

EDITOR'S NOTE

This special issue of *Early Medieval China* presents four articles that center on a series of questions about being human, prompted, as it is, by the realities of our own epoch known as the Anthropocene. What constitutes being human? What are the fuzzy edges of humanity? What can we learn from exploring the margins of humanity? The early medieval period, which witnessed ethnic conflicts and negotiations, technological revolutions, religious interventions, and socio-cultural transformations, is a time when conceptions of the cosmos, the world, and the human came under tremendous pressure, and therefore provide a particularly fertile ground for exploring these questions.

While the category of the human can be permeable and multifaceted, it becomes most intelligible at its boundaries: shape-changing animals, gods and goddesses, ghosts, monsters, marginalized peoples such as the barbarians, the foreigners, and the slaves. These groups, each with distinctive characteristics, were represented and contemplated in various types of verbal and visual arts, across different forms and genres. Many texts, from dynastic histories to anomaly accounts, from commentarial writings to legal codes, from treatises to hagiographies, implicitly or explicitly interrogate the boundary between humans and nonhumans, seeking to define a human being's personhood and status. The beings that in the perception and worldview of medieval writers existed on the margins of humanity most clearly map out "the human" as it was then conceived.

The four articles in this issue, contributed by scholars of literature and of religion, explore the margins of the human and the fluid boundaries between humanity, divinity, and animality in texts from the early fourth through mid-ninth century. Antje Richter's article focuses on three stories of mistaken identity in which a shapeshifting animal impersonates a human but is eventually uncovered, proposing that the social changes taking place in early medieval China moved questions about human identity to the center of attention. Robert Ford Campany's article takes the side of animals in stories of metamorphosis and argues for a view of nonhumans as selves striving for self-cultivation in order to achieve the goals of health, longevity, enhanced capabilities, and, eventually, transformation into higher beings. Self-cultivation for the sake of ascending the hierarchy is very much on the human agenda in the article by Jonathan E. E. Pettit, who investigates diverging conceptions of apotheosis in the hagiographies of three Daoist saints and suggests that the dividing line between human and divine may have been blurred for many Daoist practitioners. Hierarchy likewise lies at the heart of the argument put forth by Manling Luo in her article on three medieval stories about human-tiger transformation and the relationship between humans and divine forces, which she contends reveal the concerns of low-level scholar-officials about their identity and status. Intended not as the final word but rather as a conversation starter, this special issue hopes to generate further dialogue among scholars from different disciplines not only of medieval China but also beyond.

This issue also features a review article, fittingly entitled, “Bringing Scholarship on the Early Medieval Period to a Broader Audience,” by Patricia Buckley Ebrey on a milestone publication, namely *The Cambridge History of China*, volume 2, *The Six Dynasties*, 220–589, co-edited by Albert E. Dien and Keith N. Knapp, a massive tome of thirty chapters written by twenty-six scholars. Last but not the least, this issue contains reviews of three recent books on early medieval China: Jack W. Chen’s *Anecdote, Network, Gossip, Performance: Essays on the Shishuo xinyu*, reviewed by Graham Sanders; Xurong Kong’s *Fu Poetry along the Silk Roads: Third-Century Chinese Writings on Exotica*, reviewed by Qiulei Hu; and Yue Zhang’s *Lore and Verse: Poems on History in Early Medieval China*, reviewed by Fusheng Wu. More books will be reviewed in our next year’s issue; together they attest to the continued vibrancy and vitality of the studies of early medieval China.

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