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**J. Michael Farmer, *The Talent of Shu: Qiao Zhou and the Intellectual World of Early Medieval Sichuan*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. Pp. XIX + 246; illus. USD\$85.00 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-7914-7163-0.**

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J. Michael Farmer's *The Talent of Shu* tells us as much as we are ever likely to know about the third century CE filiations of scholastic interpretation in the Chengdu Plain, unless archaeologists find a new cache of excavated documents there. Finally, Sichuan — or the Chengdu Plain, at any rate — has begun to receive due attention as a community on the geographic periphery of China's heartland. The Chengdu Plain maintained high standards of scholarship quite distinct from those in the capital in part because local elites determined that its abundant natural resources should support the establishment of state-sponsored academies whose famous teachers focused on the various linguistic traditions found among the polyglot population.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, Farmer has taken on a formidable task in this book. While Qiao Zhou (221-263), as the first author of a major commentary on the *Shiji*, was an important innovator in the field of historical studies, less than thirty fragments are still extant from Qiao's masterwork, the *Gushi kao*.

To build up a picture of Qiao's scholarship, Farmer must be prepared to weigh every available piece of evidence, and to do so judiciously in light of related accounts. In successive chapters, then, Farmer carefully lays out the wider Sichuan intellectual scene. Qiao Zhou's intellectual biography is situated neatly within several larger narratives. The first of these narratives details the quite remarkable accomplishments of Qiao's family; the second reviews the political events in Sichuan that led Qiao, famed for his prophetic powers, to persuade his Shu-Han ruler to surrender to the Jin court<sup>2</sup>; the third compares divergent styles of exegesis in the early post-Han period; and the fourth analyzes the development of local gazetteers and local histories. Thus Farmer's epilogue, which recaps all his major arguments in the book nicely, serves as a pithy introduction to the whole of Sichuan politics and scholarship during the late second and early third centuries. Qiao, we come to see, was an interesting figure who displayed the distinctive Sichuan style of scholarship insofar as he was both critical of the received canonical sources

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<sup>1</sup> Notable contributions to the recent Sichuan literature include Stephen Sage, *Ancient Sichuan and the Unification of China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Robert W. Bagley, ed., *Ancient Sichuan: Treasures from a Lost Civilization* (Seattle and Princeton: Seattle Art Museum and Princeton University Press, 2001); the 2003 issue of the *Journal of East Asian Archaeology*; chapter 4 of Ronald Egan, *The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in Northern Song Dynasty China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006); and Béatrice L'Haridon, "La recherche du modèle dans les dialogues du *Fayan* de Yang Xiong (53 av. J.-C.-18 apr. J.C.): écriture, éthique, and réflexion historique à la fin des Han occidentaux" (PhD diss., Institute National des Langues and Civilisations orientales, 2006), 2 vols.

<sup>2</sup> For his pains, Qiao was condemned throughout history as a traitor.

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and "accepted opinions" about them and thoroughly conventional in his firm belief that the "wisdom and principles contained in the Classics were models for contemporary affairs" (41).

I am deeply impressed with how much information Farmer has managed to wrest from the scanty materials at hand. Sichuan "comes alive" to the reader, even when Farmer's subject is the fairly mind-numbing twists and turns of arguments within competing commentarial traditions. Good writing of this sort deserves to be commended and rewarded. Like all of us, Farmer makes a few mistakes (all minor) while laying out his ideas. King Goujian of Yue inexplicably becomes Goujian of Wu, for example (63), in a slip of the pen. The weakest chapter of Farmer's book, chapter 4, attempts fairly extensive comparisons between Qiao Zhou and the exegete Zheng Xuan (127-200), a figure whose contributions are certainly ripe for reconsideration, but so extensive as to preclude easy reappraisal. Zheng Xuan now strikes us as the most towering figure of his age, but it is fair to ask how large he would have loomed in Qiao Zhou's polemics. Farmer speculates that Qiao Zhou may have been blacklisted by the True Way neo-Confucian moralists, given the dramatic rise of anti-Qiao rhetoric in late imperial China coupled with the paucity of citations of Qiao's work before late Qing. No matter what the reason, Qiao Zhou — and indeed, Michael Farmer's expanding corpus of works on the Chengdu Plain traditions — richly deserve a second look in this brave new world of early China studies.