

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Prince and His Poet: Xiao Tong, Liu Xiaochuo, and New Directions in Southern Dynasties Literary Studies*

Alice W. Cheang

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

The Age of Courtly Writing: Wen xuan Compiler Xiao Tong (501–531) and His Circle. By Ping Wang. Sinica Leidensia 106. Leiden: Brill, 2012. Pp. x + 309. €110.00/\$151.00.

When, in the early Tang, Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643) traced the downfall of the Southern Dynasties (420–589) to the intemperate pursuit of “newfangled cleverness” (*xinqiao* 新巧) at the literary salons of their princely courts, he initiated a reaction that, over time, caused the innovative spirit of that age to become identified with moral decadence. In the ensuing denunciation of Southern Dynasties *belles-lettres*, one work was exempt—the *Wen xuan* 文選, the comprehensive anthology of ancient and modern poetry and prose put together at the court of Xiao Tong 蕭統, Crown Prince of the Liang 梁 (502–557)—not so much for intrinsic merit as for its usefulness as a repository of standard texts for memorization in preparing for the literature degree examination of the Tang civil service. But, although the *Wen xuan* continued, for practical reasons, to be studied into Song times, and was later taken up by the Qing philologists, the salon that produced this great work fell into oblivion along with the reprobate avant-garde. Now, after several decades of revisionist scholarship, the Southern Dynasties are at last recognized as an age of literary renaissance, and the disparaged texts once again read with sensitivity and appre-

* I wish to thank the editors for encouraging me to expand my review of this book into a more detailed treatment, and Dr Wendy Zeldin for her comments on the final revisions.

ciation; in fact, so much scholarly attention has lately been focused on the period taste for “new transformations” (*xinbian* 新變) that poetry in the so-called “palace style” (*gongti shi* 宮體詩), with its delicately erotic subject-matter couched in flowery and ornate language, and the labyrinthine complexities of the poetry of the Yongming 永明 era (483–493), far from seeming unusual, would almost appear to have been normative in their own day.¹ Ironically, perhaps because the *Wen xuan* is already so well known, the makers of the *Wen xuan* are among the last to emerge from obscurity in the general reassessment. They now form the welcome subject of Ping Wang’s ambitious new book, in which she proposes to fit this important piece of the puzzle into place by evaluating the contributions of Xiao Tong and his salon in the context of the literary and cultural history of the Liang.²

In her own words, the author aims “to readdress existing narratives on the Liang and Southern Dynasties literature by integrating historical records with personal writings . . . in the study of Xiao Tong, together with his close circle” (pp. 8–9). Where it is possible to reconstruct a chronology, Wang makes interesting reading as literary biography. She is at her best, however, in close readings of literary texts: her

¹ Some important works in English are: Richard B. Mather, *The Poet Shen Yüeh (441–513): The Reticent Marquis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); idem, *The Age of Eternal Brilliance: Three Lyric Poets of the Yung-ming Era (483–493)* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Cynthia L. Chennault, “Odes on Objects and Patronage during the Southern Qi,” in *Studies in Early Medieval Chinese Literature and Cultural History: In Honor of Richard B. Mather and Donald Holzman*, ed. Paul W. Kroll and David R. Knechtges (Provo, UT: T’ang Studies Society, 2003), pp. 331–98; and Meow Hui Goh, *Sound and Sight: Poetry and Courtier Culture in the Yongming Era (483–493)* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010) on different aspects of the poetic experiments at the court of Xiao Ziliang 蕭子良 (460–494) during the Yongming era of the Southern Qi 南齊 (479–502); Anne Birrell, *Games Poets Play: Readings in Medieval Chinese Poetry* (Cambridge, UK: McGuinness China Monographs, 2004) on the “palace-style” poetry produced at the court of Xiao Gang 蕭綱 (503–551), Emperor Jianwen 簡文帝 of the Liang; and Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502–557)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007) on both.

² With reference to scholarship in English, David Knechtges did some preliminary work on Xiao Tong to support his magisterial translation of the *Wen xuan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982–), which he followed up in “Culling the Weeds and Selecting Prime Blossoms: The Anthology in Early Medieval China,” in *Culture and Power in the Reconstitution of the Chinese Realm, 200–600*, ed. Scott Pearce, Audrey Spiro, and Patricia Ebrey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), pp. 200–241; Xiaofei Tian also discusses Xiao Tong as a literary thinker and the presumed compiler of the *Wen xuan* in *Beacon Fire*. However, Ping Wang is the first to write a book-length treatment on this subject.

methodology, which combines meticulous research with careful exegesis, reflects credit on Wang's mentors, David Knechtges and Paul Kroll, to whom the book is dedicated. Unfortunately, some parts of the book (Chapter Two in particular) are in a disorderly condition, with extraneous matter being included at the cost of what may be more relevant, and the presentation is sometimes so unclear as to make the author's line of reasoning difficult to follow—a regrettable blemish on a work that is clearly the product of prodigious effort and dedication.

The book is divided into five chapters; excepting Chapter Three, these are arranged so as implicitly to accord with the timeline of Xiao Tong's life. Chapter One covers Xiao Tong's early life and education, outlines his biography, and introduces some members of his circle. In Chapter Two, the author inquires into "Xiao Tong's literary inclinations": his developing views on literature, seen in the context of the literary production at his court, and how these values are embodied in the writings of his early manhood. As the single most substantial work to emerge from the Crown Prince's salon, the *Wen xuan* is also briefly discussed in this chapter. Chapter Three is dedicated to Xiao Tong's circle, as represented in the literary career of its leading member, Liu Xiaochuo 劉孝綽 (481–539). Picking up Xiao Tong's story again, Chapter Four presents a detailed narrative of his experience of Buddhism. Chapter Five takes us into the last five years of Xiao Tong's short life, in which he is shown turning to the pastoral ideal embodied in the writings of Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365–427). Thus, the single thread that binds together the multiple skeins of biographical narrative, cultural history, and textual analysis making up this book is the figure of Xiao Tong himself.

The portrait of Xiao Tong, as the author paints him, starts off dull but acquires an interesting complexity in its latter half. From the Confucian hagiography in the *Liang shu* 梁書, supplemented by some of the racier details, judiciously noted as such, in the *Nan shi*'s 南史 much more highly romanticized account, Xiao Tong appears a compassionate prince, filial son, and model brother, none of which, as Wang points out, is intrinsically implausible. Certainly, by his own showing in the few extant poems and letters he exchanged with Xiao Gang and Xiao Yi 蕭繹 (508–555), the future Emperor Yuan 元帝, Xiao Tong is an affectionate and solicitous older brother, though inferior in poetic talent to these gifted younger brothers. Between the time he reached his majority in 514 and the late 520s, Xiao Tong also stood at the head of a literary salon that produced three major compilations—the *Shiyuan yinghua* 詩苑英華, no longer extant, the prince's personal collection, of which a fraction survives, and the *Wen xuan*³—a pace unrivalled by any other princely court. This much has

³ Judging from its title, the *Shiyuan yinghua* was probably an anthology of poetry in five-syllable lines, the dominant verse form at this time. In his reply to a letter from Xiao Yi that
(Continued on next page)

already been covered in the existing research. What remains to be understood is why, from these glorious beginnings, the Crown Prince's fortunes began to decline around the time of his mother's death in 526; he died only five years later, at the age of thirty, in uncertain circumstances. In the last two chapters of her book, Wang pieces together a highly suggestive, and generally plausible, account of what may have happened to Xiao Tong in the third and final decade of his life. She is able to do this because, insignificant as they may be from the viewpoint of literary merit, Xiao Tong's writings are substantially useful as a register of his evolving state of mind.

In Chapter Four, a small body of poems—about lectures he attended and expositions he was asked to make on Buddhist doctrine as well as his excursions to Buddhist sites—furnishes the basis for a richly nuanced account of Xiao Tong's encounter with Buddhism, or, more precisely, with the intensive campaign of indoctrination by means of which Emperor Wu 武帝 (464–549), with the zeal of the newly converted, sought to induce his heir to follow him in embracing Buddhism. Written between 518 and 521, the poems show Xiao Tong docile and willing to learn at first, next, struggling mightily with the basic concepts, and then, with growing ambivalence, pressing on with the lectures and temple visits; until finally, in a reply poem written to match one composed by the Emperor, he finishes by flatly refusing his father's invitation to pursue enlightenment. One last poem relating to Buddhism, written in 525, contains an outright attack on the encroaching power of the Buddhist church.⁴ Using a steady accumulation of telling detail in her analysis of these poems, Wang gives us a fascinating history of Xiao Tong's abortive conversion to Buddhism, in which we see unfolding the troubled relationship between the Emperor and the Crown Prince, the father eager to impose his will and the son recalcitrant in the

(Note 3—Continued)

is now lost, Xiao Tong refers to his brother's request to see the newly completed collection of his personal writings, along with the *Shiyuan yinghua* that had already been in circulation for some time. The letter is dated to 522. Since the *Wen xuan* is not mentioned, it is thought that work on this compilation began after the letter was written. There was a fourth work, a collection of imperial rescripts or the like, about which nothing beyond the title is known.

⁴ That year, Fayun 法雲, Xiao Tong's former mentor in Buddhism, was promoted chief prelate of the monastic community in the capital region, and a temple built in his honour in the suburbs of Jiankang 建康 (modern Nanjing). Not only did Xiao Tong decline the invitation to attend the grand assembly held on its completion; in making his unceremoniously dilatory reply to the commemorative poem written by Fayun, he describes the temple as casting a shadow over the gate towers of Jiankang, while the drumbeat accompanying the monks in prayer throws the sober rhythms of secular life into disarray, and concludes by asking, since the influence of the dharma is all-pervading, what need there is to visit the temple at all. Mediocre as a poem, the piece makes brilliant anti-Buddhist propaganda.

face of mounting pressure. She has also added depth and texture to the portrait of the maturing Xiao Tong, who clearly had reasons other than youthful rebellion for opposing the religion his father espoused.

Documentation is particularly scanty for Xiao Tong's last five years. The one major event of this period was the death of his mother, Consort Ding 丁貴嬪, in mourning whom the prince is said to have undergone such excesses of self-deprivation that he never fully recovered. There are few associated writings: Wang discusses two, a letter and a preface. The letter was Xiao Tong's invitation to He Yin 何胤 (446–531), a former minister of the Qi celebrated for his dedication to the life of retirement, to come to court to advise the prince on a "complicated situation" (*yunjie* 蘊結) (p. 259). Wang reads this as indicating that Xiao Tong, uneasy over his deteriorating relations with Emperor Wu, was trying to gain the endorsement of He Yin, whom the Emperor himself had assiduously courted in the early days of the Liang, to secure his own position as royal heir.⁵ Inexplicably, however, she fixes on the "wax geese" incident as the occasion for Xiao Tong's falling out with his father⁶—a more convincing reason may be found in the implicit contradiction between the Emperor's public adoption of Buddhism and the Crown Prince's persistent refusal to follow suit, so superbly detailed in Chapter Four. On receiving Xiao Tong's letter, He Yin, who had declined much more tempting blandishments from Emperor Wu, sent a curt and dismissive reply.

Rebuffed by a living recluse, Xiao Tong turned for consolation to Tao Yuanming, a famous recluse of the past, for whom he apparently developed such powerful feelings of affinity that he personally made a collection of Tao's complete writings.⁷

⁵ The letter opens by alluding to two Han princes—the heirs, respectively, of the founders of the Han and the Eastern Han—and the excellent relations they enjoyed with virtuous recluses of their day; both eventually inherited the throne, but the former of the two, Liu Ying 劉盈 (213–188 B.C.E.), was at one point in danger of being ousted from the dynastic succession, until he managed to get a group of aged recluses known as the "Four Hoaryheads" (*sihao* 四皓) to lend their support to his claim. This suggests to Wang that Xiao Tong was motivated by a similar concern.

⁶ According to the *Nan shi*, a necromancer convinced Xiao Tong that influences baleful to him were exhaling from his mother's grave site but could be neutralized by burying wax effigies next to the site; the Emperor was understandably furious at this act of desecration, and the prince, having both lost his mother and alienated his father, promptly fell into a decline. This story, like several other colourful and probably apocryphal incidents in the *Nan shi* not found in other sources, seems calculated to invest the Crown Prince with a personality, just as the *Liang shu* is committed to presenting him as a Confucian paragon.

⁷ The collection is tentatively dated to 527, see p. 262, n. 140. Only the preface survives, along with the biography appended to the collection.

Although Tao's achievements had begun to be reassessed at this time, the author is correct in saying that Xiao Tong was the first to accord him recognition as a poet who wrote about reclusion rather than a recluse who simply happened to write poetry. In his preface to the collection, the second of the two pieces Wang discusses in detail, Xiao Tong differentiates between the poet's ostensible and his true subject, and identifies the seeming obsession with drinking as Tao's uniquely innovative way of articulating his quest for the recluse's ideal. This reading, axiomatic to the modern reader, was groundbreaking at the time. His interest in preserving Tao Yuanming's writings argues a sensitive understanding that puts Xiao Tong ahead of his contemporaries. In this the author sees not only Xiao Tong's perennial commitment to promoting moral excellence in poetry, but also a projection of his yearning for a model of pastoral existence—free of the conventional strictures that held reclusion to be compatible only with complete withdrawal from the world—that would be accessible even to a Crown Prince living within the confines of his palace walls. But a Crown Prince who takes a poet-recluse for his beau ideal is an oxymoron, to say the least, and the image on which Wang's narrative closes is that of a man so alienated from his life that he quite literally wished himself elsewhere.

Appropriately, Wang stops short of speculating on the actual circumstances of Xiao Tong's death. But the concatenation that she draws among developments in the final decade—Xiao Tong's education in and rejection of Buddhism, his mother's death, the failed attempt to bring He Yin to court, his empathic identification with Tao Yuanming's eremitic poetry, and the gradual breakup of his salon following the death of several key older members—tends to support a narrative of growing disaffection, not to say disillusion, that is highly suggestive.

Wang has done much to re-create the portrait of the man Xiao Tong in three dimensions. She is less successful in her presentation of Xiao Tong as a literary figure—the subject of the problematic Chapter Two. To my mind, one great difficulty in evaluating Xiao Tong's literary contributions stems from the peculiar fact that he is remembered, not for his own writings, but for his association with the *Wen xuan*, which is traditionally attributed to him but to which his actual relationship is largely unknown. The study of Xiao Tong as an individual writer is, of course, separate from the “*Wen xuan* studies” (*xuanxue* 選學) that form an entire sub-field of mediaeval literary scholarship; but, precisely because we do not know the exact nature of his involvement in the compilation of the *Wen xuan*, or the authorship of its famous preface, it is impossible either to leave the *Wen xuan* entirely out of account or fully take it into account in reviewing Xiao Tong's work.

On Xiao Tong's relationship to the *Wen xuan*, the author notes in passing the recent debate between Shimizu Yoshio 清水凱夫, the proponent of the radical view that Liu Xiaochuo did most of the actual work of compilation and moreover wrote

the preface,⁸ and a number of scholars from the People's Republic of China, who contend that Xiao Tong was actively involved in the project, with Liu and others assisting, and wrote the preface by himself.⁹ Her own position, which seems to split the difference between the two sides, is that Xiao Tong and Liu Xiaochuo both made substantial contributions to the *Wen xuan* (p. 105), and that the preface “is probably the most important document for examining Xiao Tong's views on literature” (p. 53), which I take to mean that, whether he wrote it or not, the preface reflects Xiao Tong's thinking. Wang is right to avoid getting bogged down in the reciprocal criticisms by means of which scholars in these rival camps contest another's arguments—hypotheses that, absent new textual discoveries, must remain in the realm of conjecture. Nonetheless, it is still incumbent on her, besides stating her position, to explain how she arrived at it.

Aside from the *Wen xuan* preface, Xiao Tong's literary views appear in one other document, his reply to the letter from Xiao Yi mentioned earlier. Xiao Tong's letter contains a passage that Wang takes to be his statement on the ideal writing style: one that succeeds in striking a balance between the “classically chaste” (*dian* 典) and the “ornate” (*li* 麗), while avoiding the respective excesses of the “crude” (*ye* 野) and the “superficial” (*fu* 浮, p. 77); in other words, a literary extension of the synthesis between “substance” (*zhi* 質 or native endowment) and “pattern” (*wen* 文 or acquired culture) that defines the “gentleman” (*junzi* 君子) of the *Analecets*.¹⁰ He goes on, in the same letter, to locate the creative impulse in “natural dispositions and

⁸ Shimizu has documented what he believes to be a correlation between the exclusion of certain writers in the *Wen xuan* and the relationship in which they stood *vis-à-vis* Liu Xiaochuo; the inclusion of certain pieces of dubious literary merit is likewise attributed to personal considerations on Liu's part. He sees the above as evidence that Liu was primarily responsible for the process of selection, with Xiao Tong in a nominal role. Unpopular as his views may be, Shimizu is not lightly to be dismissed: Liu's gift for bearing a grudge was legendary in his own lifetime, and it is not entirely inconceivable that he could have entertained a private agenda in the discharge of public duties. Whether we agree with him or not, Shimizu has introduced a bold new perspective for looking at some of the idiosyncrasies in the *Wen xuan* that readers have been noticing for centuries but are still at a loss to explain. Shimizu's arguments are succinctly recapitulated by Han Jiguo 韓基國, his main translator, in “Ribei ‘xin Wen xuan xue’ guankui” 日本「新文選學」管窺, in *Zhaoming wenxuan yanjiu lunwenji* 昭明文選研究論文集, ed. Zhao Fuhai 趙福海 et al. (Changchun: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 1988), pp. 305–14.

⁹ Wang lists them on p. 53. She affirms the opinion of the majority of these scholars as authoritative without stating her specific grounds for agreeing with them.

¹⁰ *Zhaoming taizi ji jiaozhu* 昭明太子集校注, ed. Yu Shaochu 俞紹初 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 2001), p. 155. The relevant passage, which the author paraphrases, is more fully translated in Knechtges, “Culling the Weeds,” p. 211.

tendencies” (*xingqing* 性情, p. 75), that is, human responsiveness to the promptings of Nature and our own emotions, in which he comes close to the traditional literary thought embodied in such classics as the “Great Preface” 大序 of the *Shijing* 詩經 and Lu Ji’s 陸機 (261–303) *Wen fu* 文賦. Based on this letter, and on the Confucian poetics expressed in the preface to the *Wen xuan*, Wang perceives Xiao Tong as holding essentially conservative views on literature, in which craft is subordinate to didactic purpose—a moderate version, she adds, somewhat inconsequently, of the more extreme position taken by Pei Ziyue 裴子野 (469–530), a leading advocate of the antiquarian poetics of “restoring the ancient way” (*fugu* 復古, p. 64).

In pegging Xiao Tong as “moderate,” Wang shows the influence of David Knechtges,¹¹ who may in turn have been influenced by Zhou Xunchu’s 周勳初 division of the poets of the Liang into three “schools,” with Xiao Tong being placed in the middle or “compromise school.”¹² But, as Xiaofei Tian has already demonstrated, not only is it anachronistic to describe mediaeval poetic practice in terms of mutually exclusive schools or movements; Xiao Tong’s “neither too X nor too Y” prescription for good writing and his lyrical passage about what moves us to write are both remarkably similar to other formulations on the same topics in the contemporary discourse on literature.¹³ In other words, Xiao Tong’s remarks on literature may be seen as comprising an elegant periphrasis of traditional criticism and current opinion—his reaffirmation of commonly held values rather than definitive statements of his particular views. Here we come to the other problem facing the author in this chapter. The extant poetic corpus is so small, with so few pieces that can truly be called personal, that it is impossible to infer from them any distinctive approach to composition; or perhaps one could simply say that Xiao Tong never practised poetry to the extent of acquiring a distinctive style. If the comments he made about literature *per se* are then also set aside as part of shared discourse, there remains little to be gleaned from his own writings about Xiao Tong’s achievements as a literary thinker and practitioner.

Whatever the Crown Prince’s qualifications as a *littérateur*, his court was filled with men distinguished for their learning, or literary talent, or both. In Chapter Three,

¹¹ “Xiao Tong’s concept of literature lies somewhere between the pragmatic views of the Confucian conservatives and those who pursued poetry for pleasure or for the unbridled expression of personal feeling.” “Culling the Weeds,” p. 211.

¹² “Liangdai wenlun sanpai shuyao” 梁代文論三派述要, originally published in *Zhonghua wenshi luncong* 中華文史論叢 5 (1964), pp. 195–221; reprinted in his *Wei-Jin Nanbeichao wenxue luncong* 魏晉南北朝文學論叢 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1999), pp. 230–53, esp. p. 238.

¹³ *Beacon Fire*, pp. 132–38.

the author singles out Liu Xiaochuo, the most brilliant poet at his court as well as one of its most active and long-standing members, as the epitome of Xiao Tong's literary circle.¹⁴ She constructs an interesting literary biography for this proud and volatile man, in which the works chosen to illustrate his development as a poet are divided into several groups: poems written while in attendance on his different patrons, Emperor Wu, the Emperor's younger brother Xiao Xiu 蕭秀 (475–518), and Xiao Tong, and a series of poems exchanged between Liu and He Xun 何遜 (469–519) after the two crossed paths at the itinerant court of Xiao Xiu. By far the most interesting pieces in this chapter, however, as well as the most revealing of Liu's complicated character, are those appearing at the beginning and end of these extensive selections—a poetic exchange from the beginning of his career and another much longer one some quarter of a century later. The first pair of poems consists of one written by a very brash young Liu, newly appointed to his first post in 502, to tax the senior official Ren Fang 任昉 (460–508) for being slow to recognize his talent and grant him a promotion, and Ren Fang's suitably withering reply. This delightful exchange, which baffled the historians for centuries, receives a bold and lucid exposition from the author. She is rather more diffident in her handling of the second pair of poems, one by Lu Chui 陸倕 (470–526) in 84 lines and Liu's reply in 122 lines, exchanged on the eve of exile in 525. According to the *Liang shu*, two impeachments were brought against Liu Xiaochuo in his lifetime, at least one of which stuck: Liu was duly rusticated to a provincial post, and Lu Chui, his senior colleague as well as the leading light of the social circle to which he belonged, seems to have been demoted on account of their close connection.¹⁵ Notes Wang, Lu Chui's poem hovers between registering grievance and offering commiseration; in other words, though he cannot hold back from administering a stern rebuke at the beginning, he refrains from the greater temptation to offer pious counsel at the end. On Liu Xiaochuo's poem, she makes copious annotations but only a few remarks of a non-committal nature. I would venture to add, from a purely stylistic point of view, that, compared to the slow sweep and dignified composure of Lu Chui's piece, Liu's reply is much more of a *tour de force*, a poetic journey that, gathering momentum in a series of controlled bursts of metaphoric brilliance, transforms the exile's sorrowful passage into a triumphal progress through landscapes made numinous by tropes of Daoist transcendence and

¹⁴ Liu is traditionally credited with the compilation of the *Shiyuan yinghua*; he received a commission directly from Xiao Tong to put together the latter's personal collection and write its preface; and most scholars believe his role in the *Wen xuan* project to have been considerable.

¹⁵ It is unclear how many times Liu was actually impeached, but, based on what is said in the poems, the charge in this case was the taking of bribes.

Buddhist deliverance. But, whereas Lu Chui spends many lines in expressing his heartfelt longing for the friends he is perforce leaving behind, and accords to each a kindly word of practical advice, Liu Xiaochuo, in a poem that is longer again by a third, speaks only of his own frustration and, though he reluctantly acknowledges what Lu Chui says in his poem, has no word of apology or regret for him in return.

Liu Xiaochuo joined the Crown Prince's staff in 516 and, except for a brief period in exile, continued in his service until Xiao Tong's death. The author attempts to characterize the relationship that presumably developed between the two over their long association in terms of the common pursuit of literary aspirations. She sees the harmonious balance in Liu's mature style¹⁶ as finding resonance with Xiao Tong's taste for moderation, and cites, as evidence of what guided Liu in theory and practice, his preface to Xiao Tong's collection of personal writings. However, the literary ideal enunciated in Liu's preface is simply a more elaborate version of what we have already seen in Xiao Tong's letter to Xiao Yi: "classically faithful, but not crude; far-reaching, but not unrestrained; ornate, but not excessively so; restrained, but not devoid . . ." (pp. 165–66); indeed, since the letter was written in reply to a request to see the newly finished personal collection, Xiao Tong was most likely paraphrasing Liu's preface. But, whether Liu was making an original statement that was then reiterated by Xiao Tong, or whether their formulations belong to common literary discourse, to say that the Crown Prince and his "poet laureate" (p. 171) both aspired to write in the "gentlemanly" style, in which opposing tendencies achieve perfect equilibrium, is not much of a description. In any case, the two had little in common as writers, and were, if anything, even more dissimilar in their personalities—Xiao Tong, the soul of good nature and a born peacemaker in his relationships, and Liu, who felt inherently superior to others and was also unable to get along with anyone he regarded as inferior to himself.¹⁷

Perhaps the close association between Xiao Tong and his chief literary man may be explained in simpler terms. Liu Xiaochuo owed his appointment at the Eastern

¹⁶ In describing Liu's style, Wang draws on the descriptive epithets used by Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–595) in his historic comparison of He Xun and Liu Xiaochuo, which contrasts He Xun's preoccupation with "poverty and low status" (*pinhan* 貧寒) against the "gentleness and ease" (*yongrong* 雍容) of Liu Xiaochuo (p. 163). Since these terms imply a Confucian view of writing style as the external manifestation of inward disposition, perhaps we could also render *yongrong* as a "lordly manner," or, to match this book's title, a "courtly style."

¹⁷ Most famously, Liu had a long-standing feud with his fellow courtier Dao Qia 到洽 (490–527). The author paints a lively picture of the enmity between the two, with Xiao Tong caught in the middle, as Dao tried to get Liu impeached for moral turpitude while Liu wrote defamatory letters about Dao to the beleaguered prince.

Palace to Emperor Wu, whom he had earlier impressed with his poetic talent. Looking at the overall constituency of Xiao Tong's entourage, we see evidence everywhere of the Emperor's guiding hand. The core group of the literary salon at the Crown Prince's court was formed when Emperor Wu appointed ten "scholars" (*xueshi* 學士), or "Academicians," as Wang renders the term, to serve Xiao Tong after he reached his majority.¹⁸ One of the senior Academicians, Lu Chui, had belonged to the "Eight Companions of Jingling" 竟陵八友, the illustrious inner circle of Xiao Ziliang that flourished during the Yongming era of the Qi, as had the elderly poet Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513), who was Emperor Wu's close advisor from the founding of the Liang until, in advanced age, he became Xiao Tong's tutor. Liu Xiaochuo, Lu Chui's fellow Academician, was too young to have been active in the Yongming era, but his maternal uncle, Wang Rong 王融 (467–493), was one of the "Eight Companions," and as a boy Liu had been made much of by the poets in the group, so much so that he later felt emboldened to write to Ren Fang, yet another of the "Eight Companions," the extraordinary poem discussed above. In short, there was a strong presence at Xiao Tong's court of men belonging to, or having close ties with, the old circle of Xiao Ziliang. When we remember that Emperor Wu had also been one of the "Eight Companions" in his youth, it becomes clear that the one great commonality that brought together Xiao Tong's circle, at least initially, was the patronage not of the Crown Prince but of Emperor Wu.

As we have seen, Xiao Tong himself neither had a strong predilection for literary creativity—though a decent writer of prose, he was an indifferent poet in an age when poetry was what mattered—nor was he, by all accounts, a charismatic personality. He was not, therefore, the kind of royal patron, who could, by leadership or participation, create an environment to nurture the growth of distinctive and well-defined literary interests. Perhaps this is why, unlike the Yongming circle or the circle

¹⁸ Xiao Tong achieved his majority at fifteen *sui* in 514. "Ten Scholars of the Eastern Palace" (*donggong shi xueshi* 東宮十學士) were appointed between 514 and 516, among them Lu Chui, Dao Qia, and Liu Xiaochuo. Some of the other names vary, depending on the historical source, possibly because additional appointments were made in subsequent years. According to Wang Liqun 王立群, the term *xueshi*, originally simply "man of learning," was used at different times during the Six Dynasties to designate an office with specific duties, such as compiling literary collectanea or elaborating ceremonial ritual. See his *Wenxuan chengshu yanjiu* 文選成書研究 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2005), pp. 99–122. Given the timing of the appointment of Xiao Tong's "scholars," it would not be difficult to see them as a kind of brain trust for the compilation projects that began soon afterwards at his court. Qian Ruping 錢汝平 draws a similar inference in his *Xiao Yan yanjiu* 蕭衍研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2011), p. 120.

that gathered around Xiao Gang when he became Crown Prince, Xiao Tong's salon is not associated with a particular stylistic approach, subject-matter, poetic type, or any definitive traits that, shared across a group, become that group's common signature—the proverbial salon style.

To sum up, readers hoping to find answers to questions about the *Wen xuan* in Ping Wang's book will be disappointed, but they will find ample compensation in the richly documented history of the life and work of the Crown Prince whose name continues to be associated with it. Originally little more than a cipher to the average reader, Xiao Tong grows, through the author's compassionate yet detached account, into someone who, unimportant for his own activities as a poet, was able to discern the importance of Tao Yuanming's poetry; and, though it was in his own best interests as royal heir to show compliance with beliefs that had become inseparable from state policy, he was brave enough—if foolhardy, considering what he was up against—to take an unequivocal stand on Buddhism. Most remarkable is the degree to which Wang has been able to reconstruct, from such a small body of extant work, the living voice of Xiao Tong, in which, true to the dictum he liked to quote from the "Great Preface," poetry expresses intent, or, in modern idiom, personal conviction. This reminds the reader, if he needed reminding, of one of the great distinctive characteristics of mediaeval poetry—the way verbal sophistication is often combined with a naïve directness of expression that was lost in later ages with the growing emphasis on the projection of a unified poetic self through the manipulation of voice and persona.¹⁹ Xiao Tong, a comparatively unskilled poet, and Liu Xiaochuo, acclaimed as a master of the art, are similar in this regard; the latter, in particular, reveals himself in the early poem to Ren Fang, the later one to Lu Chui, and some of the exchanges with He Xun in between, not with the calculated, albeit delightfully arch, self-exposure practised by later poets like Bo Juyi 白居易 (772–846) and Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), but with a kind of inadvertent honesty that, despite—or perhaps because of—his generally unpleasant personality, I find strangely appealing.

Ping Wang's book is uneven. Some parts are outstanding, while others seem incoherent and out of order, e.g., an excellent overview of the historical background of the Six Dynasties is incomprehensibly to be found in the middle of Chapter Three,

¹⁹ I discuss this at greater length in my review of Meow Hui Goh's *Sound and Sight: Poetry and Courtier Culture in the Yongming Era (483–493)* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010) in the July 2011 issue of this journal, especially pp. 358–61. Ironically, Tao Yuanming was the first poet to experiment with the projection of a carefully constructed persona that remains more or less consistent throughout his corpus.

when it would have been more helpful placed nearer the beginning of the book. There is a certain amount of undigested material, e.g., in discussing Pei Ziyè's classicist views on literature in Chapter Two, or presenting Zhang Chong's 張充 (449–514) famous letter as contextualizing background for her discussion of reclusion in Chapter Five, it is not necessary to quote extensively from their biographies; likewise, some of the poems that are translated and annotated without detailed analysis could perhaps be summarized instead. Additionally, though this is the fault of the publisher rather than the author, parts of the book appear to have gone to press in an unedited condition. However, most of what Wang has chosen for inclusion is useful and to the point, and her exhaustive treatment of the material—Chapter Four contains enough original research to fill a small book in itself—is a mark of scholarly integrity as well as readiness to do the unglamorous spadework needed to provide a solid basis for the lighter work of speculation. If the author would also develop greater boldness of argument as she pursues the implications of her research to their logical conclusions, her future work is to be awaited with happy anticipation.

I would like to close my discussion of this book by adding one small footnote to the author's reading of the exchange of poems and letters between Xiao Tong and Xiao Gang at the end of Chapter Two. Some time between 514 and 520, when Xiao Gang was stationed in Jiangzhou 江州 (modern Jiujiang 九江), Xiao Tong wrote him a poem, a somewhat pedestrian exercise in the Chu song style, to which Xiao Gang replied with a more polished piece, matching his brother's line for line, except for the addition of a supernumerary couplet in the middle. The couplet is wildly out of keeping with the rest of the poem, but, as Wang astutely observes, it reads beautifully as an example of the sensuous poetry in the "palace style" for which Xiao Gang later became known; she explains its presence here as Xiao Gang's attempt to introduce "a distinctive signature" (p. 99) of his personal tastes into a poem that in all other respects dutifully conforms to the style of his brother's. Accompanying this reply poem was a letter, now lost, to which Xiao Tong responded with a letter of his own, where he goes on at great length about literature's high purpose and the sacred duty of vassals to write with serious intent so as to inspire their lords. The author takes this letter as confirming Xiao Tong's moralistic view of literature. Without cavilling at her overall assessment of the values held by Xiao Tong, I wonder if there might not be another way to read this exchange. The additional couplet in Xiao Gang's poem was, I think, a literary joke; on seeing it—we do not know what else Xiao Gang may have written in the lost letter—Xiao Tong attempted to reply in kind. I find it difficult to take seriously the long rigmarole that fills the whole first half of Xiao Tong's letter, because to do so one would have to believe its writer an unbearable prig, given to rank-pulling of the worst kind; whereas, taken as an attempt at humour, his barrage of sonorous allusions, complete with anachronisms about lords and vassals, is clumsily

endearing, as well as more of a piece with the person who appears in the rest of Wang's narrative.²⁰

But, however interpreted, this exchange between two trusting and affectionate brothers is a good example of what the author has taught us can be done, by reading personal writings in historical context, to create interesting and nuanced accounts of literary and cultural history. Above all, Wang's analytical approach, though focused closely on individual texts, is built on the almost forgotten premise that those texts are first and foremost about the people who wrote them, and serves as a bracing reminder of how much fun—as well as how important—it is to make that connection.

²⁰ One forgets how young these boys were at the time. Xiao Tong was thirteen and Xiao Gang eleven in 514, the *terminus a quo* proposed by Wang for this exchange; her *terminus ad quem* of 520 would put them at nineteen and seventeen respectively. Xiao Tong's piece is so wooden—not much of an improvement over the schoolroom exercises discussed in Chapter One—that I would suggest a composition date nearer 514 than 520. His only other extant poem to Xiao Gang, a formal presentation piece with a definite date of 521, shows considerable advance over this one, and is among his finest works. Xiao Gang clearly had a flair for poetry from the beginning.