

KLEEMAN, TERRY F. *Great Perfection: Religion and Ethnicity in a Chinese Millennial Kingdom*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998. x + 251 pages. Maps, illustrations, appendix of official titles and ranks, bibliography, index. Hardcover n.p.; ISBN 0-8248-1800-8.

The Sichuan region has long been the focus of Terry Kleeman's work. His first book, *A God's Own Tale* (SUNY Press, 1994), told the story of the development of a local Sichuanese snake spirit into the national god of literature, Wenchang. In the present book, Kleeman addresses a little-known chapter in the history of Sichuan: its independent statehood in the first half of the fourth century under the name of Da Cheng, "Great Perfection." He presents us with a careful study of the Cheng state, and the roles played by ethnicity and Daoism in its founding. Cheng seceded from the tumultuous Jin empire in 302 and maintained an independent existence in the Sichuan region for 45 years before being forcibly brought back under Jin rule. Daoism enters the picture by virtue of the fact that the Cheng state's founders, the Li family, had a strong Daoist background. Their ancestors had been members of the Celestial Master Church that had established a Daoist state in the Hanzhong region of northeastern Sichuan during the twilight years of the Eastern Han dynasty. When their state was conquered in 215, many adherents of the church were scattered throughout China, among them a man called Li Hu, who led a group of five hundred families northwest to settle in what is now southern Shaanxi province. The reference to "ethnicity" in the book's title is due to the fact that the Li were not ethnic Chinese, but Banshun Man ("Board-shield Man barbarians"), who were part of the larger ethnic category of the Ba. When in the 290s their new homeland was rendered uninhabitable by famine, warfare, and epidemics, Li Hu's descendants led another wave of refugees back to the Hanzhong area, where they were faced with resistance from the local elites. Calling upon old religious and ethnic loyalties, they fought back and by 302 had developed into a full-fledged rebel movement. After its first leader Li Te's death in battle in 303, his son Li Xiong took over. Building upon his father's successes, he widened the rebels' sphere of control until in 306 he formally inaugurated the state of "Great Perfection," with himself as emperor. The chaotic situation in central China at the time made Sichuan appear a secondary concern to a Jin dynasty weakened internally by internecine strife and threatened externally by the invading Xiongnu. Taking advantage of the power vacuum in western China, Cheng expanded until it controlled from its capital Chengdu a sizeable territory stretching over eight hundred kilometers east to west and over nine hundred kilometers north to south. Under the less than brilliant successors of Li Xiong, who died in 334, Cheng (now renamed Han) survived for another thirteen years before being subjugated by the Jin general Huan Wen in 347.

About half of the book, contained in Part 2, is taken up by a meticulous annotated translation of the available sources on the history of this ephemeral state, principally the relevant chapters from the official history of the Jin dynasty, supplemented by the "Record of the Land of Huayang" (*Huayangguo zhi*), a fourth-century chronicle written by the former Cheng official Chang Qu. The other half (Part 1) consists of four chapters that provide an extensive contextualization for the translated documents. Chapter 1, "Ethnicity and Identity," looks at the ethnic history and prehistory of Sichuan in considerable detail, paying particular attention to the Ba. Chapter 2, "Religion," describes the emergence of the Celestial Master movement in the millennial climate of the late Han dynasty, gives an excellent sketch of the movement's organization and history, and outlines the impact of Celestial Master Daoism on the Cheng state. Chapter 3, "History," places the Sichuanese events within the greater context of Chinese history from the middle of the third to the middle of the fourth century. Finally,

Chapter 4, “Sources of Cheng History,” takes stock of the source materials on Chen and discusses their editorial history.

All of this adds up to an exhaustive treatment of the chosen topic—exhaustive, and at times exhausting to the reader. One reason for the painstaking character in the chapters on ethnicity and religion may be that Kleeman considers these two factors important in the history of Cheng, even though they are downplayed by the historiographical bias of the official sources at his disposal. Therefore Kleeman has to bring them in through the back door, so to say: as a background understanding in light of which the sources should be read, allowing the reader to fill in their silences. Hence the great care and attention given to the construction of ethnicity and religion as shaping factors of the destiny of Cheng, factors that are not evident from the sources alone. Without this background knowledge, we would not be able to gauge the true meaning of key events in Cheng history. To use religion as an example, the support given the Lis at a critical juncture by the leader of a Daoist community becomes understandable when we are aware of the Lis’ own Daoist heritage, and specific government policies of the first Cheng emperor Li Xiong make more sense when we see them as concrete applications of Daoist principles. Kleeman’s argument about the importance of religion and ethnicity in the history of Cheng is impossible to prove conclusively from the sources, given their nature, but he patiently builds a plausible case. In doing so, he achieves an extremely high degree of contextualization, but at the same time he continuously runs the risk of overtaxing his reader’s patience. Chapter 1, for example, is a fascinating overview of ethnic history and ethnic relations in Sichuan from prehistorical times to the fourth century, but its wealth of detail seems out of proportion to its eventual contribution to our understanding of Cheng history. To be sure, it is important to know the Ba ethnicity of the Cheng dynastic founders insofar as it throws light on some of the alliances they were able to forge with other non-Chinese forces. But does it really add much to our understanding when the author discusses at length the etymology of the Chinese character “Shu” (the ancient name for Sichuan), or when he examines in detail (including long translated excerpts from the *Zuozhuan*) the interactions of Ba with Zhou period feudal states? The resulting surfeit of contextual detail is all the more difficult to digest as the reader at this point does not yet have a clear idea what it is all leading up to. The author provides some links to the events surrounding the founding of Cheng, but sometimes they add more confusion than they resolve because they assume knowledge of specific events that are only introduced later in the book. In spite of such minor irritants, the persistent reader will be compensated in the end with insights into the often underestimated roles of religion and ethnicity in Chinese history. Add to this the superb editing provided by the University of Hawai’i Press, with Chinese characters inserted both in the main text and in the index, and this book will be a rewarding, if demanding, read for any student of medieval Chinese society.

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