Bing *From Farmer's Son to Magistrate in Han China*

By Michael Loewe
Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011
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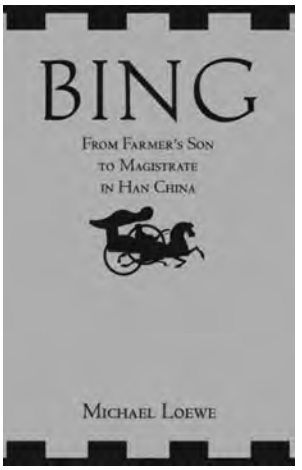
Reviewed By Jeffrey L. Richey



In a recently published study, Paul R. Goldin takes stock of the advances and limitations of the study of early China in Canada and the United States. Acknowledging the seminal contributions of earlier scholars in the field, he also points out liabilities that arise from the way in which North American scholars have shaped our understanding of early Chinese culture. Especially misleading, according to Goldin, is the widespread notion that "there was no room in early China for named individual heroes"—a stereotype that commonly is applied to other premodern East Asian cultures.[1] Given the fragmentary information about the lives of the individuals who witnessed the rise and fall of China's first dynasties that is available, one might be forgiven for thinking that early China lacked counterparts to the strikingly individual Mediterranean men and women so vividly described by Plutarch and Suetonius.

Although it is true that in early Chinese history individuals were depicted as exemplars rather than as unique human beings, early Chinese poetry and visual art often tell different stories, in which cosmic patterns are leavened by human idiosyncrasies and desires shape cosmic patterns. The Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) witnessed the flowering of an increasingly personal style of narrative in both literary and visual forms. The famous T-shaped silk banner found in the tomb of the early Han aristocrat Xīn Zhui ("Lady Dai," d. 163 BCE) depicts the deceased noblewoman's spirit making its way from grieving kin and courtiers on earth to joyous communion with celestial beings, while the *Gushi Shijiu Shou (Nineteen Old Poems)* collected during the later Han dynasty includes the following heartfelt lines voiced by someone to his (or her) lover:

> *A traveler came from far away,*
> *put a letter into my hand;*
> *at the top it spoke of 'undying remembrance,'*
> *at the bottom, of 'parting long endured.'*
> *I tucked it away inside my robe;*
> *three years—not a word has dimmed.*
> *With whole heart I offer my poor love,*
> *fearful you may not see its worth.*[2]

That these stories and the individual experiences that they record almost always are those of exceptional persons who led privileged lives does not dilute their power to connect us to the people of another place and time or to teach us about life in early Chinese culture. The same may be said for historian Michael Loewe's imaginative narrative about Wu Bing, who is born to an illiterate peasant family in Han China but dies a retired government official. The novel is set around the year 70 BCE,

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approximately one generation after the reign of Han Wudì, the "martial emperor" who ruled over some sixty million subjects spread across a vast empire that stretched from the Pamir Mountains (in what now are Afghanistan and Tajikistan) in the far west to the northern Korean peninsula (near P'yŏngyang, the present-day capital of North Korea) in the far east and linked by the Silk Roads trading networks. Well-known for his meticulous and penetrating studies of Han administrative documents, Loewe acknowledges that his novel is as much a work of fiction as it is a conjecture from history. He insists, however, that the events and personalities that he has invented represent plausible lives—albeit extraordinary ones—for the women and men of Han dynasty China:

> *As far as I know, there is no record of an official who was torn between his obligation to implement the laws and his revulsion at their severities; mention of such a difficulty in Chapter Fifteen stems from my belief that at least some of the imperial officials were also human beings…. There can be no precise record of what our hero and his wife were thinking or feeling; their reactions and emotions are of the sort that can hardly be ignored in any account of human lives.*[3]

As Bing journeys from a childhood of hard agricultural labor to an adult career as an educated official, he experiences the full spectrum of Han social life either directly or indirectly. Through Bing's eyes, the reader glimpses the slavery imposed on the relatives of convicted criminals, the communal process of village decision-making; the rites of ancestor worship and popular religion; the marvels of early Chinese technological innovations, such as hydraulic pumps and iron foundries; the gritty realities of corvée labor and military conscription; contacts with Eurasia via the Silk Roads; the vicissitudes of travel and trade by land and sea; the diets of both commoners and elites; urban and rural environments; techniques of divination; the acquisition of literacy; the perils of illness and childbearing; the links between omens and rebellions; and, of course, given Bing's career in government service, the details of law and order from sumptuary codes and taxation policies to criminal investigation and trial procedure.

The volume is slim, inexpensive, and relatively easy to read. Each chapter is tagged with a paragraph-length description of historical events, personalities, and practices mentioned in the narrative and a brief list of suggested readings from secondary sources. Along with a map of sites and borders that appear in the novel, fourteen simple black-and-white illustrations of representative artifacts—from buildings such as granaries and tombs to objects such as wooden documents, grave goods, and contemporary illustrations of everything from bureaucrats to goddesses—ground the text in imagery and effectively convey the routine details of life in Han China. The book concludes with an extremely concise "Brief History of the Han Empire" and a brief annotated bibliography of suggested scholarly resources for further reading.

Loewe is a gifted and eminent scholar whose historical expertise is impeccable, but his talents as a novelist appear to have been subordinated to his agenda as a historian. Despite being solidly readable, *Bing* is not quite as thrilling or engaging as other works of historical fiction that address life in ancient China, such as Gore Vidal's *Creation* or Barry Hughart's

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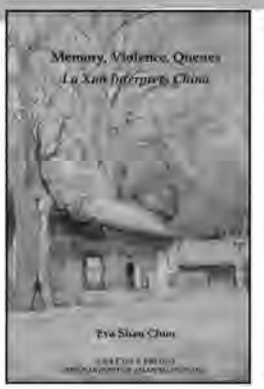

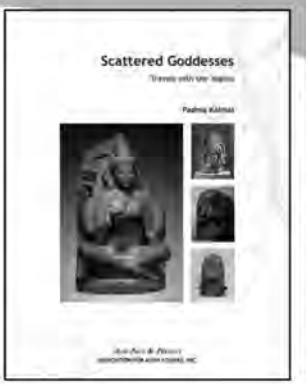

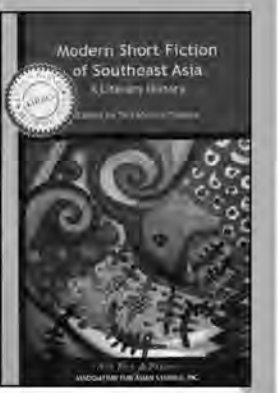

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This book presents the reader with substantial translations from memoirs and autobiographies by Japanese women. The women who appear in the book are far from household names in Japan: Okabe Itsuko (nonfiction writer and cultural critic), Shinya Eikô (stage and screen actress), Yoshitake Teruko (activist, historian), Kishino Junko (newspaper reporter, adjunct professor of African-American literature), and Kanamori Toshie (reporter, Kanagawa Prefecture grass roots activist) to name but a few. The voices found in Changing Lives touch upon key moments in a dynamic and tumultuous era in Japanese history as witnessed by these women. These events include the emperor's radio address at the end of World War II, the first Japanese election in which women could vote, the Ampo Movement, and the Women's Lib Movement of the 1970s where we encounter two of the women speaking directly about the process of developing their "feminine consciousness." Changing Lives will be of interest to students and teachers in multiple disciplines, including history, anthropology, sociology, gender studies, and women's self-writing.
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Because each chapter is so rich in social-historical context and detail, it may be advisable for instructors who use the novel in the classroom to assign only one or two chapters at a time . . .

Bridge of Birds. *Bing*, however, is far more historically reliable than either of those novels, which take immense liberties with the known facts. The vocabulary used in the novel will present few—if any—difficulties to the high school or collegiate reader, but the attention of younger students may wan if they are asked to read the text in one fell swoop. Students might find *Bing* more appealing than primary sources drawn from early Chinese historical, literary, or religious texts, however. If used as part of a survey course on Chinese, Asian, or world history, *Bing* might make an excellent companion to other novels that are both historically sound (in general, at least) but deal with later periods, such as Robert van Gulik's "Judge Dee" mysteries (based on the career of the Tang dynasty magistrate Di Renjie) or neighboring cultures such as Liza Dalby's *The Tale of Murasaki* (based on the life of Murasaki Shikibu, the author of the early Japanese novel *The Tale of Genji*).[4]

Because each chapter is so rich in social-historical context and detail, it may be advisable for instructors who use the novel in the classroom to assign only one or two chapters at a time, perhaps integrating each portion of the book with background readings or specific lesson plans that will help prepare students for what they will encounter in Bing's story. As a professor of religious studies, I can imagine assigning excerpts from the novel such as chapter six (which describes sacrifices performed by the Han emperor) or portions of chapters nine and ten (which deal with Han funerary practices, imperial tombs, and theories of afterlife) to good effect in courses on Chinese or East Asian religious history. Regardless of whether *Bing* is incorporated in part or in whole into one's teaching about early China, the novel certainly will provide students with a unique perspective on life in one of the world's oldest continuous civilizations during a particularly foundational cultural and historical moment. ■

NOTES

1. Paul R. Golden, "History: Early China," *A Scholarly Review of Chinese Studies*, eds. Gary Lance Lugar, Shuyong Jiang, Zhaohui Xue, and Haihui Zhang (Ann Arbor: The Association for Asian Studies, 2013), 1-10. This volume is available free of charge, at http://www.asian-studies.org/publications/Chines-Studies.htm
2. Trans and ed. Burton Watson, *Chinese Lyricism: Shih Poetry from the Second to the Twelfth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 30.
3. Loewe, Bing, xiii.
4. A list of historical novels set in Asia, which may be suitable for classroom use, can be found online at http://www.historicalnovels.info/Asia.html.

JEFFREY L. RICHEY is Associate Professor of Religion and Coordinator of Asian Studies at Berea College in Berea, Kentucky. He has authored and edited several books on Confucian traditions, including *Teaching Confucianism* (Oxford University Press, 2008), *The Patheos Guide to Confucianism* (Patheos Press, 2012), *Confucius in East Asia: Confucianism's History in China, Korea, Japan, and Việt Nam* (Association for Asian Studies, 2013), and (with Kenneth J. Hammond) *The Sage Returns: Confucian Revival in Contemporary China* (State University of New York Press, forthcoming). Presently, he is editing an anthology of essays about Daoist influences in Japanese religious history.