The Talent of Shu. Qiao Zhou and the Intellectual World of Early Medieval Sichuan.
By J. Michael Farmer, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2007. xix + 246 pp. 2 Maps, 2 Fig., Notes, Bibliography, Index. ISBN 978-0-7914-7163-0 (hb)

In The Talent of Shu, J. Michael Farmer offers a biography of Qiao Zhou 謙周 (199/200-270), a Sichuan classicist of the post-Han period. This period of Chinese history and literature presents hurdles—scrap of sources that range across styles and levels of voice and context, often hard to convey in a lucid historical narrative. Our picture of early-medieval China runs in fits and starts. The book at hand will be useful especially for those already familiar with recent scholarship on late-Han and Jin classicism,¹ even though it may present problems for generalist readers interested in pre-Song China and for beginning graduate students. On p. xvi the author tells us that the book is a “conversion” from his Ph.D.; still, it should have been reframed and edited.

Let me be clear: Talent of Shu is excellent for its best features and delivers new ideas about early Sichuan scholars. But it strives to solve questions and sketch scenarios only through text-fragments and an impressive array of secondary studies of those texts. My review will point to the best features by summarizing what I take to be the main argument of a chapter, followed in two or three cases by longer remarks. My question is how we can push past the texts and see more of the personal politics, social settings, and even aesthetics of Shu and Shu men.

The book’s mission is two-fold—a literary biography, in other words, a life’s shape via details of the early reception of writings. Here, Farmer argues for Qiao’s being “first,” his creating a “genre,” and his “emerging from a background.” The other part screens the biography through late-classical Sichuan intellectual culture, sprinkled with the political history of Shu. The biographical method is prosopographical groupings (e.g., Qiao’s teachers and students, the historian Chen Shou’s list of Shu diviners). The sequence is as follows. The “intellectual world” of Sichuan is shoe-horned into chapter 1; Qiao’s “early” life is chap. 2, and life at the

Shu court is 3. Chapters 4-6 represent Farmer’s philological examination of three genres (relying mainly on fragments)—respectively, Discourse on Truths and Falsehoods in the Spring and Autumn [Annals] (part of his larger Wujing ranfou lun 五經然否論); Investigations of Ancient History 古史考; and Records of Ba 三巴記. There is an epilogue and an appended single-page chronology of Qiao’s life. (Notes are inconveniently at the end; use of characters is unsystematic, and the index is quite sparse.)

For our present purpose, let us simply situate Qiao Zhou. Qiao does not emerge neatly in Talent of Shu because of the complexity of its organization. J. Michael Farmer is one of our best translators and literary historians, yet he did not translate Qiao’s Sanguo zhi biography and introduce the social and political settings at a convenient place. He may have assumed our knowledge of his Ph.D. or of B. J. Mansvelt-Beck’s synopsis of Qiao Zhou’s life and works. Moreover, Farmer does not list and analyze the entire Qiao Zhou oeuvre, as have Beck and other modern scholars.

Qiao Zhou was born into a Shu family of scholars and court officials. The family had resided in Ba until some point when they moved to the Chengdu area. They may have been relatively well off, and were apparently in a good position to engage in scholarship. Several of his ancestors were associated with the Western and Eastern Han courts, and his father was a master of the Shangshu. Qiao learned from his own father, but as Farmer shows, he also imbibed a tradition of prophetic arts fostered by an important Shu family, the Yangs of Guanghan. He remained in Chengdu until around 267, when finally he went to Luoyang to serve the new Jin dynasty briefly, but his specific activities there are unknown. In Shu, Qiao had served the second Shu “emperor,” Liu Shan, for decades, rising to a high court status and acting chiefly as a tutor, and also a teacher of other Shu scholars. He was well known as a master of prophetic arts and an advisor on military policy: he notoriously counseled Liu Shan to surrender to Wei in 263. While Farmer keeps his focus heavily on Qiao’s relationship with Shu men and Shu events, Mansvelt Beck draws attention to the impact that Qiao most likely had on the Sima imperial clansman Sima Biao 司馬彪 (b. ca. 237, d. 306) in Luoyang. Below, I comment in detail on this.

In the Introduction to Talent of Shu, the author states his themes: modern views about Shu history suffer from a Wei bias (1-2); he believes that Qiao Zhou

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2) Sanguo zhi, 42.1027-32.
4) He also says, p. 8, that Sichuan had “favorable characteristics” but “despite” these, a negative view of its people “remains in force.” I believe that writers with negative things to say did not stop to consider Sichuan’s nice aspects. Similarly, p. 13, we read: “Despite