



Book Review

Nanxiu Qian. Spirit and Self in Medieval China.

The Shih-shuo hsin-yü and Its Legacy. 2001.

University of Hawaii Press. Honolulu. ISBN: 0-8248-2309-5. 520 p.

Dél-Kína Kulturális Egyesület

© Csaba Lu 2010

The so called Wei-Chin “spirit” as it is exposed in the *Shih-shuo hsín-yü*, conventionally translated as *A New Account of Tales of the World*, is the most lively expression of *Self* in the Chinese literary tradition. It represents the outgrowth of new intellectual trends that emerged from the latter Han dynasty onward. This text established its own genre that has never been studied thoroughly so far, despite the growing interest in the Chinese idea of individual identity and human existence or personality between Western scholars. The text contains more than a thousand historical anecdotes about the life of the elite in the later Han (150-220) and Wei-Chin period (220-420) that let us to be inspired by its genuine and brilliant understanding of the concept of self and others. Imitations of the *Shih-shuo hsín-yü* also appeared from the later part of the Tang dynasty (618-907) to the early twentieth century even in Japan.

The *Shih-shuo hsín-yü* represents a unique genre that was widely misunderstood and labeled pejoratively as *hsiao-shuo* (petty talk) by Confucians from the seventh century showing that its legacy didn’t measure up to Confucian standards of scholarship and moral attainment. This attitude towards this book and its legacy also negatively influenced our understanding of the Wei-Chin “spirit”. In recent times the term *hsiao-shuo* means “fiction” and it further complicates and deepens the gap between our understanding and the positioning of this book into its proper place in the Chinese literary tradition. The present book fills this gap by viewing the whole tradition as a distinctive narrative genre in its own right that let us to know more about the Chinese idea of individual identity expressed in concepts such as body, self, person and gender.

The *Shih-shuo hsín-yü* was compiled by the Liu-Sung (420-479) Prince of Liu I-ch’ing (403-444) and his staff around 430 A.D. however it is only the conventional attribution of its origin. Hsiao Hung maintains the concept of origin as Liu I-ch’ing was the main compiler and he compiled the text with the help of Yüan Shu and Ho Chang. On the contrary Lu Hsün states that Liu only sponsored the work of his staff. This question still remained open for further consideration.

The *Shih-shuo hsín-yü* consists of more than 1130 historical anecdotes about the daily life of the elite in the late Han and Wei-Chin periods that fall into thirty-six categories. These categories capture the emotional and personal characteristics of their participants. The stories range from state affairs to philosophical and poetic gatherings, from public relationships to domestic matters. From chapter one to chapter three the book systematically explores the formation and the development of the *Shih-shuo* tradition and the Wei-Chin spirit. These chapters constitute the first part of the book. The second part contains the narrative art of the *Shih-shuo Hsín-yü* that can be

expressed thorough discussions of theoretical concepts like Order and Disorder, Body and Spirit. The third part of the book, from chapter six, shows the topical overview of the imitations of the Shih-shuo hsin-yü legacy.

This brilliantly written book has grown out of an MA thesis and later became the subject of a Yale PhD thesis that proves the importance of its topic. The author, *Nanxiu Qian*, from Nanking is part of a new generation of highly qualified Sinologists whose personal affection towards this subject is the guarantee for high standard research. This book can really enhance our understanding about the spirituality of the medieval Chinese world.



Dél-Kína Kulturális Egyesület ©

www.kinainegyed.hu