

major role in the Hungarian war for independence of 1848–49. Chapter 10 gives a broad overview of the mythology surrounding Csoma. Here Marczell deconstructs the image of Csoma as a “hermit-hero” enduring hardships in his quest for knowledge and/or enlightenment. One intriguing line of enquiry considers Csoma’s role in the “Bengal Renaissance” as a proponent of vernacular studies and traditional literature against an encroaching promotion of exclusively English-language-medium education in European literature and science. Chapter 11 introduces the extraordinary tradition according to which Csoma was canonized as a bodhisattva at Taisho University in Japan, and exposes this event as a comedy of errors in which the Hungarian delegation, led by an unscrupulous journalist, summarily presented the Japanese with a statue depicting Csoma as Maitreya Buddha and inscribed with the words “Kőrösi Csoma Sándor The bodhisattva [sic] of the western world”. It seems the Japanese delegation was too polite to decline, and the legend of Csoma as bodhisattva flourished as a result. Chapter 12 introduces the main cast of characters in the promotion of the “cult of Csoma” in Hungary. While damning at times the forces that have monopolized the hero’s legacy, Marczell in the end endorses the mythologization of Csoma, stating that it has played an important role in Hungarian national cohesion and that “. . . besides offering an example of courage, sense of purpose, will power, stamina and diligence matched with austerity, frugality and modesty, it satisfied nearly sacred needs” (p. 215).

Volume II is a substantial sourcebook for further research on Csoma’s life that should be of considerable use in this field. Marczell has faithfully transcribed over 400 pages of handwritten documents and provided the occasional reproduction. These cover the entirety of Csoma’s career in India and are organized chronologically. This is followed by a smaller section containing extracts of often-rare printed sources that the author has collected over the course of his research. The third section, essentially a long appendix, gives lists of sources relating to Csoma’s life and an overview of relevant materials kept in various archives in Britain, Hungary and Austria.

In the appendix to volume I, “The most consequential agents in Csoma’s cult, their background and effects on the hero’s image”, the author’s entry for himself begins, “P. J. Marczell (1936–), a former Hungarian political refugee in Switzerland, views Csoma as a valuable common reference of intellectual curiosity and endurance for Hungarians irrespective of their place of residence”. One comes away with the impression that the image of the lonely and displaced scholar striving for discovery in a foreign land acted as a sort of talisman for the author in perhaps the same way as it had for his illustrious fellow countrymen, Duka and Stein.

Brandon Dotson

EAST ASIA

MARC S. ABRAMSON:

Ethnic Identity in Tang China.

(Encounters with Asia.) xxv, 258 pp. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. £36. ISBN 0 8122 4052 9.

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The Tang is widely characterized as having a confidently inclusive approach to non-Chinese peoples and practices that permitted membership of the Tang *oikumene* to any who sufficiently embraced Chinese culture. Marc Abramson questions this consensus view by seeking out a discourse of ethnic difference that he believes to be pervasive through Tang society, among elites but also commoners. Despite some positive aspects, this discourse expressed in its ambiguities some fundamental anxieties about identity that were engendered by continual exposure to foreigners and reinforced by the political turmoil of the latter half of the dynasty. Accordingly, “there was a whole realm of social, political, and cultural interactions . . . where ethnicity was the key, though often implicit, factor in determining the course of events. . .” (p. viii).

Ethnicity is a notoriously slippery subject and, especially in the pre-modern period, its study requires the clearest thinking and the most careful argumentation for anything meaningful to result. Abramson first has to establish what made the Chinese Chinese, by elucidating what elements placed an individual in or barred them from the categories “Han” and, crucially, “non-Han”. He carefully distinguishes ethnic identity (Han or non-Han) from culture (Chinese or non-Chinese), to clarify situations where, say, an ethnically non-Han steppe nomad engages in a culturally Chinese practice such as filial piety. In a wide-ranging trawl of official, unofficial, literary and archaeological materials he locates little positive definition of Han and Chinese traits: these, like whiteness in the United States, emerge chiefly by contrast with that which is non-Han and non-Chinese.

In the introduction, Abramson posits a chronology in which evolving combinations of four themes – genealogy, culture, the body and politics – succeeded each other as prime shapers of the Tang discourse of ethnic identity. To the mid-eighth century ethnicity was held to predict behaviour; after that ethnicity was derived from behaviour and so became a less effective predictor. The following chapters then offer tantalizing discussions of jokes and stereotypes, the foreignness of Buddhism, the characteristics of the non-Han body, conceptual and political geographies, and different kinds of ethnic change. The conclusion analyses two tenth-century documents as showing political loyalty becoming the prime indicator of identity, crushing ethnic/cultural criteria and indicia and reflecting literati panic about the relationship of people to state. It is not until then that behaviour became the primary indicator, finally allowing non-Han to be considered better Chinese than some Han.

Abramson’s methods find ethnicity almost everywhere in Tang China, for if certain traits have ethnic associations, then any mention of those traits – or even of the theme from which the traits are drawn – becomes evidence of ethnic thinking. Yet his material repeatedly shows that contemporaries frequently, if not usually, used categories other than ethnicity as the determining factors in their decisions. For instance, polemics against Buddhism criticized its foreign character but dwelt mostly on its social and economic impacts. Abramson’s discussion of the body (sadly deprived of illustrations) notes occasional massacres of those of *hu* (non-Han) appearance, but that Tang physiognomical analysis generally emphasized individual character rather than group membership. Ethnic motives are imputed to the provisions of the *Tang Code* while recognizing that tax relief, for instance, was chiefly determined by practicalities. The repeated qualifications about the size of the role played by ethnicity convey a sense of mismatch between evidence and argument that would make the book a confusing read for undergraduates, and leaves the specialist pondering the alternative interpretations that could be drawn from the same evidence.

Thus, a vocabulary or a rhetoric of ethnicity may be identifiable in numerous places, but a discourse must define the framework within which choices may be made, and it is not demonstrated here that ethnicity was the primary determinant of actions or choices, nor that the Tang state deliberately established a “self-consciously Chinese framework” (p. 178). To claim the latter confers an authority, effectiveness and coherence of thought on the Tang establishment that Abramson’s examples show it did not have. And since his evidence is, unavoidably, largely about and produced by the literate classes, the extension of their views to the masses rests too heavily upon assumptions, such as the inevitability of interethnic tension between different groups living adjacent to each other. We can see, however, that the Tang situation was complex, and that there was considerable capacity for subtle and sophisticated approaches to diversity. This would have worked better as the overall point of the book.

This is Abramson’s first monograph, and it is unfortunate that in cutting down the dissertation too much evidence has been lost, for few readers can be convinced when they are referred to other works for the specific examples that build a sustainable argument. The author has examined, with some sophistication, material sufficient to produce a shelf of books, but here he attempts to deal with too many topics in too short a space. Far more effective to have offered more detailed analysis of less material to determine which were the discourses in operation at any given time and which won out in particular cases. Most of all, it is a pity that Abramson did not follow through on his chronological sketch to provide a substantiating narrative of change through the body of the book.

Thus, as sometimes happens, the book’s contribution is other than the author may have intended, for it does raise worthwhile questions about exactly what categories shaped the Tang world in various periods. What discourses framed what was possible, and how did they interact? Were there not emic discourses about ritual, filiality or the *wen-wu* relationship, about loyalty, orthodoxy or rulership? It is in analysing the relative impact of these, and doubtless many other, competing discourses – not just one – that we will find fuller characterizations of the Tang, and better understandings of its connections to both earlier and later times.

Naomi Standen

OUYANG XIU (translated and with an introduction by RICHARD L. DAVIS):

Historical Records of the Five Dynasties.

Ixxix, 669 pp. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. £17.50.

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This landmark translation of Ouyang Xiu’s influential Song dynasty (960–1276) version of Five Dynasties (907–960) history has now been issued in paperback, making it accessible as an undergraduate purchase for topics in historiography, Song culture and – with due caution – as a primary source for Five Dynasties history. It remains important to amplify Davis’s point that this work tells us more about the Song than about the Five Dynasties.

Davis estimates that he has translated some two-thirds of the original, including all of the annalistic material and, comprising the largest part of the text, unabridged renditions of many of the biographies, favouring the longer and more detailed