Xiaofei Tian, *The Halberd at Red Cliff: Jian'an and the Three Kingdoms*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018. 470 pp. ISBN 9780674977037. $49.95.

In the year 217, a plague ravaged the Han empire. Far deadlier than the coronavirus which forces me to write this review in self-quarantine, it seemed to touch every household, rushing untold numbers of men, women, and children to early graves. The sounds of weeping filled the streets. Common folk hung talismans to ward off evil spirits. Aristocrats blamed an imbalance of cosmic forces and wrote elegies for their beloved friends. Three years later, the Han dynasty collapsed, following nearly four hundred years of relatively stable rule. Three regional polities would compete to succeed the Han. The fighting would last for decades, and the land would not be unified under a single ruler again for another three and a half centuries, with the Sui in 589.

The period surrounding the collapse of the Han has long captured the Chinese literary imagination, but in two distinct ways. On the one hand, the poetry of this era is celebrated as the earliest exemplars of the personal lyric (*shi* 詩), a form that would become the most highly esteemed genre of Chinese literature. On the other hand, the military battles of this time gave rise to storytelling traditions that produced countless narratives, novels, plays, films, TV series, and video games.[1] The poetry is generally known by a reign-period name, Jian'an. The narratives are known by a political name, the Three Kingdoms. Despite the fact that many of the celebrated poets were also important military leaders, these two literary traditions are generally discussed separately. Culture (*wen* 文) and military (*wu* 武) shall not meet.

It is the stated purpose of Xiaofei Tian's compendious new book, *The Halberd at Red Cliff*, to reunite these two traditions. The basic thesis of the book is simple: both Jian'an and the Three Kingdoms, from the very beginning, are ideas that have been reconstructed in retrospective nostalgia. Stated baldly, this thesis will likely strike western academics as obvious. All cultural history is constructed, and those constructions change throughout time. But Tian's thesis is merely a pretext for a splendid tour through

1. On a personal note, growing up in 1980s suburban Ohio, the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* video game for Nintendo (itself a translated version of the Japanese game *Sangokushi* 三國志) was my first exposure to premodern China in any form.

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Chinese literary history, conducted by one of the world's most capable guides. It is in the details that *The Halberd at Red Cliff* shines.

The sprawling chapters—which reach up to 72 pages in length—are arranged roughly chronologically. They begin with the writings of the third-century poets and the practices of their courtly community, move forward in time to their reception in the following centuries, and conclude with a thousand-year survey of representations of the famed Battle of Red Cliff in poetry, drama, novel, and film. An epilogue critically analyzes the gender dynamics of Three Kingdoms video games and homoerotic fanfic. A series of appendices translate key primary sources. For one scholar to command such a breadth of sources, with such attention to their music as well as their meaning, is an impressive achievement.

Part one, comprised of the first two chapters, focuses on the writings of the Jian'an community itself. Chapter one is the most compellingly argued and, to experts, will be the most controversial. It argues that Jian'an "was a romanticized era created from elegiac remembrance," even during the poets' own lifetimes (29). The founding documents of Jian'an poetry, such as Cao Pi's *Normative Discourses* (*Dianlun* 典論), were written in the shadow of the plague of 217, which wiped out many of his poet-friends. Cao Pi, as the Crown Prince of the ascendant kingdom of Wei, actively attempted to create a new poetic canon in order that the departed may achieve literary immortality in lieu of earthly longevity. "An era is born with the very declaration that it is over," writes Tian (29). Later writers such as Xie Lingyun (385–433) and Xiao Tong (501–531) crystallized this romantic image of Jian'an in their reimaginings, which themselves became canon. This despite the fact many of the writings of the Jian'an poets, preserved by chance in other sources, are much darker and more complicated than the romantic image. This tension, between the original work and the constructed context for it, is a theme that runs throughout Tian's book.

Chapter two discusses the complex ways that literary writing created, perpetuated, and negotiated the Jian'an literary community. It focuses on poems, poetic expositions (*fu* 賦), and letters describing the social practices of feasting and gift-giving. As Tian reminds us, power played a major role here: the Jian'an literary community was comprised of lords and vassals, in which allegiance is often exchanged for protection. There are long, fascinating tangents on the cooking of wild geese, on the discovery and exchange of precious jades, and on human sacrifice. Each of these has a payoff, as they explain the dynamics of crucial

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images in Jian'an social writings—how vassals, figured as geese or jades or sacrifices, are trapped, consumed, owned, or exchanged by their lords. The Jian'an community is, in fact, more of a sociopolitical than a literary one, helping to establish legitimacy for the emergent Wei dynasty ruled by the Cao family.

Part two, comprised of chapters three and four, focuses on later generations' reimagining of Bronze Bird Terrace, an imposing tower constructed at General Cao Cao's orders, one which later became a site of nostalgia and image of impermanence. Chapter three describes Lu Ji's (261–303) writings on the Wei and its Jian'an-related sites. As a southerner who moved north in the period of division, Lu Ji was an outsider to Wei poetic culture but nevertheless entranced by it. In this way, Tian argues, Lu Ji was a fan writer in the strictest sense: one whose conscious goal was "*repeating with a difference*" the literary legacy he so admired (184). In so doing, he hoped "to write a new poetry, no longer merely of the north or of the south but of a unified empire" (196). Though convincing on the whole, this chapter is less coherent than the first two. An opening section on feather fans is largely superfluous: the pun on fan's two meanings (as air-wafter and as enthusiast) does not exist in medieval Chinese, even if Lu Ji was a fan who wrote about fans. Some interpretations of poems are advanced through rhetorical questions which are then treated as fact, as on pp. 189–90. Some of the evidence for Lu Ji's poetics for a unified empire seems more based on poetic convention than on any political agenda. Lu Ji's couplet describing wartime enemies, "Tatar horses gather like clouds; / Yue banners are everywhere like profuse stars" 胡馬如雲屯，越旗亦星羅, is driven by the logic of parallelism, ubiquitous in premodern Chinese poetry. "Tatar horses" and "Yue banners" are standard synecdoches for northern and southern troops, referring (by further synecdoche) to armies from all over the world. They are not actual descriptions of "the ethnic identities of the northern and southern foes" (200), which, as Tian posits, would enforce an "us vs. them" mentality in both northern and southern Sinitic dynasties.

Chapter four provides a mini-anthology of poems on the Bronze Bird Terrace from the fifth through the fourteenth centuries. These poems are divided into two types: an early tradition (fifth through tenth centuries) which focuses on the Terrace as a melancholic site associated with Cao Cao's last will and testament, and a later tradition (eleventh century onward) which describes physical tiles from the Terrace which have been made into inkstones and sold on the antique market. The earlier tradition, on the Terrace itself, usually describes a troupe of female dancers performing for Cao Cao's soul tablet.

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This section is particularly powerful, as Tian shows in great detail the many variations on a theme, how delicacy and restraint give way to shifting perspectives of the poetic speaker, which give way to irony and satire. It allows Tian to explore many overlooked but fascinating poems from the Tang-dynasty (618–907), often understood to be a high point in Chinese poetry. The later tradition, on Bronze Bird Terrace inkstones, is another captivating story, in which the past becomes commoditized, traded, collected, exploited, and falsified (poets often complained of fake inkstones flooding the market). Sympathy toward the Wei dynasty, like old ink, gradually dries up as "the past is solidified into a tangible object, a hard thing, to be played with, exchanged, gifted, or stolen" (276). This chapter, which would have benefitted from being split into two, is nothing less than an expert course in how to read classical Chinese poetry. Tian brings our attention to minor verbal cues (the uses of similes, of images of light, of slight perspective changes) that radically shift a poem's meaning. She contextualizes all of this in the changing standards of literary history, showing how aesthetic standards shift over time and how later events (such as the Song dynasty's loss of the north in 1127) give new meaning to historical references.

Part three is comprised of one chapter, "Restoring the Broken Halberd." The titular "broken halberd" refers to a weapon discovered in the sands of Huangzhou by the Tang poet Du Mu (803–852) in the 840s. He imagines the halberd to be a relic of the famous Battle of Red Cliff fought in 208, in which a chance turning of the winds led to Wu general Zhou Yu's victory over the large naval fleet of Cao Cao's Wei kingdom. This poem, Tian argues, is a turning point in Chinese literary history. Following Du Mu, Red Cliff overtook the Bronze Bird Tower as the main focus of literary representations of the Three Kingdoms period. As she traces a variety of these representations of Three Kingdoms military narratives from Du Mu's time to our own, she notes four key inflection points, focusing on how they contextualize Cao Cao's poem "Short Song." The first is Du Mu's poem. The second is polymath Su Shi's famed "Former and Latter Rhapsody on Red Cliff" composed in 1082, which depicts a complex dialogue between a romantic's and a realist's attitude toward the legacy of Red Cliff. Su Shi's work became so influential that no later writer could ignore it, and nearly all followed his lead in setting Cao Cao's poem against the Battle of Red Cliff. The third inflection point is the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (seventeenth century), which shifts the focus from historical memory to military strategy and narrates the story from the Shu-Han kingdom's perspective. As a result, Shu strategist Zhuge Liang becomes the hero, and Wu

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general Zhou Yu becomes a capable but small-minded rival. The fourth inflection point is John Woo's 2008 film *Red Cliff*, which Tian contrasts with a 2010 mainland Chinese TV dramatization of the same story. Both modern adaptations, in contrast to the premodern texts, give greater visibility to women and common folk. Tian argues that the film, directed by a Hong Kong native, advocates for regionalism over national unity. To do this the film turns would-be unifier Cao Cao into a villainous monster by setting his recitation of the "Short Song" over images of Cao and his generals feasting merrily in juxtaposition with the Wu and Shu-Han troops solemnly burying their dead. The film thus attempts to "tame" the poem, which would otherwise exceed its context and create sympathy for the villain. The problem, from a literary historian's perspective, is that later readers assume the veracity of each of these recontextualizations of Cao Cao's poem. That is, as we get further away from Cao Cao's time, older representations seem to become truer, even if they were speculative to begin with. Indeed, as the very first chapter showed, the literary context of the early third century was from the very beginning shaped by the refracting prism of nostalgia. There is no "historically accurate" depiction of the Three Kingdoms, its wars, and its literary culture—only variations that spiral further and further from an imagined center.

In her discussion of the way different Three Kingdoms narratives contextualize Cao Cao's poem "Short Song," Tian posits a fundamental tension between poetry and narrative. Poetry, as the isolated detail, carries an aesthetic power that exceeds any attempt to contain it with a single meaning. Narrative, as the larger mythos, tries to pin down the poem's true meaning through contextualization. But no narrative fully explains the poem. It is always open to reinterpretation and recontextualization.

There is a similar tension in *The Halberd at Red Cliff*. Tian's brilliant readings of individual poems, her digressions into the details of material artifacts, her long descriptions of tangentially related cultural practices, her compilation of dozens of writings on a shared theme, her critical analyses of gender in Three Kingdoms fanfic—all of these exceed the larger arguments which they are meant to support. Like the individual aphorisms in a Blakean epic, or the tormented souls in a Bosch painting, or a series of conspicuous cameos in a period film, the particulars collected in Tian's book often threaten to overpower the whole. *The Halberd at Red Cliff*, then, is probably better read as a guided sourcebook on lore of and about third-century China than as a well-honed argument concerning it. The book's merits are in its presentation of primary texts.

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Occasionally, however, we may feel the strain of the way these sources are put in service of larger arguments. For example, Tian overreads the Buddhist resonances of common words in her discussion of Xie Tiao's poem on Bronze Bird Terrace (p. 225–26). When tears "stain" (*ran* 染) the speaker's clothes and reveal his feelings to be "in vain" (*kong* 空, also "empty"), Tian assumes that Xie Tiao is invoking these terms' technical meanings in Buddhist philosophy. Yet, unlike many of his contemporaries, we have no direct evidence that Xie Tiao practiced, or even held any sympathy toward, Buddhism. Tian brings up *ran*'s religious connotations to heighten the sexual tension in the poem, claiming that Buddhist defilement (*ran*) is said to be caused by "desire or sexual passion." Yet, to the Buddhist, the desire that causes defilement is not necessarily of the sexual kind. This minor interpretive blunder stains an otherwise graceful reading of the way Xie Tiao's poem elegantly evokes the complicity of its reader. There are other places to quibble with details of Tian's readings, often a matter of misplaced emphasis. For example, the line "Famous performers sing solo, unaccompanied by music" (202) is an infelicitous translation of 名謳激清唱, which does not stress solitude. But overall, Tian's renderings are sound, written in a mellifluous variation of the sinologese shared by scholars of premodern China.

One aspect of Tian's book that will be of particular interest to readers of *Studies in Late Antiquity* are the cross-cultural comparisons found in the early chapters. For example, when discussing Lu Ji's encounter with the former capital Luoyang in chapter three, Tian cites both Gibbon's and Petrarch's nostalgic reactions to seeing Rome centuries after its glory days. Merovingian and Carolingian gift-giving are evoked to help describe the dynamics of exchanges among the Three Kingdoms in chapter two. In chapters one and two, the symbolic and social aspects of feasting in Jian'an poetry bring up quick references to similar associations in ancient Greek, Mesopotamian, and Renaissance symposia. The comparisons are provocative but brief—just enough, perhaps, to excite interest in scholars of the premodern west. They are foretastes of the comparative feast that could be prepared by a future scholar working boldly across times and regions.

In short, *The Halberd at Red Cliff* is a finely crafted critical sourcebook of Chinese cultural history as seen through literature of and about the Three Kingdoms. Sweeping in ambition and encyclopedic in execution, there is something in it for everyone. The comparative classicist will find an informative introduction to early medieval China. The student will find guided readings through nearly two millennia of Chinese literature. The sinologist will find a

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plethora of innovative interpretations of works to engage with. *The Halberd at Red Cliff* is a good companion to have by one's side while waiting out an epidemic.

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Rita Lizzi Testa and Giulia Marconi, eds., *The Collectio Avellana and Its Revivals*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019. xxxii + 650 pp. ISBN 9781527521506. £105.99.

The volume is the result of a seminar held in September 2016 in Perugia, Gubbio and Fonte Avellana, at the Monastery of Santa Croce. Rita Lizzi Testa and Giulia Marconi from the University of Perugia were the instigators of this gathering of scholars from Italy, Spain, Finland, France, Switzerland, and the United States, as well as the editors of the fine volume under review.

The 2016 seminar followed on from two earlier conferences on the *Collectio Avellana (CA)*, both organised by Alexander Evers at the Loyola University in Rome.[1] The first volume of papers from these conferences is yet to appear, as A. Evers and B. Stolte, *Religion, Power and Politics in Late Antiquity: Bishops, Emperors and Senators in the Collectio Avellana 367–553 AD* (Leuven: Peeters, forthcoming). Evers also contributes a chapter to the volume currently under review, which gives a useful analysis of the five-part structure of the *CA* and confirms its compilation in Late Antiquity.

The *CA* transmits 244 important church documents, dating from 367 to 553. Mainly written in Latin but sometimes translated from Greek, these documents include canons and pronouncements of church councils, imperial and papal rescripts, and imperial and episcopal letters from East and West. Many of these sources are preserved only in this collection, including most of the 145 letters of Pope Hormisdas, known as the pope who resolved the Acacian Schism that split the eastern and western churches for 35 years until 519. The compilation was produced in several stages between 530 and the end of the sixth century, and a manuscript was once held at the Monastery of Santa Croce in Fonte Avellana, where the theologian Peter Damian worked and flourished just after the monastery was built in the eleventh century. This locale, Fonte Avellana, drew its name from the hazelnuts (*avellanae*) that grew there near a

1. See https://www.luc.edu/collectioavellana/index.shtml (accessed 28 May 2020).

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