was part of what is called “social aesthetics,” because it displayed the social value of the person who was able to compose a poem; on the other hand, since poetry was a major means of literati communication, its role in shaping the historical

and social imagination of the literati was comparable to that of historiography and other genres. That is why poetry was so embedded in community making among literati, and this book amply illustrates this. As for the contemporary uses of the Jian'an and the Three Kingdoms materials, Tian mostly focuses on cinema and TV, which have a strong impact on contemporary imagination, and on fan fiction, which has developed to a considerable extent in the digital age. In this sense, she has not chosen her materials in a random way. On the contrary: for the imperial period, she picked the genres that could potentially reach the imperial elites, and for the contemporary period, she took the genres that have an impact on massive audiences. These old and new genres, with their images, metaphors, and characters, have created through aesthetic means representations of both history and society, and in this sense, they have played an important role in shaping social life.

In Tian's own words, the general purpose of this book is to "break down" the "artificial segregation" of two different sets of meanings. The first set revolves around the term "Jian'an," which today mostly brings to mind a period of literary splendor: it is the time of the "Seven Masters" and the poets who surrounded the Cao family. The second set revolves around the term "Three Kingdoms": unlike "Jian'an," the "Three Kingdoms" are associated with martial episodes and epic legends from the three polities—Wei, Shu, and Wu—that emerged out of the ruins of the Han. If I had to put it in the terms of historical epistemology, I would say that Tian deals with "colligatory terms:" that is, she traces the history of those words or expressions that colligate otherwise disparate pieces of evidence, put them under a single concept, and turn them into a tool of historiographical narrative. (William H. Walsh seems to have been the first to use the term "colligation"—taken from William Whewell—in this sense; see Walsh, *Philosophy of History: An Introduction* [New York: Harper, 1958], 22–24 and 59–64.) "Jian'an" and "Three Kingdoms," just like "Enlightenment" or "Renaissance," are prototypical colligatory terms: they put past people and events under a single conceptual umbrella and serve as established figures to organize narratives about the past. So how did these colligations—in Tian's words: "sets of associations"—change their meaning in their long-term history and how did they shape discourses about the past? To answer this question, the book delves into their history from the late Han dynasty onwards.

The book contains three parts, an epilogue, and three appendixes. The first part deals with the transformation of Jian'an into a "literary" era. In the first chapter, Tian identifies three key moments in this transformation process: in a first moment, Cao Pi, the first emperor of Wei, set out to define the so-called Seven Masters as a group—once all of them had died after the 217 plague; in a second moment, Xie Lingyun (385–433), one of the most famous early medieval poets, lent his own voice to the poets of the group; and in a third moment, the group was canonized by the *Selections of Refined Literature*—an anthology of the early sixth century—and was finally turned into a symbol of conviviality and fraternity. In her analysis, Tian shows that the Jian'an imaginary was neither an invention of later times nor the inevitable fate of a talented group: the topos started with its own protagonists and its meaning was negotiated across places and times. The second chapter focuses on the social meaning of writing in the early medieval period. With a historico-anthropological approach, she shows how poetry and letters created and recreated the hierarchical personal dependencies that formed early medieval communities. Poetry did not rely on "literary groups" in the modern sense (as they are often portrayed in Chinese literary history); on the contrary, just like other "aesthetic" genres, poetry was involved in community making and status differentiation. Feasts and banquets become key moments to establish or enact the relations between guest and host and, more generally, between patron and client; discussions on taste impose boundaries between insiders and outsiders; gifts and letters, like other forms of exchange, are the means through which lord and vassal reproduce their mutual dependency. This is a central issue: if we want to understand the meaning and uses of writing in the early medieval period and beyond, we should consider these relations as the context in which written performances take meaning.

The two chapters on the Bronze Bird Terrace, which Cao Cao had constructed in the city of Ye, are particularly rich and help us understand the changing perceptions of both time and space until the Song dynasty (960–1279). Chapter three shows that changes in the perception of time are intimately related to spatial mobility. Cao Cao and his sons Pi and Zhi celebrated the Bronze Bird Terrace and turned this place into an influential "textual site." Later on, the brothers Lu Ji and Lu Yun, two members of the Southern aristocracy, left a deep mark on the perceptions and meanings of this site in post-Han history.

This was especially the case for Lu Ji (261–303). As someone who had lived in the fragmented political world of the Three Kingdoms and who had come to the North as a foreigner after the Jin dynasty conquered the South, Lu Ji developed a poetry of a unified empire where everyone shared the same lord. He conveyed in his writings a feeling of both estrangement and admiration of the North; he confronted the “material city” of Luoyang, which he described from his foreign perspective, against the “literary city” that he knew from the poetic and historical tradition (pp. 167–72). In this context, he portrayed the Bronze Bird Terrace—where Cao Cao’s concubines would spend their time emptily gazing at their dead lord’s grave—as the spatial embodiment of the “foolishness of human desires and the pathos of mortality” (p. 175). The “spatial imagination” of Lu Ji thus set the agenda for the subsequent history of the Bronze Bird Terrace and its city, Ye. During the fourth century, Ye became a major city or even the capital of the Jie and Xianbei empires; it was destroyed and rebuilt many times, and the Bird Bronze Terrace ran the same fate. But despite the repeated recreations of the material city under non-Han rule, the “literary Ye” perpetuated by the Southern perspective kept on shaping the literati imagination well beyond early medieval times: Ye was the Bronze Bird Terrace, it was Cao Cao, his sons, and the Seven Masters. After a period in the late Tang (618–907), in which this surviving “literary city” was recast in a negative light, Ye started becoming the object of antiquarianism and connoisseurship; tiles of the Bronze Bird Terrace, whether fake or not, were often turned into inkstones and were revered as curiosities. By then, Ye and the Bronze Bird Terrace had become entangled with the detached attitude that the Song literati adopted toward the pre-Tang traditions.

The last part of the book consists of a single chapter dedicated to the Red Cliff. It starts with a poem written by Du Mu (803–852) which brings together the Bronze Bird Terrace with the Red Cliff battle and represents a dividing line: “if prior to its composition Bronze Bird had been a main theme in the literary representation of the Three Kingdoms, then the Red Cliff had ever since dominated the Three Kingdoms imaginary, down to the present day” (p. 283). The first line of the poem contains the image that gives the book its title: the “broken halberd.” The image of the broken halberd ties the two traditions to the poem: the martial and the literary, “Jian’an” and the “Three Kingdoms.” The “Red Cliff” became from then on the “textual site” of these entangled traditions. The chapter moves from ninth-century “poems on history” (*yongshi shi*) to Su Shi’s (1037–1101) recasting of the “Red Cliff” topos in two rhapsodies and one song lyric; then it reviews Su Shi’s successors, analyzes the fourteenth-century *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and ends with an analysis of John Woo’s film *Red Cliff* and the TV series *Three Kingdoms*. Cao Cao’s famous “Short song” (Duange xing) is the red thread that displays the entanglement of the literary and the martial traditions.

The book ends with an epilogue that deals with the “return of the repressed”: that is, it analyzes how women become foregrounded in the modern Three Kingdoms imaginary. Indeed, despite the fact that elite women played a key role in early medieval politics, the martial legends and literary representations of the Three Kingdoms refer to them only allusively. They have only become key characters in modern times. The author therefore analyzes two cases of an inversion of the gender perspectives: an anonymous Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) *zaju* play, *A Duel of Wits across the River*, which gives a prominent role to the female perspective through the figure of Lady Sun, and online fanfic representations of homoerotic writing by largely female communities. In both cases, and especially in the second case, the author shows the complex relation with the largely male-centered traditions of the Three Kingdoms: “the return of the repressed female presence as seen in Three Kingdoms slash [i.e., fanfic homoerotic fiction born in the 1960s and 1970s among *Star Trek* media fandom and fanzine culture] could be easily construed as a form of irreverence, existing in a tension-filled symbiotic relation to the sort of institutionalized nostalgia sanctioned by the Chinese state” (p. 357). After this epilogue, the author presents a translation of Cao Cao’s “Short Song,” translations of Red Cliff poems, and a full translation of the *Duel of Wits across the River*.

This overview of the book is too superficial to do justice to the author’s insightful and learned analyses of poems, letters, and visual materials. The reader will be able to appreciate them in due course. But I hope I have been able to give an idea of the methodological and epistemological questions this book raises. Through her analysis of colligations like “Jian’an” and “Three Kingdoms,” Tian indeed tackles in her own terms an old and central epistemological question of history: what is the epistemic

status of colligations, and, more generally, of historical narratives? How far are they from “facts”? (The epistemological status of colligations has been widely discussed in the last decades, especially regarding narrativism, and they have recently resurfaced in controversies about the postnarrativist philosophy of history. See, for example, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015].) By the end of her book, right after a reflection about the cinematic representations of the “Red Cliff,” Tian draws a general conclusion on this issue: “If by their very nature as art form all historical films are, as Pierre Sorlin reminds us, fictional, then so are all poetic representations of history and, indeed, all historical representations of history, in terms of their belatedness, their manipulation of source materials, and their shifting points of view” (p. 344). Such a statement has strong implications for the historian of China, not only regarding epistemology, but also regarding the status of sources: “Perhaps because of the existence of the fourteenth-century *Sanguozhi yanyi*, the earlier work *Sanguo zhi*, closer in time to the events of the Three Kingdoms and sanctioned as official dynastic history, is often privileged as ‘real history’ . . . , even though Pei Songzhi’s commentary alone, whose cited sources and viewpoints often conflict with one another, ought to disabuse us of any notion that the *Sanguo zhi* should be trusted more than other official histories or historical romances.” In other words, the “Red Cliff” only speaks for itself: a “fixture of the cultural and literary map of China,” this colligation is historical “only insofar as [it is the production of its] own historical circumstances” (pp. 344–45). No matter whether it is used in history or in romance, it is a fiction that cannot be trusted more than any other.

However, after reading Tian’s book, I draw different conclusions. Her insightful reconstruction of the changing status of “Jian’an” and “Three Kingdoms,” and especially her analyses of the different roles that are given to “fictions” in different circumstances, point to the fact that each form of writing gives a different status to its colligatory terms, since each genre negotiates in different ways the relation between the writer’s imagination and the available remnants of the past. It would certainly not be accurate to make the positivist claim that fiction does not play any role in history-writing: this book is here to prove that fiction is constitutive of historical representations, and also that representations of the past are not the monopoly of history writing—for different genres have their own ways of representing the past. But whereas modern storytelling and film making often use fiction to detach themselves from the limits of the “evidence” (and also to protect themselves from any attack in the name of “evidence”), modern historiography instead uses “fiction” to rationalize evidence: it is what we call “hypothesis,” the constrained form of fiction we use to recreate a past that is no longer available beyond its fragments. We know that hypotheses do not correspond to “what really happened,” because someone may one day bring new evidence and produce a better representation of the past; but we also know that we need this controlled form of fiction as part of our effort to get closer to the past. Did an early medieval historian like Pei Songzhi share such an attitude? Although it might be inaccurate to use modern methods and epistemic assumptions to describe the modus operandi of past historians (for the constraints they had were not the same as ours), Pei Songzhi’s efforts to collect evidence reveal his aim: get closer, not further from the past. In other words, the question is not whether “fiction” is the opposite of “history,” but what is the specific role of fiction in the search for history.

For this reason, I would not apply Tian’s conclusions to her own book: her insightful analyses are not just “fictional.” On the contrary, I would say that her book is a persuasive and well-written claim about history. By offering a plausible historical reconstruction on how colligations can shape representations and social attitudes, she makes us reflect more carefully on the relation between imagination and knowledge, and on the different tools people have to make claims about the past.

PABLO A. BLITSTEIN
SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES, PARIS
