INTRODUCTION
THE ZHENGSHENG 正聲 MODE

Those who probe and search the dark depths have been doing so ever since Wang [Bi] and He [Yan]Microscope探究幽邃自王何以還. Those who according to their times revise institutions are in the spirit of Xun and Yue 因時修制荀樂之風.1

Showing up in Shishuo xinyu 世說新語
In the above passage from the fifth-century Shishuo xinyu 世說新語, Xun Xu 荀勗 (d. 289) shows up as just a flicker in the eye of compilers and commentators long after his time. It is a truism that myth and fact, or legend and historiographical narrative, intersect and approach each other through different ways of telling and writing. They seem different by their social contexts and the contexts of their authors and “tellers,” but they both can inspire a common pride of place and culture, and they can carry warnings. Throughout my seven chapters, besides material that is technical and prosaic concerning Xun’s outrageous influence at the imperial court and vast intellectual achievements, I offer in addition a reflection on him that reveals a troubled legend.

To Shishuo xinyu readers, “Yue 樂” in the above epigraph was a surname, but finding a specific Yue was not easy. To complicate things, readers would also recall that “Xun” and “music 樂” fit together: Shishuo xinyu’s chapter 20 on “Technical Understanding,”2 as well as technical treatises and an evolving historiography, all pointed to Xun’s life as devoted to precision, and his corrected musical scale was criticized by one of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, giving Xun something of an infamous tinge. Thus Xun Xu’s legend was encountering difficulty very early in its career.

2 Two anecdotes about Xun lead off the Shishuo chapter, in which he is both scolded and cast as weird for his powers of perception; see SSHY/Mather nos. 20.1–2, pp. 357–59. Xun Xu’s appearance in Shishuo is treated in detail in chap. 5.
We return to the difficulty of the epigraph. “Xun” may refer to both Xun and his older kinsman Xun Yi 頤 (d. 274), both court-commissioned scholars who worked on institutional texts. “Yue” can only be guessed at: a literatus named Yue Guang 樂廣 (d. perhaps 304), but not associated with the Xuns and not a shaper of court institutions. Yue was known as a qingtan 清談 type of wit. He lived later than both Xuns and had nothing to do with their political faction; he did once take sides in 298, when the court overturned the late Xun Xu’s opinion concerning Jin historiography.

How, then, do the two surnames function in parallel with those of Wang and He? The quip purports to come from the mouth of a former northern military leader Zhang Tianxi 張天錫 (ca. 344–404), now in the southern capital. He had just been asked by a certain unidentifiable party to assess for young southerners the worth of those many literati who had come from the north over the course of perhaps seventy-five years. The general does not take one side or the other. Diplomatically, he judges contemporary qingtan scholars of the xuan 玄, or “mystery”—the more common description applied to those leisurely, free and independent souls—as stemming from two Wei-era paragons who many blamed for the Wei’s demise. But what does one do with Zhang’s reference, next, to men who took care of rites and codes—researchers into realities, not into the dark depths? Did Zhang disapprove of both camps, or neither, or only one? The popular choice would have been Wang and He, since in Shishuo xinyu and many other belles lettres, those two were often made to seem so ethereal as to be precursors of the divine, philosophical monks of Jiangnan.

For the Xun–Yue part of the anecdote, it is odd that “Yue 樂” comes right after “Xun 荀,” since the “spirit” of Xun Xu’s “institutional revisions” was in fact musicological. If Yue Guang was the person meant,