



THE POLITICS OF MEMORY
FRANCISCUS VERELLEN

Franciscus Verellen is a historian of medieval China specialized in the religious culture of Daoism. His recent work has focused on the transition period from the Tang (618–907) to the Five Dynasties (907–65). Verellen did his doctoral studies at the University of Oxford and the École Pratique des Hautes Études. He taught at Columbia University and the École Pratique des Hautes Études and held various visiting appointments in North America and East Asia. He is Professor Emeritus and a former Director (2004–14) of the École française d'Extrême-Orient, where he occupied the chair in History of Daoism and served as head of the research centers in Hong Kong and Taipei. He was elected a life member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in 2008 and of Clare Hall, University of Cambridge in 2022. Franciscus Verellen's most recent monograph, *Imperiled Destinies: The Daoist Quest for Deliverance in Medieval China* (Harvard University Press, 2019), was translated into French and Chinese. His new book manuscript *Famed and Defamed: Gao Pian's Military Trajectory and the Fall of the Tang* is currently under review at Cambridge University Press. – Address: 50 rue du Général de Gaulle, 95320 Saint Leu-la-Forêt, France. E-mail: franciscus.verellen@gmail.com.

Occasional visitors to Berlin in the past, Isabelle and I enjoyed gaining a deeper familiarity with the city's sprawling topography, vibrant cultural life, and international spirit. Following are a few jottings from our Berlin notebook:

Reichtum der deutschen Wissenschaftssprache wiederentdeckt. Shakespeares in freier Neuübersetzung bereut. Vergangenheitsschicksale vergegenwärtigt, Gegen-

wartskonflikte nähergebracht. Unerwartete Einblicke in das Verhalten des Insektes, zeitgenössische Komposition, russische Ideengeschichte, afrikanische Literatur, neue philosophische Ansätze gewonnen. Freundschaften geschlossen. Den halben Kantatenzyklus in der Gedächtniskirche einverleibt und das dreihundertste Bach-Jubiläum in der Leipziger Thomaskirche gefeiert. Jakob Ullmanns tonlose Grenzraummusik eben wahrgenommen. Mit Isabelle das Nachwort zu Famed and Defamed im Strandkorb auf dem Darß umfochten. Vergebens Sottobosco-Stilleben in Schwerin nachgespürt. Neue Stadtviertel durchlaufen. Relevanz der Begriffe „Mittelalter“ und „Neuzeit“ für die Geschichte Chinas nuanciert ...

The year also provided welcome opportunities for renewing or establishing contacts through lectures and visits with colleagues at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Humboldt Forum), the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, the Department of East Asian Studies at Leipzig University, and alumni Fellows. Ian Johnson, senior China analyst at the New York Council on Foreign Relations, joined me in a public conversation hosted by Wiko on “Religion, Zivilgesellschaft und Politische Macht in China – Gegenwart und Vergangenheit im Dialog.” The writer and filmmaker Folco Terzani visited from Florence for three days of discussion in preparation of a novel on Laozi.

My announced research project, “Transcending Turmoil: The End of the Tang (618–907) in the Testimony of Du Guangting,” on the intellectual and religious implications of dynastic change in medieval China, made less than expected progress. Instead, the final phase of researching and writing the previous book expanded to include an unplanned close scrutiny of Chinese official historiography and its treatment of contentious issues in times of regime change.

Now titled *Famed and Defamed: Gao Pian's Military Trajectory and the Fall of the Tang*, this book is organized as a military biography set in the same transitional period. It began as an enquiry into the breakup of the Golden Age of Chinese imperial ascendancy and civilizational splendor seen from the vantage point of one of the period's leading protagonists. A complex character – illustrious general, governor of large territories, engineer and poet, man of religion and the object of religious cults, Gao Pian (821–87) left a conflicted legacy. A hero and valiant defender of the embattled dynasty to some, to others he was a secessionist villain who betrayed the Tang. As the research progressed, the portrait

of Gao that emerges from contemporary writings increasingly diverged from the damning image of him that official historians presented to posterity. My new line of investigation focused on the sources of this disagreement and the motives that lay behind the historians' judgment.

The Standard History of the Tang was written in the Five Dynasties (907–65) period of division that followed the Tang. It was significantly revised after the reunification of the empire under the Song (960–1127). The eleventh-century editors of this “definitive” version were eminent men of letters as well as active statesmen. Due to the loss or destruction of archives and makeshift historiographical procedures during the last emperors' repeated exiles from the capital, later historians faced a gaping lacuna of official documentation on the dynasty's final five reigns. The scholar-officials tasked with portraying the Tang expected the writing of history to yield judgments assigning praise and blame to the actors of the past, which would be apt to illumine contemporary policymakers, sway the emperor's mind, or mirror the errors of political rivals. Staunch Neo-Confucians, their verdict assimilated Gao Pian with the late Tang “turncoats” and “secessionists” held responsible for the fall of the Tang. To safeguard the Song dynasty's hard-won unity, these historians were determined to inoculate their compatriots against such leaders.

In writing the last chapters of this book and revising the manuscript at the Wissenschaftskolleg, my objective was not simply to rehabilitate a maligned reputation, but to examine, first, what Gao's case reveals about the mechanics of an empire's unraveling and, second, the aims and methods of dynastic historiography. Loyalty formed with filiality the twin pillars of a socio-political edifice that sustained the Confucian imperial order. Up to a point, a well-honed rhetoric of loyalty could safeguard a faltering regime from the tremors of political upheaval. As Laozi, an early critic of Confucian moral philosophy, pithily observed: “When the six relations of kinship are in disharmony, filial piety and parental love come to the foreground. When the state falls into anarchy, loyal subjects make their appearance.” With the crumbling of the imperial compact of allegiance, loyalism was conspicuously in evidence in late Tang and Five Dynasties political discourse.

Illustrating the timeless tug-of-war between politics and history, the contemporary Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, who currently makes his home in Berlin and Cambridge, writes in his recent memoir *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows*: “When I was growing up, my father rarely talked about the past, because everything was shrouded in the thick fog of the dominant political narrative, and any inquiry into fact ran the risk of provoking a backlash too awful to contemplate.”

History's partialities and moral pronouncements have long been in the sights of Chinese critics. The Qing dynasty advocate of "evidential scholarship" Wang Mingsheng (1722–98), in his *Critical Discussion of the Seventeen Dynastic Histories*, argued for a more probing and broadly-sourced historiography. Qian Daxin (1728–1804) held that "historical facts themselves should reveal whom to praise and whom to blame" and that "the process of laying blame should be analogous to the deliberations involved in deciding court cases. There must be no forced or self-serving use of the historical evidence to support political and dynastic prejudices."

Famed and Defamed lays the facts of Gao Pian's trajectory and his role in the fall of the Tang before the reader's judgment. The new evidence presented draws on a variety of contemporary writings, including a trove of official documents by Gao Pian's Korean secretary Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn, preserved in the latter's native kingdom of Silla. Barely touched by historians, this archive chronicles step by step the process and the conditions of Gao's disengagement from the imperial court, illustrating the unstoppable forces at work in the dissolution of the empire and the tenuousness of the historians' trials of allegiance. The light that these neglected records shed on Gao Pian's actions and personality does not reduce the complexity of his character, nor the difficulty of establishing his intimate motivations, but the authenticity of their testimony is incontestably more compelling than the official verdict, and the facts of Gao Pian's life are more captivating than the political fiction.

Attuned to different career stages, professional priorities, and unforeseen initiatives born from serendipitous encounters, the opportunities Wiko offered in 2022/2023 were as diverse as the set of Fellows and partners present. To me, it was above all a haven for writing in an enchanting natural environment under conditions that an enlightened institutional strategy, dedicated staff, exemplary facilities, and exceptional Fellows conspired to perfect.

*Im Anfang war das Wort. Dann zwei.
Zu Ende war die Langeweile
nach der ersten ganzen Zeile.
Meinungsaustausch, Bücherschreiberei,
Opernpartituren, Zukunftsträume
Inspiriert im Schatten hoher Bäume
die Musenfee
vom Halensee.*