

Real Life in China at the Height of Empire: Revealed by the Ghosts of Ji Xiaolan.

Edited and translated by David E. Pollard. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2014. Pp. xl + 334. \$45.00.

The recent trend in English-language translations of traditional Chinese fiction has been to deliver to the reader complete and unabridged renderings of the classic Ming and Qing novels and vernacular short story collections, with all the poetry and occasionally the commentary included: David Hawkes and John Minford's five-volume translation of *The Story of the Stone*, Anthony Yu's four-volume *Journey to the West*, David Roy's five-volume *Plum in the Golden Vase*, and Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang's translation of Feng Menglong's three *Sanyan* 三言 collections are notable examples.

In the case of collections of tales written in Classical Chinese, however, edited selections rather than complete translations have long been the norm. It is not hard to see why. Although they are not necessarily bigger books than the vernacular fiction titles, collections of classical tales are often quite voluminous. *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋志異, the outstanding Qing collection of strange tales by Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715), includes almost 500 tales and runs to about 600,000 Chinese characters. *Yuwei caotang biji* 閱微草堂筆記, the almost equally celebrated miscellany of anecdotes by Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805), has close to 1,200 entries and extends to some 380,000 Chinese characters. Both collections lack a unitary structure, and their contents vary in interest; would-be translators thus tend to become editors, dipping into these books to choose stories for an anthology rather than translating the whole collection from cover to cover. There are issues, then, of what to put in and what to leave out, and English editions of classical Chinese tales call for first-rate curatorial judgement as well as translating acumen.

For a long time, the only really notable collection of classical Chinese tales in English was *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, selections from *Liaozhai zhiyi* edited and translated by the British sinologist Herbert Giles (1845–1935) and first published in 1880. Giles, in his own words, selected 164 of “the best and most characteristic stories” for inclusion in this edition,¹ but the integrity of his translation was gravely compromised by arbitrary changes designed to cleanse Pu's tales of their sexual content.

John Minford's recent selection of 104 stories from *Liaozhai, Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*² largely supplants Giles's work, but is not without quirks of its

¹ Giles, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, 3rd ed. (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1916), “Introduction,” p. xxi.

² London: Penguin, 2006.

own. This anthology shows signs of having begun as a full and complete translation, for its first sixty or so stories closely mirror the opening sequence in the original Chinese text. But Minford's (or his publisher's) plan appears to have changed at some point, because the Penguin edition includes only very scattered selections from the remainder of Pu Songling's collection. As a result it presents a rather lopsided view of Pu's work, showcasing the brief and somewhat insubstantial anecdotes that dominate the first chapter of *Liaozhai* and according limited space to the more elaborate stories that also figure prominently in Pu's book.

Yuewei caotang biji has taken longer to attract attention from Western scholars. The first English edition of Ji's work was put together by David L. Keenan, who translated 112 entries in a slim volume entitled *Shadows in a Chinese Landscape: The Notes of a Confucian Scholar*.³ Observing that Ji's anecdotes emerged from a culture of informal storytelling, Keenan chose a mixed bag of stories and arranged them in five categories: tales about Ji Yun's household, tales from members of his household, tales about his colleagues, tales from his colleagues, and tales from and about his neighbours. Keenan's rationale was that grouping together stories in this way "may help illuminate the contexts in which they were first shared."⁴ While this organizing principle might appeal to scholars of the book, it is perhaps less likely to engage the general reader, whose primary interest lies simply in what the stories are about.

It is precisely this concern that David Pollard addresses in his excellent new edition of Ji's work. What considerations shaped *his* choice of stories? "I chose all the items in this collection," Pollard explains, "solely for the individual insights into social matters and ways of thought they afforded" (p. xxvii). The bulk of the entries, he argues, are "very short and utterly simplistic demonstrations of the working out of the universal principle of reward and punishment for good and bad deeds," and for this reason "hold no interest for present day readers." It is the longer stories and discursive pieces that he favours for inclusion in this book, partly for their literary qualities and partly because in them, as he puts it, "one has the pleasure of encountering a keen intellect, willing to interrogate and speculate, and to consider both sides of a coin" (pp. xxvi–xxvii). Pollard's selection draws evenly from all five of Ji's collections, for a total of 162 entries, or about 14% of the total.

Real Life in China at the Height of Empire: Revealed by the Ghosts of Ji Xiaolan is Pollard's title, a clear announcement of his intention to show how Ji Yun's book, despite its associations with supernatural lore, succeeds in shedding light on Qing society and the nature of social interactions and attitudes in eighteenth-century China.

³ Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999.

⁴ *Ibid.*, "Foreword," p. xix.

His chosen tales are presented to the reader under twenty-nine topical headings, set out in four parts. Part I is devoted to “The Supernatural and the Curious” (pp. 1–119), which includes such topics as ghosts, foxes, and reincarnation, and closes with “The Wild West”—tales deriving with Ji Yun’s period of banishment to Urumqi. Material in this part of the book may be relatively more familiar to some readers, having been discussed at length in academic studies such as Leo Tak-hung Chan’s *The Discourse on Foxes and Ghosts: Ji Yun and Eighteenth-Century Literati Storytelling*.⁵

The rest of the book introduces other themes in Ji Yun’s work, particularly its engagement with everyday issues, largely secular and down-to-earth. Many such tales deal essentially with real-life situations and shed light on all kinds of human relations: between masters and servants, men and women, officials and underlings, and so forth. Pollard groups these tales under three general headings. Part II, “The Official’s Milieu,” includes such topics as legal dilemmas and disputes, and issues involving yamen staff (pp. 121–72). Part III, “Family and Friends,” focuses on the web of interpersonal relationships that shaped people’s lives (pp. 173–222). Part IV, “A Mirror on Society,” offers a particularly rich array of topics, ranging from women to merchants, morality to fraud, homosexuality to Jesuits in China, and much more (pp. 225–334). The entries in Ji’s collection have no titles, so Pollard supplies them with titles of his own, sometimes terse and matter-of-fact (“Ape Lips,” “Shaman,” “Rape,” “Fashions”), sometimes whimsical and inventive (“The Charge of the Granny Brigade,” “So Near Yet So Far,” “Concubines had Better Watch Out”).

There are abundant insights and much pleasure to be gained from reading this book. Pollard is a knowledgeable, congenial guide to the material, neither too obtrusive nor too remote, making cross-cultural comparisons or drawing attention to current-day parallels as appropriate. His prefaces to each section are models of concision, offering elegantly distilled information and some astute observations. Pollard’s preface to the “Ghosts” section notes, for example: “More starkly than elsewhere, we see enacted in these think-pieces the contest between his scepticism and his credulity. Ultimately, and rather disappointingly, he usually gives way to the bureaucratic instinct to keep options open” (p. 22). Humour, a quality that Pollard rightly draws attention to as an element in Ji’s work, is a welcome feature of his own remarks. In the preamble to the “Hearth and Home” section, for instance, Pollard comments drily: “An extended family was indeed a kind of state in miniature, and not all that much easier to keep in order” (p. 175).

Pollard further enriches our understanding of the background to some of the stories by citing items from Ji Yun’s correspondence with family members, where interesting new sidelights often emerge. His assessment of Ji Yun as a thinker is

⁵ Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1998.

always thoughtful and measured. “Ji Xiaolan was no ideological rebel,” Pollard notes. “He subscribed to conventional social values and practices, accepted class distinctions, had a limited view of human rights. But he also had a story of sympathy and recognized injustice where it occurred” (p. 226).

Pollard’s skills as an editor are fully matched by his accomplishments as a translator. “Nothing in the narrative is laboured,” Pollard says of Ji’s book (p. xxvii), noting that some of the anecdotes are “exceptionally well composed” (p. xxvi), and he succeeds beautifully in emulating the fluent, cultivated manner of the eighteenth-century original. Ji Yun’s prose drew effortlessly on the rich diction of classical Chinese, and Pollard employs an equally graceful English style to capture the nuances. The paragraph that opens “Dogma Blights Young Lives” is a good example of how smoothly his translation flows:

The Book of Rites states that food, drink and sex are the great drives in human lives. Granted, to offend against the moral code, to profane social order, and to corrupt customs are all behaviour proscribed by imperial law, but calf love between infatuated youths, as long as it does not greatly exceed the bounds of decency, need not be harshly treated according to the letter of the scriptures. (p. 236)

飲食男女，人生之大欲存焉。干名義，瀆倫常，敗風俗，皆王法之所必禁也。若痴兒騃女，情有田所鍾，實非大悖於禮者，似不必苛以深文。

Pollard also employs colloquial idiom to good effect in renderings of direct speech or when delivering Ji Yun’s personal reflections. “That’s fine by me,” says one character (p. 204; the Chinese original is 大善); “You really are an innocent abroad!” exclaims a second (p. 139; 先生真書痴耶); “This gent is going to come up in the world, I’m betting on him!” announces a third (p. 276; 此君豈長貧賤者哉). Ji Yun’s final thought on the topic of “Animals of the Wild” is rendered delightfully as “People nowadays say that the meat of the twin-humped camel is one of the eight top delicacies, but they have got the wrong camel” (p. 118; 今人以雙峰之駝為八珍之一，失其實矣).

The readability of the translation is further enhanced by Pollard’s practice of forgoing footnotes and incorporating cultural information into the text where that is practical. Near the end of the following passage, for example, he helpfully amplifies what might to some be an opaque reference:

His Excellency Qiu Wenda commented: “The commissioner let himself be drawn into meddling with affairs that did not concern him, and came within an ace of falling for the ruse. Those in high authority must be circumspect

in every word and deed. If at that time the commissioner's mien had been as forbidding as that of the incorruptible Judge Bao, the miscreant would have had no opening to exploit. (p. 282)

裘文達公嘗曰：「此公偶爾多事，幾為所中。士大夫一言一動，不可不慎。使爾時面如包孝肅，亦何隙可乘。」

The translation, while generally very accurate, is not entirely free of errors. Here and there romanization is a little wayward: “the goddess of Guyi Mountain” (p. 58) should read “the goddess of Guye Mountain” (姑射神人); “Zhang Sanfen” (p. 80) should be “Zhang Sanfeng” (張三丰); the name of the book collector Zhao Qimei 趙琦美 is miswritten as Chao Qimei (p. 221). In one place I also noticed a slight misreading of the Chinese text. In “A Libertine Rebuffed,” the lines 妻忽飛跨驢背，別換一形，以鞭指某數曰 are rendered as “His wife instantly leapt onto the donkey's back, and in an abrupt change of manner pointed her whip at him, delivering the reprimand . . .” (p. 275). But 別換一形 is not just a matter of “an abrupt change of manner”; the point is rather this character “transformed her appearance,” revealing that she was not the libertine's wife at all but a spectre temporarily masquerading as her.

In his introduction Pollard generously acknowledges his debt to Yan Wenru's 嚴文儒 recent Chinese edition of Ji's work, *Xinyi Yuewei caotang biji* 新譯閱微草堂筆記. “Without its extensive annotation and translations into the modern Chinese language,” Pollard writes, “I would have been lost” (p. xxxi). But on at least one occasion Yan Wenru leads him a little astray. A story in Ji Yun's second collection contains the following line: 明壽寧侯故第在興濟，斥賣略盡，惟廳事僅存. Following Yan Wenru,⁶ Pollard identifies the Marquis of Shouning as Zhang Luan 張巒 (whose dates are 1445–1492) and translates the line as follows: “After the death of Zhang Luan, father of the consort of the Ming dynasty Emperor Xiaozong, his estate in Hebei province was broken up, leaving only its main hall standing” (p. 221). A closer reading of the Ming historical record, however, makes it clear that the breakup of the Zhang estate was not precipitated by the death of Zhang Luan but took place decades later, after the purge of his sons Zhang Heling 張鶴齡 (d. 1537?) and Zhang Yanling 張延齡 (d. 1546).⁷

⁶ *Xinyi Yuewei caotang biji* (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 2006), p. 544.

⁷ For a full account of this episode, see *Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1368–1644*, ed. L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1976), pp. 74–77.

Honglou meng tends to be thought of as the encyclopaedic Qing novel par excellence, but Pollard makes a persuasive case for seeing Ji Yun's miscellany as encyclopaedic in its own way, given its broad range of topics and diversity of perspectives. Attractively illustrated and brought to a high level of finish, the book is designed to be accessible to a general readership, and one hopes that it will soon be issued in paperback so that it can reach an even wider audience. Through it readers will get a vivid sense of how Chinese in the High Qing saw their society and thought about life and the afterlife, and if their reaction is at all like mine they will be sorry when the book ends.

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The Landscape Painting of China: Musings of a Journeyman. By Harrie A. Vanderstappen. Edited by Roger E. Covey. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2014. Pp. xiv + 342. \$44.95.

Harrie V. Vanderstappen (1921–2007), universally known as Father Harrie to his students, colleagues, and countless friends, was both an ordained Catholic priest and for some thirty years a beloved teacher of East Asian Art at the University of Chicago. This book, edited by his student Roger E. Covey (1954–2013), and lavishly illustrated with plentiful colour plates, is a posthumous gift to the field of Chinese painting studies and a demonstration of what made Father Harrie so unusual. Immune to academic fads and fashions in art history, he remained tenaciously, even scrappily, committed to what he calls in this book “visual-based methodologies”—an approach to engaging with works of art based on intense looking and exhaustive description, animated by the conviction that patient visual exploration will tell us more than about the minds of artists than any amount of textual research. Although open to insights from the domains of cultural history, religion, or anthropology, Vanderstappen's characteristic method privileged above all what his own eyes told him. *The Landscape Painting of China* condenses a life-time of looking and might be subtitled “Looking at Paintings with Father Harrie.”

The central argument of Vanderstappen's book, and the guiding principle that shapes what might be termed a Vanderstappian mode of looking, is that Chinese landscape painters made use of recurring patterns and conventions—of mountain forms, rocks, trees, streams, huts, and other motifs and of brush methods that were believed to animate paintings with the same vitality that courses through the natural