

BOOK REVIEWS

Considering the End: Mortality in Early Medieval Chinese Poetic Representation.
By Timothy Wai Keung Chan. Sinica Leidensia 107. Leiden: Brill, 2012. Pp. xii + 239. €112.00/\$156.00.

This book consists of interpretive chapters on the poems of Wang Yi 王逸 (c. 89–c. 158 C.E.); legends about the sufferings of virtuous women, Cao E 曹娥 (130–143) in particular; the writings of Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263) on what the author terms “apocalyptic” themes; Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365?–427) and a genre of poems known as coffin-puller dirges; Buddhist concepts in the poems of Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385–433); the genre of poems ostensibly composed “on the verge of death”; and an epilogue on the image of the fisherman and other stock literary figures connoting reclusion. Generous quotations from a selection of Chinese passages, with translations, are provided. The book focuses on poetry, as indicated in the subtitle, but passages in some prose works are treated as well.

Chan’s analyses are strongest when focused on the structure of specific poems and how this structure might shape our reading. He makes some savvy interpretive choices that allow for appropriately subtle readings of poetic works. An example is his comment that scholars often overlook the genre features of dirges and thus take them literally, whereas attending to those features helps us see dirges as something more complex and subtle, often playful (p. 98). What might be considered a very general thrust of this book—that religious ideas mattered to poets—is certainly salutary in a field that has traditionally had a hard time seeing a poem as little more than a coded venting of political frustration. And yet so powerful is this old trope of reducing all else to politics that Chan himself often succumbs to it, as when he suggests that “Xie Lingyun’s apparent devotion to Buddhism may have resulted from his turbulent political life” (p. 127) or when he states baldly that “the literary works of this period are of complexity [*sic*] often caused by unstable political conditions” (p. 1). But the book is marred by a number of other problems as well.

Some of the problems are of relatively small scope, such as the assertion that it is “possible to read the Great Man”—a literary type or persona—“as a popular religious sect” (p. 88), a fundamental category mistake since literary personae are not religious sects; or the claim that K. Schipper gives “a comprehensive study” of the *Taiping jing* 太平經 in his three-page article on this enormous, sprawling text (p. 73, n. 27). Chan suggests that the lack of “certain dramatic themes” such as “apocalypse” in Chinese “religious literature” is the reason why it has been “neglected in the

study of world literature outside of China” (p. 67), when surely the basic reason why Chinese religious literature has been neglected outside of China is that most of it has gone untranslated and unstudied in languages other than Chinese. What is truly remarkable is the extent to which this literature has been ignored by scholars who *do* read Chinese—something this book does nothing to remedy. Chan often presents two alternative interpretations or variant readings, then chooses one over the other without telling us why (e.g. pp. 93, 103, and 105). He sometimes simply declares as fact things that are by no means so, as for example that textual “splintering” of the author’s persona is “derived from a shamanistic tradition” (p. 115), whatever this might mean. He is sometimes given to unnecessary digressions and superficial comparative asides (examples may be seen on pp. 48 and 92), as well as to making terse, dense assertions without explaining or developing them (e.g. p. 91).

Other problems are graver. The writing is often vague, making Chan’s arguments hard to discern. As noted above, one of the book’s general yet oddly unarticulated agendas is to demonstrate the relevance of religious ideas to literary (mostly poetic) productions. Yet Chan often runs into difficulty tying specific poetic passages to specific religious concepts, and this is nowhere clearer than in Chapter Five, “Xie Lingyun on Awakening,” in which Chan tries unsuccessfully to demonstrate that Xie’s “acceptance of the *dunwu* [sudden enlightenment] theory” (p. 129) and other Buddhist doctrines is reflected in some of his poems. Certainly one can find allusions to all sorts of religious terms in the works of a poet such as Xie, but, as Chan himself admits, “poetry is a different genre from philosophical argument” (p. 144), and any attempt to infer a poet’s religious “beliefs” from his poems is going to be tricky and speculative at best. The book contains no discussion of the challenges involved in such an enterprise or what would count as success.

But this book’s most serious drawback is its fundamental topical incoherence. Chan opens by saying the book is “a study of the literary representation of the worldview, psyche, and attitude of selected writers who lived in political turmoil” (p. 1); on the next page he asks, of the early medieval period, “How could anyone feel secure living in this political turmoil?” (Does anyone feel secure in any era?) Chan assumes, then, that poems are “representation[s]” of the “worldview, psyche, and attitude” of their authors; this is an assumption that at least warrants discussion. One also wonders whether such fundamental literary themes as death and chaos are likely, a priori, to be found more in certain historical periods than in others. The assumption that they are more likely in a “turbulent” period again bespeaks the old tendency to reduce poetry to politics. By page 3, Chan is specifying the focal theme of the works treated in the book as “eschatology,” which Chan never defines. By the end of the book it seems to mean any sort of “ending” and therefore nothing in particular.

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