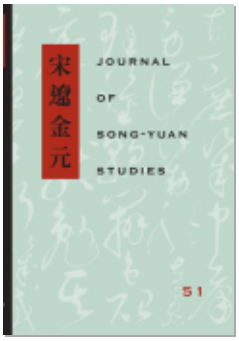
The Way of the Barbarians: Redrawing Ethnic Boundaries in Tang and Song China by Shao-yun Yang (review)



Jonathan Karam Skaff

Journal of Song-Yuan Studies, Volume 51, 2022, pp. 354-357 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/sys.2022.0017*

Shao-yun Yang. *The Way of the Barbarians: Redrawing Ethnic Boundaries in Tang and Song China*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019. Pp. 242. $30 (paper); $99 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0295746036

Shao-yun Yang investigates intellectual shifts in "premodern Chinese attitudes regarding ethnocultural identity and difference" that occurred in the late Tang and Northern Song periods (3). He believes that previous studies of this topic have been influenced by the modern nationalistic assumption that foreign threats naturally encourage "a stronger emphasis on ethnic solidarity and greater hostility toward ethnocultural others" (4). Yang's goal is to explain attitudes of late Tang and Northern Song scholars toward foreigners in terms that more closely correspond to premodern Chinese conceptions.

The introduction and the first two chapters explore the thought of the influential Tang scholar-official, Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) who famously was the leader of the Guwen 古文 (Ancient-Style Prose) literary movement that reacted against the florid parallel prose of the Six Dynasties and early Tang. Philosophically, Han Yu's well-known essay, "Tracing the Way to Its Source" (*Yuandao* 原道), advocated for a Confucian/Classicist (Ru 儒) revival of "The Way of the Sages" (*Shengren zhi Dao* 聖人之道), which he believed to have been declining since the time of Mencius. One putative cause of degeneration was the "barbaric" foreign religion of Buddhism. Yang agrees with other scholars, such as Charles Hartman, that Han Yu's ideas about religion and identity should not be described as xenophobic or nativistic because Han opposed not only Buddhism, but also Daoism. Han Yu's attack on the religions radically challenged Tang imperial ideology that drew upon Classicism, Daoism, and Buddhism for legitimacy.

However, in contrast to Hartman and others who interpret "Tracing the Way to Its Source" as advocating to restore Confucian "cultural orthodoxy," Yang has coined a neologism, "ethnicized orthodoxy," to describe Han's views. The book's introduction argues that the term "ethnicized" is better suited than "cultural" to describe Han Yu's proposed orthodoxy because premodern Chinese (Hua 華 or Xia 夏) lacked a concept analogous to "culture" defined as "shared values, beliefs, and practices" (11). In addition, "ethnicized" better conveys the radicalism of Han Yu's rhetorical strategy to depict "alternative philosophical and religious traditions as un-Chinese and barbaric. . . . According to such rhetoric there was fundamentally no such thing as a Chinese Buddhist or even a Chinese Daoist" (16). This was "an ideology-centered

interpretation of Chineseness" (4–5) that "*ethnicized* . . . the boundaries of Classicist orthodoxy" (15). Ethnicized orthodoxy was not an identity, but rather was a rhetorical device meant to shame opponents in intellectual debates by "denying their Chineseness" (56). However, in Chapter 2, Yang seemingly contradicts his own argument by disagreeing with scholars, such as Peter Bol, who "see Han Yu as imputing a barbaric essence to Daoism" (53). Yang contends that Han Yu's language is ambiguous about whether Daoism is as barbaric as Buddhism or merely inferior to Classicism. Instead, Chapter 4 credits the Northern Song "Guwen radical," Liu Kai 柳開 (947–1000)—who considered Han Yu and himself to be the final two sages transmitting the true Way—as the first to impute barbarism unequivocally to both Daoism and Buddhism. If Han Yu was only Liu Kai's inspiration to ethnicize the Way of the Sages, then perhaps another label Yang uses to characterize Han's thought, "ideological exclusivity," more aptly represents the ideas of both scholars (43, 222).

Yang argues that late Tang scholars developed another discourse of "ethnocentric moralism" that eventually superseded ethnicized orthodoxy and became mainstream during the Northern Song. In coining this second neologism, Yang selects the modern concept of "ethnocentrism"—defined as the "subjective belief that one's (sic) own people and their ways are superior to all others" (14)—because of its close correspondence to premodern Chinese attitudes. "Moralism" more conventionally refers to the propensity of Classicists to judge people according adherence to ritual propriety (*li* 禮) and moral duty (*yi* 義). Yang locates the origins of this discourse in late Tang essays, including Cheng Yan's 程晏 (fl. 895–904) "Call to Arms against the Inner Barbarian" (Neiyi xi 內夷檄), which "subverts conventional understandings of Chineseness and barbarism" (69). Chinese who behave immorally are accused of being barbarians at heart, while barbarians who are attracted to the Central Lands and the emperor's transforming influence are Chinese at heart. Northern Song "Guwen moderates," who tolerated Buddhism and Daoism, developed this discourse further in essays, letters and exegetical works. Yang gives much attention to exegesis of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, a popular genre among Northern Song Guwen scholars seeking to recover true understanding of the classic text. Yang particularly focuses on conflicts in the *Annals* involving states of the Central Lands (Zhongguo 中國) and the "barbarian" southern states of Chu 楚 and Wu 吳. Commentators used ethnocentric moralistic rhetoric that accused not only Chu and Wu of following

the "The Way of the Barbarians" (*Yi-Di zhi Dao* 夷狄之道), but also rulers of the Central Lands who behaved immorally in interstate relations. Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) extended the logic of ethnocentric moralism to its fullest extent in a decree examination essay of 1061 in which he criticized rulers of the Central Lands who acted immorally because the "'real barbarians' by birth were not as contemptible as Chinese people who had turned into barbarians by behaving immorally" (113). Yang argues that ethnocentric moralism also was well-suited to the budding Daoxue 道學 (Learning of the Way or Neo-Confucianism) movement that espoused an "uncompromisingly moralistic approach to all aspects of politics and society" (122).

Yang contends that the intellectual shift from ethnicized orthodoxy to ethnocentric moralism was not the "straightforward product of political change or crisis, but had its own developmental logic, driving forces, intertextual influences, and internal debates" involving the Guwen and Daoxue movements (4). The author eruditely traces the textual developments and debates, but seemingly underestimates how changing contexts of politics influenced the viability of each discourse. For example, during the late Tang both discourses appear to have been deployed rhetorically to critique domestic politics. Han Yu's "Tracing the Way to Its Source" is conventionally interpreted as a call to political reform dating to 804 or 805 when Han Yu had been exiled in the south after submitting a memorial critical of the dominant faction of officials at the court. The essay's call for moral cultivation to revive the "Way of the Sages" can be viewed as an antidote to the corruption of eunuchs and officials at court, while its attacks on Buddhism and Daoism and advocacy for burning monasteries, which were untaxed, would remove a financial burden from the people and state. Yang disagrees with this conventional dating and contextualization, but his complex and compressed argument that the essay was composed in 811 in literary debate with Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819) would require further evidence and elaboration to be persuasive. Regardless, Yang clearly agrees that ethnocentric moralism likely emerged in the context of late Tang politics. Most germanely, Cheng Yan's "Call to Arms against the Inner Barbarian" was probably an indirect rhetorical attack on the Chinese warlord Zhu Wen 朱溫 (852–912) who behaved "barbarically" in usurping rule from the Tang and founding the Later Liang (907–923).

Ethnocentric moralism eclipsed ethnicized orthodoxy during the Northern Song, according to Yang, because "the priorities of leading Guwen writers had long shifted from anti-Buddhist and anti-Daoist polemics to questions

of political and socioeconomic reform" (116), but "the biggest factor in the decline was the fact that no *Annals* commentator of the eleventh century took an interest in using ethnicized orthodoxy" in exegesis (117). This explanation gives weight to intellectual trends and downplays the influence of Northern Song politics, but the cause seems to be more closely tied to contemporary politics and geopolitics than the author asserts. Since the power of the Buddhist and Daoist establishments had been much reduced under the Northern Song, rhetorical attacks on the religious were no longer useful at court. Instead, conflicts over policies and reforms occurred between factions of Guwen scholar-officials who could be praised or denounced based on their perceived adherence to shared moral standards. For example, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* commentator Hu Anguo 胡安國 (1074–1138), criticized the reformist policies of Wang Anshi for bringing, "disorder to human relations and . . . using barbarians [ways] to change the Chinese" (132). The rhetoric of ethnocentric moralism also was useful in interstate relations. The focus of *Spring and Autumn Annals* exegesis on the conflicts between states of the Central Lands and "barbarian" Chu and Wu served as allegories for Song relations with the Liao and Xi Xia dynasties. Song revanchists could justify attacks against barbarian neighbors because of their "immoral spirit of rebellion," while reformists could fault the "Central Lands" for failing to "set a good moral example that would move the barbarians to submit to the king" (105). If Yang had given more than passing attention to the influence of domestic politics and foreign affairs on ethnocentric moralism, he might have fortified his argument that the Northern Song did not experience nationalism or proto-nationalism.

Shao-yun Yang deserves praise for his meticulous research and nuanced analysis of the Guwen and Daoxue scholarly debates on the nature of barbarism. Along the way, he successfully demonstrates that this subset of highly literate individuals viewed their world through moralistic lenses that gave them perspectives on foreigners that cannot be readily categorized as xenophobia, nativism, or nationalism. Perhaps most enlightening is the discussion of scholars who turned their gaze inward to warn fellow elites against following "The Way of the Barbarians."

JONATHAN KARAM SKAFF
SHIPPENSBURG UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA