

BOOK REVIEWS

CHINA

QIAN, Nanxiu. *Spirit and Self in Medieval China: The Shih-shuo hsin-yü and its Legacy*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001. xv + 520 pages. Tables, figures, glossary, references, index. Cloth US\$60.00; ISBN 0-8248-2309-5. Paper US\$32.95; ISBN 0-8248-2397-4.

A fascinating, meticulous study on the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* and the entire *shih-shuo t'i* tradition is finally available to those who are dazzled by the unique literary body of the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* and its significant presentation of aesthetics. As the author points out in her "Introduction," this book gives a comprehensive analysis of the unique genre *shih-shuo t'i* from the origin of the work, *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* in the Liu-Sung (420-479) period to the various imitations produced in China and Japan over the subsequent 1500 years (1). This book is developed from the author's MA thesis and her Yale PhD dissertation, and the author has employed her exhaustive research for over twenty years and has successfully demonstrated to the readers that her long devotion is not in vain. The book, in dealing with such a complex and long history of an uncommon literary genre, has marked a major contribution to the studies of Chinese history and literature, in particular to those in the Wei-Chin period. A book like this is long overdue, and it is definitely indispensable to our understanding of the two most essential but unique characteristics of the time and their legacy—the "Wei-Chin spirit" and "being the authentic self," as the title indicates. It is also a must-read complement to Professor Richard Mather's translation of the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World*.

The *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* was compiled only a decade after the end of the Chin dynasty, and it is believed to be one of the source materials on which *Chin shu* (The history of the Chin Dynasty) is based. However, for this very reason, the *Chin shu* compilers have been severely criticized by their contemporaries and later historians for using anecdotes from the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü*. The reason for this harsh criticism is that historians such as Liu Chih-chi 劉知幾 (661-721) in the T'ang Dynasty pejoratively labeled the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* as a work without any historical value that only records jests, minor arguments, contemptible stories, and strange events. However, scholars have agreed that the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* does contain a wealth of historical information, social and cultural values, as well as individual personalities and emotions; therefore, it is always the source material to which scholars refer as they conduct studies on the Wei-Chin period. This is exactly the reason that the author argues that we need to view the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* and its tradition "as a distinct narrative genre in its own right" (2). In her "Introduction," the author elucidates, "The *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* occupies a strange position in Chinese literary life. When treated as a collection of Wei-Chin cultural references and historical anecdotes, it has been highly regarded, placed in a central position, and hence well studied; but, when considered as *hsiao-shuo* (petty talk), it has been ignored, marginalized, and hence underexamined" (2).

This is a study replete with profound thoughts but with easy-to-follow language and structure. To most readers, in particular to those who have little knowledge of this period,

it definitely enhances our understanding on the “Wei-Chin spirit” and on the expression of “self.” The “Introduction” serves as a summary of the purpose and significance of Qian’s study and provides readers useful background on understanding the characteristics of the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* and its genre. In addition to the “Introduction” to the book and a “Conclusion,” this study is divided into three parts, and each part has its own introduction preceding the chapters. Part 1, “From Character Appraisal to Character Writing: The Formation of the *Shih-shuo* Genre,” consists of three chapters. It “shows how the late Han and Wei-Chin practice of character appraisal (*jen-lun chien-shih* 人倫鑒識) gave rise to the *Shih-shuo t’i*” (8). It also treats the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* as a product of this prevailing intellectual practice and deals with the problem of categorization of the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü*. Part 2, “Narrative Art of the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü*” comprises two chapters, and by using the anecdotes assigned to each category in the work, it examines the work’s narrative structure, its taxonomy of human nature, and its problems of characterization of “persons.” Here, the author analyzes the work as a unique literary genre which emerged from a special social, political, and philosophical environment. Part 3, “Discontinuity along the Line of Continuity: Imitations of the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü*,” is the longest part, comprising 5 chapters. As is obvious from the title, it deals with the 35 imitations of the work produced over 1600 years both in China, from the T’ang Dynasty to the Republic era, as well as in Tokugawa and Meiji Japan. A list of these imitations is provided in the “Introduction” to Part 3 (Table 5, 194–96) and in Section E of the “Selected Bibliography” (501–504). Among the five chapters, the chapters on the “Women *Shih-shuo*” (Chapter 8) and the Japanese imitations (Chapter 9) are especially noteworthy. The author has opened up a world for later scholars to explore further the “Women *Shih-shuo*,” which, in my opinion, should be more fully studied in the future with a complete translation of the anecdotes in English. Scholars in the field of Chinese Studies should pay more attention to the Women *Shih-shuo*, along with other Chinese women’s literature, for it will provide us different tools for understanding Chinese society as a whole.

The bibliography of any book is always useful for readers who want to refer to primary and secondary sources after their reading, and to gain an idea of what scholars have focused their attention on; therefore, it is worthwhile to look at the “Selected Bibliography” of this work. “Section A,” in chronological order, is an annotated list of the various editions of the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü*. “Section B” provides translations in various languages, in which we can see the great interest that Japanese scholars still have in the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* and the inspiration this work has given to the authors of eight Japanese imitations (see “Section E”). “Section C” lists the special studies on the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü*. It is notable that not many studies have been done in any Western language, or at least they are not included in the author’s “Selected Bibliography.” I understand it is a “selected bibliography,” but I just wonder whether it is because there are not many studies on this work in any Western language from which the author can select. In other words, this certainly underlines the significance of Qian’s study on the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü*. There is no doubt that the value of this study lies in the fact that the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* inaugurates a new and specific Chinese literary genre—the *Shih-shuo t’i*, but also that it provides the first thorough study about the genre itself in a Western language. Professor Nanxiu Qian has certainly ended a period of long neglect and started a new hope for later studies on this subject matter, particularly on the “Women *Shih-shuo*” and each of the imitations.

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