
Luo Manling’s *Literati Storytelling in Late Medieval China* explores how Chinese literati attempted to manage their lives and identity in response to changing socio-political roles through storytelling during the late medieval period. According to Luo, this period, from the mid-eighth to the mid-tenth century, also known as the Tang-Song transition, was crucial for the “reconfiguration” of the Chinese elites. They were shifting from aristocrats who had the choice of “officialdom” to educated men appointed to “bureaucracy service” based on their examination results (p. 5). From an impressive trove of collected stories in various genres, Luo pinpoints four themes that reveal how Chinese literati responded to the dramatic socio-political transformation by articulating changing social anxieties through stories. These four themes are “sovereignty, literati sociality, sexuality and cosmic mobility,” and are thoroughly examined in the book’s four chapters.

In Chapter One, “Sovereignty: The Case of the Illustrious Emperor,” Luo argues that through different versions of stories of Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712-756), late medieval literati reimagined and re-defined how they could engage the monarch. In their stories, Xuanzong was a successful emperor responsible for Tang cosmopolitanism and prosperity, but was also a failure because his infatuation with Yang Guifei resulted in neglect and eventually the devastating An Lushan Rebellion in 755. Besides the most common stories that moralized Xuanzong’s political downfall, some literati recast Xuanzong as a dedicated romantic hero with sophisticated feelings and sensibilities, and an accomplished musician, calligrapher, and a true connoisseur of arts and literature. By casting Xuanzong with all the qualities of a refined literatus, Luo suggests that literati imagined intimate and personal relationships with the monarch, whose power they perceived to share.

Chapter Two on “Literati Sociality” explores how literati collected stories of past generations to construct unofficial histories and historiographies of themselves. With the intention of shaping their contemporary sense of community, Luo argued that late medieval literati gathered stories that emphasized morality, prestige, the composition and sharing of poetry and the examination participation. All of these four aspects were enduring qualities of literati identity throughout imperial China. Luo’s study therefore suggests that literati were beginning to
form some kind of group identity, despite ongoing divisions and factions, before the civil service examinations became the most definitive mode of “literati sociality” (p. 60) in later periods.

Chapter Three, “Sexuality: Women, Literati and Nonmarital Bonds” describes how literati cultivated their images as romantic figures in different stages of their literati career. The older literatus with masculine self-control was juxtaposed with the emotional and physically vigorous younger junior who was at once a sexual competitor and a benefactor. The essential literati ornamentation was female sexuality, which became a focal point for male-bonding and solidarity. Women in their various roles as daughters, wives, lovers or femme fatale were all devices that men employed in different contexts to express their struggles as elites and as competitors within the changing patriarchy.

The final chapter, “Cosmic Mobility” describes how literati stories fit within the genre of zhiguai (records of the strange), describing observations and encounters with supernatural beings and forces. Accepting one’s fate or predetermined course of life as an official was one way of managing the “structural constraints of officialdom” (p. 146). Having to negotiate with the underworld bureaucracy and continue with existence beyond this life meant that many stories featured cordial relationships between seniors and juniors within the literati community. Possibilities of transcendence to another realm or immortality helped to explain why some literati were “winners” (p. 159) while others sought out stories of dreaming and waking to escape and reimagine their troubled lives within officialdom.

Luo’s examination of storytelling as a literati response to the Tang-Song transition provides a systematic survey of themes embedded in a very wide range of materials that in turn attests to a diverse late medieval literati social life. Luo’s discussions of storytelling as a mode of discourse, with the four main themes she identifies as key to the construction of a literati identity prior to the predominance of Song period civil service examination, are interesting additions to current understanding of the period. The slim volume covering such a wide range of materials resulted in raising more questions than answers offered. Nevertheless, this work is a welcome addition to Sarah Allen’s 2014 *Shifting Stories: History, Gossip, and Lore in Narratives from Tang Dynasty China*, Anna Shields’ 2015 *One Who Knows Me: Friendship and Literary Culture in Mid-Tang China*, and many others working in this period.

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