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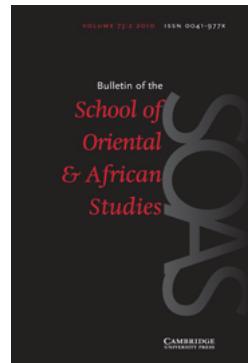
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**Chang Woei Ong: *Men of Letters within the Passes: Guanzhong Literati in Chinese History, 907–1911.* (Harvard East Asian Monographs.) xiv, 262 pp. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008. £25.95. ISBN 978 0 674 03170 8.**

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Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies / Volume 73 / Issue 02 / June 2010, pp 336 - 337

DOI: 10.1017/S0041977X10000261, Published online: 23 June 2010

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0041977X10000261](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0041977X10000261)

#### **How to cite this article:**

Andrea Janku (2010). Review of Chang Woei Ong 'Men of Letters within the Passes: Guanzhong Literati in Chinese History, 907–1911' Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, 73, pp 336-337 doi:10.1017/S0041977X10000261

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“victims” of the patriarchal system. Other texts focus on the fantasies of women seeking an escape from the female condition, be it through Buddhist renunciation and rebirth as a man, or as the cross-dressing female who seeks a male career but cannot ignore the needs of her female body.

As the first major work of translation of Women’s Script folk narratives, *Heroines of Jiangyong* will be favoured reading for all those with an interest in Chinese popular literature, Women’s Script, Chinese oral and literate culture, folklore and gender studies. The ballads would be a pleasure to read in the undergraduate classroom as a point of entry to the subtleties of Chinese family relations and key cultural values.

Anne E. McLaren

CHANG WOEI ONG:

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By the end of the imperial period, Guanzhong, once the centre of the Chinese empire, had become economically and culturally marginalized. Few would have associated the splendour of the Tang capital Chang’an with this impoverished region. In the late 1920s famine relief campaigners in the coastal treaty ports tried hard to evoke the past glory of the “northwest” in their efforts to raise awareness of the region’s past contributions to the nation and the present need to supply vigorous relief. In this way the ruins of an empire in decline became a constituent part of the story of the birth of the modern nation. Liu Guangfen, the last of the Guanzhong scholars to be introduced in Ong’s book, started a campaign of “reviving China from the Northwest” (p. 194) in his native Xianyang in the late 1890s, three decades before the same idea with a slightly different twist was propagated with much more fanfare in the national press. This changing relationship between the local and the national, the regional and the central, and official and unofficial activism is explored in this insightful study that covers no less than a millennium of history. Its guiding question is how the literati’s perception of these relationships changed through time. This huge project is made feasible by concentrating on a very particular group of people, the *shi* or literati, and indeed, one should perhaps add, the most outstanding among these, many of them scholars and officials of national standing. This explains to some extent why it makes sense to say that “people in the past always thought of Guanzhong in terms of this greater political and cultural system that we retrospectively call China” (p. 3). Ong’s study is representative of what Peter Bol has termed the “localist turn” in late imperial Chinese history. While others stemming from the same “school” have more clearly followed a cultural history approach (Anne Gerritsen’s study on the Ji’an literati is a fine example), Ong’s study is by and large an intellectual history, focusing on the teachings of Zhang Zai, the famous eleventh-century Daoxue scholar who was enshrined as the founder of the Guanxue school by Feng Congwu in the final decades of the Ming dynasty. To some extent it is also a social history of the literati, providing many case studies of individual *shi* and their families. The book is organized in three chapters on the Five Dynasties and Northern Song (“A new beginning”), Jin and Yuan

(“The dark ages”), and Ming and Qing (“The renaissance”), following the familiar dynastic sequence of events. The justification for following this politically determined model is the acknowledged importance of the imperial state which “essentially always played a crucial role in defining the historical consciousness of the Guanzhong literati” (p. 18).

The first chapter provides an illuminating account on the Tang–Song transition in North China, complementing the more familiar and better-documented story of the rise of the south. The main theme is the exclusive state orientation of the new elite followed by a turn towards local commitment in the second half of the Northern Song. “Unofficial” literati increasingly came to the fore in local society – “unofficial” referring to scholar-officials acting in an unofficial capacity and thus showing a concern for local affairs. In the political context of the time (Wang Anshi’s statist New Policies) this can be read as a move against over-centralization and an insistence on local society’s ability to manage its own affairs (“do not try to teach a jade cutter how to cut jade”, p. 48). However, contrary to the autonomy sought by elites in the south, local elites in Guanzhong still demanded the symbolic presence of the state (“without the *shi* the state lacked the resources, without the state the *shi* lacked a mandate”, p. 73). Zhang Zai’s idealistic “return to antiquity” philosophy is situated in this context of the renegotiation of the relationship between local elite society and the state. But even in this period Guanzhong’s agrarian economy could not support the further rise of a strong northern Daoxue school (as it could not support local militias, p. 82), and the Jurchen conquest sealed in 1142 ended its further development. These basic shifts are repeated in different ways throughout the periods examined in this book. During the “dark ages” of Jurchen and Mongol rule, when it proved difficult to uphold a privileged *shi* identity and *shi* families were unable to reproduce their success, people turned to Daoism instead, yet a surprisingly state-oriented one. In the thirteenth century Daoxue was brought back to Guanzhong from the south, all but ignoring the local Daoxue tradition. Despite state sponsorship of the local Daoxue tradition following a devastating earthquake in 1303, local literati did not appear interested in the promotion of a local scholar of national importance. The most convincing explanation is that the “resources needed for ensuring a sustained development of literati culture were not present in Guanzhong during the Jin–Yuan era” (p. 129). This changed significantly in the Ming, when state policies invigorated the Guanzhong economy by making long-distance trade a lucrative affair – a trend that continued in the Qing with the Western expansion of the empire. Local wealth produced successful *shi* and a powerful elite proud and able to promote the local heritage nationally. This also made possible “an explosive increase in all kinds of published literary works”, which is clearly one of the reasons why a “collective Guanzhong identity becomes very visible” (p. 131). It seems that from the mid-Ming an increased exposure to all kinds of disasters encouraged the combination of Guanzhong Daoxue and statecraft studies, a trend that became even more pronounced in the first half of the Qing (p. 179). When in the nineteenth century another spate of warfare and famine thoroughly destroyed this newly gained wealth, local consciousness remained strong enough for people like Liu Guangfen to make more explicit claims on the importance of the local for the nation. He, however, preferred to frame his activism in terms of a response to imperialist encroachments. This is an admirable study opening doors to many different aspects of late imperial Chinese history and perhaps inadvertently but continuously implying questions about the relevance of the natural environment for this history.