



Jessey Choo (New Brunswick)  
Missing Persons: Writing the Biographies of Wartime Cannibals in Medieval China

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**Abstract**

Following a brutal nine-month siege, the militarily strategic city of Suiyang fell in 757 to rebels against the Tang dynasty. When the siege commenced, the city's population consisted of roughly ten thousand fighters and over thirty thousand residents, but when the city fell, only about four hundred survivors remained, and none of them civilians. Rather than surrender the city to non-Han Chinese “barbarian” rebels, the Han defenders had chosen instead to kill and eat all the residents, whom they were supposed to protect. But the siege of Suiyang also slowed down the rebels and gave the dynasty a much-needed reprieve. Thus, when the matter of commemorating the event came before the throne, the Tang emperor faced a dilemma—should he brand these defenders as mass murderers, or as war heroes? The survival of the dynasty depended on loyalty, but whose loyalty should the emperor honor and inspire, the people's or the armies? This paper illuminates the politics and morality of commemoration by analyzing the fierce debate at court over how the biographies (and hence the judgment) of the commanders who ordered the cannibalism should be written; it further follows the subsequent deification of these commanders and explores how the accounts of their cannibalism became incorporated into Daoist rituals of exorcism.

