Foreword

Two passages illustrate the depth of Victor Xiong’s portrayal of Emperor Tang Taizong in  *Heavenly Khan*.  In the first passage, the emperor asks his court historians if he may see what they are writing about him.  The historians decline the request.  Their duty, they affirm, is to provide a dispassionate record and evaluation of events for the use of rulers to come.  If the emperor saw what was written, the historians would violate their charge by becoming historical actors.

The second passage comes in an account of the emperor’s rise to becoming the undisputed ruler of China.  A crucial step involves the assassination of his brother.  The emperor consults his diviners about a particular day for doing the deed.  Is plastromancy (divination using the flat part of tortoise shells) auspicious for the undertaking, he wonders?  The diviners turn the question around.  They ask, would the emperor’s resolve waiver if the tortoise shells were unfavorable?  The emperor is firmly decided to act:  No, the stars shall neither encourage nor dissuade him.  He eliminates his rival successfully, helped by the fortuitous intervention of a loyal subordinate.

            In these passages the reader supplies generalizations left unsaid.  The imperial court included counselors who were respected for an allegiance to their learned discipline—counselors who also understood that scholarly judgment had to be shared carefully with men of action.  The historians knew that if their writing displeased the emperor, they could lose their position and their head; almost as bad, if the emperor were pleased with the commentary, he could become careless in future deliberations.  In the same way, the diviners understood that whatever the tortoise shells revealed would be perilous to relate, and not only if the patterns were auspicious and the emperor’s initiative failed.  An inauspicious divination could dissuade the emperor from acting, and as a consequence all later reversals would come back to their report; if the emperor acted and succeeded in the face of heaven’s frown, the diviner's expertise would be compromised.  The emperor certainly perceived these political calculations in the mind of his advisors, but he also knew that without intellectual independence, counselors have little value.

Victor Xiong’s Tang Taizong is usefully compared with the kings portrayed by one of Europe’s greatest writers. In his comprehensive account, *The English and Their History,* Robert Tombs has recently emphasized that the English see themselves as a cohesive people in part through the theatrical representations of medieval kings and their companions written by William Shakespeare, whose histories have been staged for half a millennium. Shakespeare’s characterizations endure because of their complexity. Tombs writes, “Shakespeare not only lets daylight in upon majesty…but subjects it to a withering glare, showing kings humiliated, deposed and killed. The plays are overwhelmingly political: the conflicts and decisions of people acting out of ambition, lust, pride, fear, revenge, jealousy—and occasionally loyalty, faith or honour” (the last quality is a mere word, Shakespeare’s character Falstaff laughs). “Their efforts and aims are often futile, absurd and meaningless. Even the most just or glorious war brings waste, corruption, cruelty and death. His kings and queens are as human as his peasants—selfish, cruel, doubting, incapable, lecherous, perfidious, but rarely very chivalrous, and sacred only by the grace of their subjects.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Shakespeare’s most sympathetic king is Henry V, whom he shows as a dissolute youth in the company of Falstaff and then as a commanding leader, and whose encouragements upon the eve of the battle of Agincourt (“Once more unto the breech…”) echo in British propaganda against the Germans, both in the First World War and in the Second (Winston Churchill’s address following the evacuation of Dunkirk: “We shall fight on the beaches...”). Victor Xiong invests Emperor Tang Taizong, who personally led his troops in war, with the stature of this king of Shakespeare’s.

Historical fiction (that is to say, imagined psychological portraits in a verifiable past) has attracted the human imagination since Shakespeare’s time. Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* and Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* did much to promote the romantic view of medieval Europe; Dumas (*Les trois mousquetaires),* Tolstoy (*War and Peace),* and Dickens (*Tale of Two Cities)* made European convulsions accessible to a wide readership. The genre has matured from Robert Graves (*I, Claudius*) to Umberto Eco (*Il nome della rosa*) and to Hilary Mantel’s sixteenth century London. Distinguished scientists have written novels about illustrious forebears—the Evariste Galois of physicist Leopold Infeld (*Whom the Gods Love*) and the Hippocrates of neurologist Wilder Penfield (*The Torch*). Professors in the History Department at the University of Western Michigan are no strangers to historical fiction. Their novels have been set in Imperial Rome and on Java during the Second World War, and one historian has written a novel about a vegetarian future. Victor Xiong’s story of Emperor Tang Taizong—based on mastery of the historical sources—takes a distinguished place in this pantheon of the writer’s craft.

In an essay originating in the Finzi-Contini Lecture at Yale University in 1999, the English writer A. S. Byatt emphasizes that storytelling attracts us because it deals with life and death. She distinguishes among three genres of storytelling: myth, fairy-tales, and novels. (Here I elaborate a bit on Byatt’s discussion of the thoughts of Dutch writer Cees Nooteboom.) Myths recount events that never happened and explain them in a completely inadequate way; they involve people who live forever (in the Greek myths, Sisyphus, Prometheus, and Medea); they describe the origin of features of the world (Mount Tangkuban Perahu, the “overturned boat” on central Java). The failure of myths in consoling the inevitable disappointments of life gives rise to fairy-tales, which are instructive stories about goodness and its opposite; fairy-stories affirm the lie of contentment (“they lived happily ever-after”). Different from myths and fairy-tales, novels tell stories plausibly, even if they include dream sequences and contradictory perceptions of the world. But for the privilege of allowing us to see ourselves in a new light, novelists relinquish the rôle of counselor or seer.[[2]](#footnote-2) Only implicitly does a successful fictional account instruct us about the path to a virtuous life.

What good, then, is a novel if it does not tell us how to live? Why should practical people, scrambling to make their way in the world, spend time with this art form? One answer is that, in their life, people continually appeal to art in adornment and in the cultivation of the senses. It follows that we are wise to direct attention to deep works of art rather than to shallow ones, to focus on Kunst rather than on Kitsch, in the terminology of art criticism. Another answer is that novels require readers for their full appreciation. Novels are written to be read, and they achieve significance when they are discussed. This is what Ernst H. Gombrich called, in his influential book *Art and Illusion*, the “beholder’s share”—how the viewer of a work of art supplies essential meaning to it. Here is why some works of art assume special importance long after they are created (and also why some late twentieth-century critics believed that every work of art exists to be re-interpreted for all time).[[3]](#footnote-3)

As a work of art, Victor Xiong’s book rewards a beholder. The prose is direct and uninflected. Nearly every sentence evokes an image, and one delights in looking up from the book to turn the images this way and that. The reader is like a free-diver exploring the Antikythera wreck in Greece early in the twentieth century, surfacing after a short period of time to contemplate a treasure plucked from the sea-bottom.[[4]](#footnote-4) We dive again and again into antiquity, which we find both familiar and foreign. In addition to revealing details of diet, dress, and architecture, Victor Xiong supplies dialogue for the imperial court. At one point, the emperor is met by his son, who is so overcome by devotion that he sucks the emperor’s nipples—a simple gesture that to my knowledge has not been recorded for European royalty. *Heavenly Khan* presents a marvelous picture of the life-giver to one of the great epochs of civilization.

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1. Robert Tombs, *The English and Their History* (London: Penguin/Random House, 2015), 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A. S. Byatt, “Old Tales, New Forms,” in Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), 123-50, on 147-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (1960; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), Part Three: “The Beholder’s Share,” 179-287. Paul de Man is known for having advocated that all writing is devoid of fixed meaning. Alvin Kernan, *In Plato’s Cave* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 196-201. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alexander Jones, *A Portable Cosmos: Revealing the Antikythera Mechanism, Scientific Wonder of the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)