

Disengagement by Complicity: The Difficult Art of Early Medieval "Hypothetical Discourses"

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A Review of *Writing Against the State: Political Rhetorics in Third and Fourth Century China*, by Dominik Declercq. Leiden: Brill, 1998 [Sinica Leidensia, 39]. Pp. viii + 434. \$107 (hardbound).

Delicate are the moments of beauty in scholarly life, when one comes across a book in one's own field that through its lucid thinking, meticulous scholarship, and stylistic elegance grants delightful hours of reading. Such rare books do not gasp for breath under the burden of an unwieldy vendor's tray of seasonal jargon; guiding their readers through hitherto unexplored literary terrain of considerable obstacles, they travel with no apparent effort the capacious worlds of classical writings and their modern scholarship. Dominik Declercq's *Writing Against the State* is such a book, and its review could end right here. As a treasure-house of learning, and a model to follow, it is mandatory reading for every student of Chinese literature.

However, considering the relative obscurity of its topic, the book deserves a more extensive discussion. *Writing Against the State* is devoted to the long-faded literary genre known as either "hypothetical discourses" (*she lun* 設論) or "responses to questions" (*dui wen* 對問). Of this genre, just twelve examples are extant in full, and together with a few more fragments and passing references, we can trace exactly nineteen titles from the second century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. Not that Declercq's voluminous study deals with all of them: sandwiched between a hundred introductory pages on the early development of the genre and a very useful seventy page appendix titled "A Gallery of Emblematic Heroes" (containing brief accounts for all major legendary and historical figures that are extensively invoked in the writings under discussion), the main body of the book (chapters three through eight) deals with the mere six extant texts from the period of the Three States (220-265) and the Western (265-317) and Eastern (317-420) Jin 晉 dynasty.

What exactly is the genre, and what is its relevance? "Hypothetical discourses" (to stay from now on with the more common designation, as Declercq does) cover a group of dialogically structured texts in which the author (who names himself) successfully responds to the challenge of an anonymous "guest" who is accusing him of a lack of public engagement. By their artful and highly conventionalized form, the

she lun appear as a subcategory of the *fu* 賦 (rhapsodies); in terms of contents, they attempt to justify a personal life removed from, or on the margins of, official duty. As Declercq argues, these texts were not written lightly for purposes of entertainment and aesthetic delight; instead, they were prompted by a genuine need to avert threatening, sometimes perhaps life-threatening, charges of disloyalty and political dissidence. In their own terms, *she lun* were by definition successful; without exception, "the author is ultimately vindicated as a true and upright gentleman while his opponent, the voice of worldly opportunism, is triumphantly reduced to silence" (p. 4). More than writings in other genres, *she lun* were composed at the interface of life and literature: intricately crafted exercises in literary convention intended to resolve individual real-life dilemmas. As Declercq notes:

Regarded by literary scholars as mere exercises in composition, by historians as unwieldy source material, these elegant compositions have fallen by the wayside. But at the junction of literary and political history, the little-remarked "hypothetical discourses" reveal a range of responses to a question of grave importance to Chinese gentlemen, drawn up within constraints of speech and style characteristic of their age (p. 19).

In Declercq's presentation, each of the six texts under discussion is therefore not only elegantly translated and amply annotated but at the same time embedded in a painstaking study of its author's biographical circumstances and the larger historical context. Educating the reader in early medieval Chinese literature and history alike, and indeed in their complex interplay, Declercq gives a splendid demonstration of what the study of either one in light of the other entails.

But are the twelve surviving *she lun* more than some curious scribbling in the margins of Chinese literary history? What, if anything beyond their own existence, do they tell us about Chinese literature that we wouldn't already know from less obscure writings? Quite a bit, as *Writing Against the State* makes clear. Through the lens of *she lun*, we get a closer look at the conditions of literary production in early medieval China, at the anxieties and pressures as well as motivation, sincerity, and literary art of men who as members of the cultural elite were expected to assume public responsibility in exposed positions. We are asked to revisit official and private ideologies for a historical period that retrospectively, and grossly simplistically, has been looked down upon as an age of religious escapism and aesthetic superficiality at the expense of "Confucian" values. And we have the opportunity to examine the eloquence of expression and concealment in literary works that were written to justify their authors as well as to comment on the state of public affairs. Finally, *she lun* reveal a complex problem of the Chinese imperial state: on the one hand, the educated elite complied with the ideological demands of the state by means of literary composition;¹ on the

¹Consider Stephen Owen's remarks in his *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 31: "The language [of poetry] is Statethink, new words to emasculate all threats to the central order. . . . As a symbolic act of

other hand, as the title *Writing Against the State* pointedly captures, it is precisely, and perhaps only, through the perfect mastery of literary form that members of the elite could effectively ward off the claims that the state was making on their lives.

In his "Introduction," Declercq summarizes the complex ideological tensions out of which a genre like *she lun* had grown. While in the early Chinese empire, learned men "had few alternatives other than pursuing a career as a government official" (p. 6) in order to put their textual knowledge to use, to resign from office was also considered

a legitimate way to signal one's protest against perceived abuses in government. In theory, the political establishment would acknowledge the protest and take appropriate action; it could not simply disavow its own ideology. Thus one finds that even hermits were credited with a positive role: they were seen as gentlemen who by fleeing the world displayed an extreme distrust of the possibility of preserving their integrity in any public function at all. Their attitude could be explained as a form of puritanism -- or as a total condemnation of the regime they lived under (p. 9).

Ironically, nothing made a man look more suitable for public office than his credible refusal to embark on a career, claiming "that he was motivated by loftier moral principles than most" (p. 12). The person of seemingly low ambition was therefore as much an honorable—and highly visible—figure as he was vulnerable to charges of disloyalty; yet "the risk he took conferred a quite 'bankable' prestige that could lead to a position with the government" (p. 15). As Declercq argues, this fundamentally ambiguous message inherent in all known *she lun* was necessarily balanced by the high degree of stereotyped formalism of literary expression: historically accepted, the genre conventions themselves—including recurrent references to the established canon of texts and heroes from the past—granted a certain protection from dangerous misunderstanding.

From such considerations, it seems clear that the *she lun* genre is not marginal to the Chinese literary tradition, but indeed can be regarded as a textual form wherein perennial questions concerning the nature and function of literary composition, as it was intimately related to the social status of the educated elite, crystallized. In terms of literary history, *she lun* exemplify the entire tradition of regarding the act of writing as a response to political circumstances, and of perceiving the literary work as a precarious manifestation of political involvement. Beyond the aesthetic domain of literary composition, that is, in the larger picture of intellectual history, the "hypothetical

loyalty to the state, the poem affirms this principle of order and makes it manifest. The parallel couplet, the structured description of a landscape, the presumption of meaning incarnate in the world—all these formal patterns and conventions of figuration carry the secret message, "I believe in the universal and eternal validity of the cosmic-imperial system." To some extent, the imperial writers' complicity with the state is implied in the overall thesis of Mark Edward Lewis's *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); another recent book that tries to argue in this direction is Christopher Leigh Connery's *The Empire of the Text: Writing and Authority in Early Imperial China* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998).

discourses" address an issue that from Warring States times onwards was on the minds of Chinese thinkers: under which circumstances is retreat from public office, or remaining in some inconspicuous and marginal position, permissible or perhaps even called for? While much has been written on the early Chinese tradition of reclusion, including insightful studies that have moved us beyond a misguided "Confucian" versus "Taoist" dichotomy,² and while the third and fourth centuries have often been considered a time when political disengagement flourished in various types and gradations (e.g., actually inside versus outside of office), little attention has been paid to the literary aspect of the phenomenon. Yet as one may understand from Declercq's work, this literary side in form of the "hypothetical discourses" is more than some superficially aesthetic concomitant of an otherwise serious philosophical and political issue: it plays an essential part in the conscious self-representation of men in disengagement and as such to some degree defines and indeed constitutes one of the most prominent types of reclusion, namely that of highly educated men who in general remained in some higher or lower office and who were able to display their uncompromised virtue and superior ability in precisely the medium that mattered most as the outward expression of a gentlemen's inner perfection—sophisticated literary production. While it would be difficult to disprove Declercq's assumption that *she lun* were invariably written in response to a real and potentially dangerous challenge, one does not need to be particularly cynical to recognize the considerable prestige that such texts—if written well—were able to confer upon their authors.

Once the genre was fully established by Eastern Han times, the author of a convincing "hypothetical discourse" was both an official, real or potential, of highest integrity and a literatus of outstanding achievement. Both elements, the moral and the literary, contribute to the philosophical and aesthetic intricacy of the genre, and Declercq deserves our gratitude for having provided access to these texts, by their very nature exquisite and demanding. His translations, well annotated and regularly interspersed with explanatory comments and interpretative paraphrases, are elegant renderings that capture the rhythmic diction and Byzantine eloquence of the original. Typographically, the text is set to reflect shifts between rhymed and unrhymed passages as well as changes of rhyme that—as Declercq aptly recognizes (see p. 56, *passim*)—mark the borders of topical units.³ (In addition, one only would also have wished for the full Chinese text placed alongside the translations or, at least, in a separate appendix.)

²An excellent study is Aat Vervoorn, *Men of the Cliffs and Caves: The Development of the Chinese Eremitic Tradition to the End of the Han Dynasty* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1990), that also has provoked a sophisticated review article by Alan Berkowitz, "Reclution and 'The Chinese Eremitic Tradition,'" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113.4 (1993), pp. 575-584; this article should be read as complementary to, and in parts also corrective of, Vervoorn's book.

³Declercq's observation is significant as it duly recognizes an important, yet mostly overlooked, stylistic device in traditional Chinese literature. Marking textual shifts in voice or topic with changes of rhyme is certainly a relic from earlier performance practice that deserves broad and careful examination; see my "Shi jing Songs as Performance Texts: A Case Study of 'Chu ci' ('Thorny Caltrop')," *Early China* 25 (forthcoming).

Declercq is fully aware of the superior model that David R. Knechtges has set for translating the *fu* (the literary genre to which, in formal terms, *she lun* are most closely related),⁴ and he prudently cites Knechtges's translations of difficult words that abound in both "rhapsodies" and "hypothetical discourses."

Following his introduction to the principal *she lun* setting, Declercq in chapters one and two lays the historical and conceptual basis for the detailed discussions of post-Han "hypothetical discourses" given in the main body of the book. In chapter one, the origin of the genre is traced through its first two texts, Dongfang Shuo's 東方朔 (154-93 B.C.) "Da ke nan" 答客難 ("Response to a Guest's Objections") and Yang Xiong's 揚雄 (53 B.C.-A.D. 18) "Jie chao" 解嘲 ("Dissolving Ridicule"). It is Yang Xiong who defined the genre by recognizing and consciously emulating Dongfang Shuo's earlier model; yet in appropriating the earlier text as an example to follow, Yang—and also the next *she lun* author Ban Gu 班固 (32-92)—interpreted Dongfang's text in new terms. Declercq observes that in Dongfang Shuo's *Shiji* 史記 biography, where "Response to a Guest's Objections" is only partially included, "the accent is on the agonistic and impromptu character" of the text, showing how "the element of challenge and response... of 'hypothetical discourses' could have originated in a joust with words in an audience at court" (p. 20). An anonymous speaker ridicules Dongfang for his low position at court where all his talent and learning—something Dongfang is boastful about—remain unappreciated; in the past, men of his stature would have served as high advisors to their ruler. Dongfang responds that the times have changed, that the world is now in harmony, that one should be content with the position one is granted by the emperor, and that the true gentleman should concern himself more with his self-cultivation rather than with greed for high office.

The account in Dongfang Shuo's *Shiji* biography suggests that "Da ke nan" artfully recreates in literary form an actual debate between Dongfang Shuo and a group of court academicians, "staged for the Emperor's entertainment or even at the Emperor's instigation" (p. 24), and that the dialogue form, as in the persuasions (*shui* 說) of the *Zhangguo ce* 戰國策, ultimately reflects an exercise in face-to-face rhetoric. By contrast, the *Hanshu* 漢書 compiler Ban Gu (in line with Yang Xiong's earlier judgement) no longer places the "Response" in a performance context: in Dongfang Shuo's *Hanshu* biography that includes Dongfang's text in full, "the 'Response' is treated as a special example of a type of literary text that Hellmut Wilhelm has called the "frustration *fu*" (p. 20), written in private and "definitely not a composition that originated under duress, let alone one that was intended for future public performance" (p. 34). In carefully unfolding these different understandings of "Da ke nan," Declercq traces a fundamental shift in textual production and reception from the time when Chu Shaosun 褚少孫 (ca. 105-ca. 30 B.C.) interpolated Dongfang Shuo's biography into Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (ca. 145-ca. 86 B.C.) *Shiji* down to Yang Xiong's reaction to Dongfang's text. In other words, it was the definition of the genre itself in Yang's "Dissolving Ridicule"—not

⁴See Knechtges, *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature*, three volumes to date (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982, 1987, 1996).

by a specific designation but through reference to the earlier model—that transformed “Response to a Guest’s Objections” into a type of text that perfectly matched Yang’s ideas about the nature and function of literary compositions; it remains doubtful that these ideas were also Dongfang’s, or that he indeed could have possibly developed them in his own times. I believe there is good evidence to support such considerations by embedding them in a larger context: one important phase in the gradual development from a performance-centered culture to one dominated by written literary texts seems to fall precisely in Yang Xiong’s time and was certainly enhanced by his own literary practice. Just as he did with Dongfang Shuo’s composition, when discussing Sima Xiangru’s 司馬相如 (179-117 B.C.) *fu*, Yang again applied anachronistic categories of his own textual scholarship and literary production to performance-oriented compositions that he understood, probably misunderstood, as a model to follow.⁵

As becomes clear from Declercq’s detailed analysis of “Da ke nan” (for which he includes a new translation, as he does for Yang Xiong’s “Jie chao”), the difference in the assumed original nature of the text proper—literary representation of an actual dialogical performance versus written expression of frustration—prompts significantly different interpretations. Only if read as a “frustration piece” does Dongfang Shuo’s text turn into an all-too-easily decodable criticism of his own ruler, Han Wudi 漢武帝 (r. 141-87 B.C.);⁶ otherwise, it would be understood as artistically—certainly not verbatim—recreating an original debate in which its author had tried to defend himself against dangerous accusations.

Yang Xiong’s “Dissolving Ridicule,” by contrast, is a literary composition for which no particular origin in an actual performance is apparent. Yet as Declercq argues, this piece includes “a thinly disguised charge of passive resistance to the regime, surely not something Yang Xiong... would invent for the sole purpose of writing an ingenious piece of *belles-lettres*,” instead, Yang was probably “obliged to respond to a real-life, dangerous challenge” (p. 41). I find this conclusion—which Declercq extends to *she lun* in general (p. 68)—possible; but between “an ingenious piece of *belles-lettres*” and a concrete “dangerous challenge” lies a range of other options. I find it at least as plausible to suggest that “Jie chao” was written as part of Yang’s overall self-representation—note that he in fact authored his biography!—and that the text was meant to respond to a more general set of circumstances and impulses for self-justification.⁷ Such questions are difficult to decide; more important is Declercq’s

⁵See my “Ritual, Text, and the Formation of the Canon: Historical Transitions of *wen* in Early China,” *T’oung Pao* 87.1-3 (2001), pp. 43-91.

⁶One should note the close parallel to Yang Xiong’s and Ban Gu’s interpretation of Sima Xiangru’s *fu*, claiming that these texts were intended to admonish the emperor who instead mistook them as eulogies; see *Hanshu* (Peking: Zhonghua shuju, 1987) 30.1756, 57B.2600, and 2609. The point is also made in *Shiji* (Peking: Zhonghua shuju, 1982) 117.3063 and hence attributed to Sima Qian. However, I am inclined to follow Yves Hervouet’s argument that Sima Xiangru’s *Shiji* biography is a later text modelled on its counterpart in the *Hanshu*; see Hervouet, “La valeur relative des textes du Che ki et du Han chou,” in *Mélanges de Sinologie offerts à Monsieur Paul Demiéville*, vol. 2. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974), pp. 55-76.

⁷Cf., for example, how Yang reacted to the powerful Liu Xin 劉歆 (d. A.D. 23); see David

careful and entirely convincing analysis of "Dissolving Ridicule," showing that through its dense accumulation of historical and textual references, Yang Xiong's text resists any one-dimensional reading:

In the end there is no doubt that Yang Xiong condemns the regime, hints threateningly that the people in power will come to a bad end, refuses to take any part in it; all this we learn, however, without being able to pinpoint where exactly Yang Xiong says it, clearly and unambiguously. Wherever Yang Xiong risks becoming too outspoken, he takes care to counterbalance it immediately with a dose of the opposite, and in this zigzag fashion the argument progresses. It is the gradual accumulation of 'false notes' that tells the reader which way the wind really blows across this doubtful landscape, where the superficial landmarks do not point in any clear direction. (p. 58)

In laying open Yang Xiong's complex strategies of indirect criticism and self-justification, Declercq lets us appreciate "Jie chao" as a rhetorical masterpiece and at the same time offers careful insights into the Chinese tradition of political expression. Most importantly, in my eyes, it becomes abundantly clear how traditional Chinese political rhetoric is interwoven with the art and power of literary expression. Exquisite poetic compositions like those of the *she lun* genre are not historical texts in a transparent sense (whether or not there is any such thing in early and medieval China is yet another question); neither can historians afford to ignore the texts, nor can scholars of literature dismiss their contexts.

In chapter two, devoted to a discussion of the *she lun* as a literary genre, Declercq forcefully raises this issue right at the beginning. He notes that despite the very small number of surviving texts, such writings once formed a considerable body of texts and were gathered in several anthologies (in the laudible fashion that prevails throughout the book, the reader is given all the details and precise references behind such a conclusion). Significantly, the surviving examples of "hypothetical discourses" are included in their author's official biographies, and Declercq argues that they were indeed meant to contribute to the historical narrative—and truth claims—of these chapters in the dynastic histories. He notes that "the 'hypothetical discourses' that have reached us intact did so largely because of the prestige of these Histories, disseminated in so many manuscript copies that they, at least, escaped the ravages of war and other depredations" (pp. 60-61). If this is true, however, one cannot help wondering about certain limitations in the retrospective definition of the *she lun* genre: it means that only texts survived written by authors who – for a great variety of reasons – figured prominently enough in the imperial state to merit an official biography.

Perhaps with the exception of Dongfang Shuo's "Da ke nan," it was primarily the prominence of the author (or his enigmatic character), and not the aesthetic quality of the text, that ensured the broader circulation and enduring preservation of a "hypothetical discourse." As Yang Xiong and Ban Gu referred to Dongfang Shuo's

"Da ke nan" as their model text, most of the later *she lun* were in turn consciously oriented toward the examples set by Yang and Ban (and Dongfang only through *their* reading); we witness the gradual extension of a narrow historical line of famous models, sharply confined to the few texts by prominent authors that have been transmitted through the ages. To me, this suggests that within the gradually emerging *she lun* tradition, any model "hypothetical discourse" was closely bound to the exemplary personality of its author and served as the ultimate means of his characterization.

While this conclusion only strengthens Declercq's more general point that *she lun* cannot be appropriately understood beyond their historical (extraliterary) context, I would like to go a step further: ever since Dongfang Shuo, references to ancient men in reclusion lay at the core of an argument designed to justify one's own relative obscurity; with the new genre, exemplified in Yang Xiong's and Ban Gu's "hypothetical discourses," such historical models were complemented by textual ones that, within the narrow confines of the literary elite, increasingly emphasized the public literary composition as an integral part and expression of one's personality and social practice of relative disengagement. In some passages, Declercq comes close to such questions:

From the historian's point of view, these people's literary oeuvre afforded more eloquent testimony to the way they had positioned themselves in their times than did the record of their actions in public life; they were more instructive to posterity in what they had written than in the example they had set by their actions on the political stage. Not as landmarks in literature, but as examples of how gentlemen expressed themselves in the conditions of their time: this is how their writings function in the Book of Jin. Nevertheless, their didactic or moralistic purpose did not blind historians to the literary quality of the texts they chose to include in a historical work. . . . Literary accomplishment, after all, was a mark of the gentleman. The more beautiful a text, the more worthy it was of serving to document the author's standing. (p. 245)

I would have liked a more pointed conclusion: composing a literary work of the *she lun* caliber in fact *is* public performance. Beginning in Eastern Han times, text and personality were seen as mutually illuminating and indeed as standing in for one another; this is why *she lun* are preserved in their author's biographies (where their *raison d'être* is always related to the concrete real-life circumstances of their authors). Therefore, it is perhaps not merely accidental to find Dongfang Shuo's "Da ke nan" quoted only partly in the *Shiji*, but fully in Ban Gu's *Hanshu* (where also Yang Xiong's "Dissolving Ridicule" is preserved as a whole). The rationale behind "hypothetical discourses" as truthful and authentic expression of the self is related to a text like the "Great Preface" ("Daxu" 大序) to the *Shi jing*, most likely also of Eastern Han provenance. But while the "Great Preface" explains the nature of anonymous songs through its (in James J. Y. Liu's terminology) "expressive theory of literature," *she lun* literary practice is bound to the named individual and related to the well-documented Eastern Han notion that posthumous literary fame would transcend, and indeed substitute for, recognition during a man's lifetime. Moreover, it is not surprising to find the genre

flourishing in the third and fourth centuries, when ideas about the relation between personality and literary production were paralleled by a new interest in the variations of human character, as it is reflected in Liu Shao's 劉邵 (third century) *Renwu zhi* 人物志, Huangfu Mi's 皇甫謐 (215-282, another *she lun* author) *Gaoshi zhuan* 高士傳, or in the practice of "pure conversation" (*qingtan* 清談) preserved in the stories compiled by Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403-444) in the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語.

If there is one major weakness in *Writing Against the State*, I would identify it at this point: while the book offers meticulous research into both the individual biographies of *she lun* authors and the general framework of third and fourth century political and social history, it does not seem to pay sufficient attention to issues of early medieval literary thought and the contemporaneous discourse concerning the expression and judgement of human personality and individuality—prominent areas of intellectual history that in my eyes are important to consider when looking for what defines "hypothetical discourses" as a genre, that is, beyond certain formal conventions. By contrast, Declercq is strong in analyzing the important differences among the various texts: while Dongfang Shuo with his "Response to a Guest's Objections" may not have had any particular political message in mind, Yang Xiong, as noted above, delivered a strong criticism of the government. Ban Gu, turning the genre in again another direction, used his "Da bin xi" 答賓戲 ("Response to a Guest's Jest") to eulogize his times, while Cai Yong 蔡邕 (133-192), by "hiding [the] originating impulse" of "Shi hui" 釋誨 ("Rejecting Censure"), apparently intended his text to be understood in more general terms, that is, "to serve as a 'warning' against arbitrary government... presumably for all eternity" (p. 86). The six texts from the third and fourth century, as Declercq demonstrates in detail, depart as well in various directions from the earlier models. This broad range of possible messages delivered through a "hypothetical discourse" suggests all the more to look into more fundamental issues that might contribute towards defining the genre. Declercq addresses the need for such a definition, and the difficulty of reaching it, by asking—yet not convincingly answering—a simple question: why is it that *she lun* were traditionally never subsumed under the broader category of *fu*, despite the obvious fact that the former employs most of the basic formal characteristics of the latter? (pp. 87-92)

As noted above, chapters three through eight are each devoted to one of the six extant post-Han *she lun* pieces. These are Xi Zheng's 郤正 (d. 278) "Shi ji" 釋譏 ("Rejecting Slander"), Wang Chen's 王沈 (third century) "Shi shi lun" 釋時論 ("Explanation of the Times" [or perhaps "Rejecting the Times?"]), Huangfu Mi's 皇甫謐 (215-282) "Shi quan lun" 釋權論 ("Rejecting Advice"), Xiahou Zhan's 夏侯湛 (243-291) "Di yi" 抵疑 ("Countering Suspicions"), Guo Pu's 郭璞 (276-324) "Ke ao" 客傲 ("Of a Guest's Insolence"), and Cao Pi's 曹毗 (fl. ca. 342-383) "Dui ru" 對儒 ("Riposte to a Scholar"), with the last piece being an anomaly in actually reversing the normal argument of a *she lun*: it defends why the author is *not* retreating but instead focussing on his successful official career. Each of the six chapters starts out by thoroughly examining the author's personal circumstances as they were embedded in the larger political, social, and intellectual contexts of his time; on this basis, Declercq then presents his annotated

translation of the text proper, interspersed with analyses of its successive sections. In addition, the chapter on Wang Chen's "Explanation of the Times," being the first on a Western Jin text, includes useful outlines of Jin history (pp. 123-133) and "Roads to Office During the Jin" (pp. 134-151) that aptly summarize the current state of the field. Of particular interest here is the complex, and continuously changing, relation between the educated elite and the state. After the Han state had, with certain success, attempted to appropriate the moral high ground by integrating the classicist scholars into imperial office duties, this class of learned men soon found itself again on the margins or even the outside of the bureaucracy. As they had been in late Warring States times, scholars in the Three Kingdoms period once more were less protected but also less controlled by the state and were able to represent (in Mark Edward Lewis's words) an "opposition stance" of assumed moral superiority towards the state. And as in the Qin and Han empires, the imperial bureaucracy again took formal measures to draw scholars back into official responsibility, limiting the authority of, and potential moral threats from, the "famous gentlemen" (*mingshi* 名士) who in the final decades of the rapidly deteriorating Eastern Han dynasty resided outside the court and "came to attract a following of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of private students and retainers for their independent stand against the dynasty, competing with each other over who had the 'purest' credentials" (p. 138).

The *she lun* of the third and fourth century are important documents of these tensions, as they are inscribed into the threshold of imperial office. Despite their overall formal conventionality and highly schematic line of argument, these complex readings also demonstrate a fascinating range of individual expression. In some cases, attempts to decode the "real meaning" are defeated differently in different texts: Yang Xiong's subtle balance of conflicting messages is one thing, but Guo Pu's dazzling array of philosophical ideas and literary allusions is quite another. Other "hypothetical discourses" are more straightforward, like Xi Zheng's rather conventional frustration piece, Wang Chen's political critique that "must rank among the most vitriolic prose in Chinese literature" (p. 122), or Xiahou Zhan's angry yet at the same time, because of the author's secure aristocratic background, relaxed self-recommendation to a corrupt bureaucracy.

Amidst its many virtues of historical analysis and literary translation and interpretation, *Writing Against the State* also allows us important insights into the official ideology and rhetoric of early medieval China that further contribute towards a more precise and subtle understanding of an age that Confucian thinkers from Tang times onwards have often condemned for its philosophical predilections of "dark learning" (*xuanxue* 玄學), individualist escapism, and an increasing interest in Buddhist ideas. The *she lun* discussed here show us a different picture: while Buddhism does not play a role in any of them, references to the five "Confucian" classics, the *Lunyu* 論語, and the sages of high antiquity (especially Yao 堯 and Shun 舜) abound, as do those to the *Laozi* 老子 and *Zhuangzi* 莊子; in addition, the imperial structure itself is, apparently as one of the major ideological conventions of the genre, related in terms of Han correlative cosmology. Perhaps with the exception of Guo Pu, this does not

necessarily reflect any particular individual philosophy or ideology; as the form of the *she lun* genre was highly standardized, so was its stock of references. A quick alternation of *Lunyu* and *Laozi* quotations—both referring to models of semi-reclusion—was not the exception but rather the compositional rule. What does this mean? Consider Declercq's following statements, made in the context of Guo Pu's dubious, yet apparently highly esteemed divination expertise:

The 'history of Chinese philosophy' as we are accustomed to think of it, in imperial times, at least, is nearly always the history of *state-patronized* philosophical thought... it was in fact the government that picked the winners [among different philosophical doctrines]... the philosophical developments of the second to the fourth centuries, as the classic textbooks chronologically present them, are due in part to revolutions in official patronage, which, once extended to proponents of a given 'school,' gave that brand of thought the seal of orthodoxy and hence a strong position to become the leading 'philosophy.' (pp. 260-261)

I find this idea not fully convincing. Was it ever in early or early medieval China "the government" (a term supposedly referring to the emperor and a small inner circle of high officials?) that decided on a particular ideology and successfully disposed of competing systems of thought? Was there ever a clearly identifiable "state orthodoxy?" Note that Michael Nylan has argued that such a picture does not hold for the Han dynasty;⁸ similarly, David McMullen has shown that even in the seventh century, when a group of scholars led by Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574-648) was imperially commissioned to produce the *Wu jing zhengyi* 五經正義 ("Rectified Meaning of the Five Classics"), not one but two commentaries for each of the principal canons were officially accepted, and that in addition, court scholars enjoyed the freedom to write their own interpretations.⁹ As neither one of the two strongest government structures of early and medieval China managed, or indeed intended, to impose a clearly defined orthodoxy, it seems questionable to assign such an impulse (not to speak of the necessary authority) to struggling and short-lived regimes that through their very instability and dubious legitimacy let many notable scholars refuse to enter public service. Instead, I believe that the *she lun* suggest a different explanation: the apparently disengaged men of public repute (never mind that some appear shadowy today) who wrote these texts, drawing on legendary models from the past to claim a stance of superior morality against the present, were themselves forceful agents in the political discourse of their time. They held authority not despite but because they were ostentatiously operating from the margins of the imperial bureaucracy, a place of conspicuous visibility, from which they proposed a serious alternative and competition to whatever officially sanctioned values were held in the inner circles at court. Considering that the ultimate

⁸See Nylan, "The *Chin Wen* / *Ku Wen* Controversy in Han Times," *T'oung Pao* 80 (1994), pp. 83-145.

⁹See McMullen, *State and Scholars in T'ang China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 78.

model of disengagement under questionable rulership was Confucius himself, can we go so far to say that perhaps not high government officials but semi-secluded scholars, often employed in the subordinate tiers of the bureaucracy or living in (sometimes erratic and precarious) circumstances of personal patronage, were the true holders of moral authority, as they embodied the claim for, and possibility of, an ideal government against which, by comparison, any actual rule could only pale? Didn't the center of moral gravity always reside on the margins of political power, not really completely dissociated from the imperial court, but also not at its core? Wasn't this morality more often at war than in peaceful harmony with the putative moral force of imperial ideology?

Having moved this far, I may finally venture an interpretative suggestion for the genre of "hypothetical discourse." While Declercq discusses the typically "mixed messages" of these texts primarily in terms of a rhetorical strategy employed to protect the author from charges of illoyalty, I wonder whether the notorious ambiguity of the political message, pervasively paired with philosophical syncretism, was to some extent already the very point: the true gentleman was not one-sided but broadly inclusive, and his intellectual penetration of both the cultural heritage and the cosmological principles was high above pedestrian squabbles between particular doctrines. As such, the very compositional logic of *she lun* sufficed to avert any possible "state orthodoxy," and the intricate diction of the texts, as it established the author's superior cultural accomplishment (*wen* 文), represented an aesthetics of both complicity with the state and political subversion. With such conclusions on the moral force and compositional texture of "hypothetical discourses," the genre—marginal as it may have appeared at first glance—would indeed turn out to be a quite important element of the Chinese literary tradition, and certainly very much worth reading.

As usual, a very good book does not really end with its last page but provokes further thinking that even may include some occasional disagreement—which then takes nothing away from, but only further corroborates, the importance of the original work. *Writing Against the State* is a superb piece of scholarship, sure to be frequently consulted for years to come. Finally, the author together with those at Brill who are responsible for its physical production should be congratulated on their own contribution to *wen*. With an elegant layout that pleases the eye on every page, the virtual absence of typos and similar flaws, the liberal use of Chinese characters throughout the text, and a beautiful, while discreet, cloth binding, the outward appearance is just the adequate carrier for the exquisite contents.