

Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue: An Annotated Translation of Wu Yue Chunqiu. By Jianjun He. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021. Pp. 280. \$55.00.

The *Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue* (*Wu Yue chunqiu* 吳越春秋) is part of a major tradition within Chinese literature, dealing with the long drawn out and highly dramatic conflict between these two kingdoms in the early fifth century B.C.E., which culminated in the conquest of Wu by Yue. The *Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue* appears to be the earliest known example of a sustained narrative on the subject, knitting together a range of source texts to create a tale that probably ought to be regarded as the first novel to be written in the Chinese language. Quite apart from the interest scholars of Chinese history and literature may feel at reading this very early manifestation of writing about the conflict between Wu and Yue—a topic which subsequently served to inspire many of China’s greatest poets and fiction writers throughout the imperial era and on to the present day—this book is also significant both for documenting a non-Huaxia culture at a time when it was still flourishing, and for its role in shaping what would become a very important regional cultural tradition. Almost all the other texts that have come down to us from the pre- and early imperial era are part of a metropolitan (if not palace) tradition, and as such reflect the culture of not merely the ruling elite in general, but more specifically, the national elite residing in one or other capital city in close proximity to the monarch. Almost every other Han-dynasty text that survives in the transmitted tradition was either produced by or edited within the imperial library—the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue* is one of the rare exceptions. Along with two other surviving texts—the *Lost Histories of Yue* (*Yuejue shu* 越絕書) compiled by Yuan Kang 袁康 and Wu Ping 吳平 in the early Eastern Han dynasty, and *Doctrines Weighed* (*Lunheng* 論衡) by Wang Chong 王充 (27–c. 100 C.E.)—the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue* is part of a remarkable florescence in a local intellectual tradition, defined by its interest in the history and culture of the Yangtze River Delta region.

He Jianjun is to be commended for taking on the challenge of translating this book into English, in what he terms a “grassroots project” carried out without access to many of the major publications in the field. Even with much better resources, the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue* poses endless difficulties for the translator: the internal structure of the text is highly complex and remains poorly understood, there are no premodern commentaries to elucidate difficult passages, the transmitted text is in some portions corrupt, and early quotations preserve significant textual variants which may or may not derive from this version of the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue*. (Given that a number of other

works with very similar titles were in circulation from the medieval period onwards, deciding which should be considered lost textual material and which should be ignored is highly controversial.) The dating and authorship of the transmitted text remain very contentious, and it does not fit easily into any of the well-understood genres of literature produced in the early imperial era. These difficulties have discouraged many Chinese scholars from studying this text and have also served to deter translators. Indeed, considering the importance of the culture and history of the Wu and Yue region in Chinese literature, the early manifestations of this tradition are astonishingly badly represented in translation: thus, aside from various translations into modern Chinese, the *Yuejue shu* has been translated into English (but no other languages), and the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue* has itself previously been translated into Japanese (under the title *Go-Etsu shunjū: Go-Etsu kōbō no rekishi monogatari* 吳越春秋：吳越興亡の歴史物語 by Satō Taketoshi 佐藤武敏) and German (as the *Heldensagen aus dem unteren Yangtse-Tal (Wu-Yüeh ch'un ch'iu)* by Werner Eichhorn).¹ The failure to translate the key texts which shaped the later sagas of the conflict between Wu and Yue means that non-Chinese speaking audiences have been left as baffled as one would be attempting to understand the legacy of classical literature on the Western world in the absence of any translations of the *Iliad*.

Given the importance of the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue* in Chinese literary history, it is unfortunate that He Jianjun's translation is very variable in quality: it seems that when the translator was informed by the translations available for the source texts for the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue*, the result is accurate (though perhaps sometimes lacking the flair of the original), but whenever he has attempted to go his own way, the result is a real challenge for the reader, who will struggle to comprehend what is going on unless they can read the parallel text and are well-versed in the history of the Eastern Zhou dynasty. There are occasions when the translation is misleading; for example, on p. 183, *chai* 豺, or “dhole,” is translated as “jackal”—an animal that never lived in China.² In another instance, the title of Taizi Jian of Chu 楚太子建 (d. 522 B.C.E.) is translated merely as “prince” and not as “crown prince” or “heir to the throne.”

¹ Satō Taketoshi, *Go-Etsu shunjū: Go-Etsu kōbō no rekishi monogatari* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2016); Werner Eichhorn, *Heldensagen aus dem unteren Yangtse-Tal (Wu-Yüeh ch'un ch'iu)* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1969).

² This problem in translation was first highlighted by Edward H. Schafer, “Brief Note: The Chinese Dhole,” *Asia Major*, ser. 3, 4.1 (1991): 1–6. For continuing concerns about the mistranslation of the name of this animal, see, for example, Brian Lander and Katherine Brunson, “Wild Mammals of Ancient North China,” *Journal of Chinese History* 2.2 (2018): 291–312.

By implying that Jian was just one of the many children of King Ping of Chu 楚平王 (r. 528–516 B.C.E.) and not his designated heir, it makes it impossible for the reader to understand why King Ping was so desperate to get rid of him, and why Jian (and his son) continued to pose a very serious political problem both for King Zhao 楚昭王 (r. 515–489 B.C.E.) and his successor, King Hui of Chu 楚惠王 (r. 488–432 B.C.E.). Given that Jian's lineage was regarded by many as having a better claim to the throne than the reigning monarch, these people's very existence posed an ongoing threat to the stability of the regime. There are also other peculiarities with names and titles, so the term *gongzi* 公子 is consistently given throughout this translation in pinyin, without explanation, leaving the uninitiated reader to guess as to the significance of this title. There would certainly be an argument for translating the titles of individuals like Gongzi Guang 公子光, the future King Helü of Wu 吳王闔閭 (r. 514–496 B.C.E.), as “Prince Guang”—as the oldest son of King Zhufan 吳王諸樊 (r. 560–548 B.C.E.), he could lay claim to a princely title. Similarly, there seems to be no consistency as to whether the translator separates surname and personal name or runs them into one word: thus, we have Cui Zhu 崔杼 (d. 546 B.C.E.) for the ancestor of the Boling Cui 博陵崔氏 and Qinghe Cui 清河崔氏 aristocratic clans, but his fellow dictator in Qi 齊, Qing Feng 慶封 (d. 538 B.C.E.), has his name rendered as Qingfeng.

Honorifics and respect language, whereby an individual will apply self-deprecating terms to himself, consistently cause problems in this translation. Since the translator seems to have been determined to produce a literal rendering of the text, every *chen* 臣 is translated as “your subject,” creating a very odd effect for the reader—a few mentions of “your humble servant” would have been much more effective, since English generally lacks such vocabulary terms. Meanwhile, the monarchs of this text consistently refer to themselves either by the term *guaren* 寡人 or *gu* 孤. In translating the former as “a man of little virtue,” the author seems to be following the commentary by Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648) on the *Liji* 禮記 (Records of Ritual), where he states: “A [monarch] who calls himself *guaren* says that he is a man of little virtue” (寡人者，言己是寡德之人).³ However, when it comes to *gu* (which literally means “orphan”), the author translates it this way, ignoring Kong Yingda's commentary which states that the terms *gu* and *guaren* are identical in meaning but used on different occasions: “In times when there were no troubles [the monarch] would conventionally call himself *guaren*; in times of disaster, he would call himself *gu*” (無凶則常稱寡人，有凶則稱孤也).⁴ The author of the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue* seems to have generally observed

³ *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), “Quli xia” 曲禮下, p. 144.

⁴ *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), Zhuang 11, p. 245.

this distinction; hence, King Goujian of Yue 越王勾踐 (r. 496–465 B.C.E.) refers to himself as *guaren* prior to and after his captivity in Wu, but while being held as a prisoner-of-war, he speaks of himself as *gu*. The subtleties of this self-deprecating personal pronoun for rulers are not preserved by simply rendering them as “a man of little virtue” and “the orphan.” Having made the decision to translate these terms, it is also incumbent on the translator to remain consistent, and not mix the two up; there are instances where *guaren* is translated as “an orphan,” as occurs in the line: “I, an orphan, lay in bed in the daytime and had a dream” 寡人晝臥有夢 (p. 119). Furthermore, in sentences where honorifics and respect language come thick and fast, the translator finds himself entangled in a positive forest of commas and convoluted grammar to the destruction of any readability: “If I, a man of little virtue, followed you, Prime Minister, and killed him, I, a man of little virtue, am not acting wisely but simply satisfying your, Prime Minister, personal desire” 寡人曾聽相國而誅之，是寡人之不智也，而為相國快私意耶 (p. 184). Such constructions will discourage all but the most dedicated readers.

This translation—at best pedestrian—is sometimes exceedingly clunky. The perils of literal translation are vividly demonstrated on virtually every page in this book, as the reader struggles from one strangely constructed sentence to the next. At one stage we are informed: “That Helü is tyrannical is what you, son of a king, know” 闔閭無道，王子所知 (p. 80); subsequently King Goujian of Yue exclaims: “I wish one day to engage in battle with Wu in the broad and flat wild in the world” 願一與吳交戰於天下平原之野 (p. 115); after that, readers are confronted with the peculiar locution: “How different is my, your subject’s, life from that of Wu Zixu’s” 臣命何異於子胥 (p. 133); and later we are told by Wen Zhong 文種, a senior official in the government of Yue: “Since our king has already escaped from disaster and has already washed off the humiliation he suffered in Wu, I have completely changed my dwelling to the place where I will have myself killed” 吾王既免於患難，雪恥於吳。我悉徙宅自投死亡之地 (p. 264). There are also a number of peculiar terms in this translation, which seem to be the result of the translator attempting to coin words for the occasion; for example, there are a series of references to a “wind chest” 震 (p. 120; here following the gloss by the modern scholar Zhang Jue 張覺 who defines this term as 橐⁵), which in English technically refers to a component within a pipe organ. What appears to have happened is that the translator has given a literal rendering of the modern Chinese term for *tuo* 橐 (that is *fengxiang* 風箱 or “wind chest”); however, what he really

⁵ Zhang Jue, *Wu Yue Chunqiu quanyi* 吳越春秋全譯 (Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 2008), p. 133, n. 9.

means is “bellows.” At some points, I am inclined to blame whoever proofread this, for the text and footnotes contain a number of irritating typos and formatting errors. Thus, there are instances where letters have been lopped off personal names (for example, on p. 156, the name Fangfeng 防風 becomes Fangfen); there are what appear to be simple spelling mistakes (for example, Wu Zixu is consistently designated by his fisherman friend as “Man in the Reeds” [*luzhong ren* 蘆中人], but on pp. 95–96 he becomes “Man in the Weeds”); there are endless examples of irregular capitalization, with terms such as 越王 being given as both “King of Yue” and “king of Yue” within consecutive sentences; and divisions between surname and personal name are not always given with internal consistency (for example, on p. 218, the name of the famous beauty 西施 is variously given as Xishi in the main text and Xi Shi in the footnotes). At the same time, there are some peculiar romanizations, such as the form *niu* for *niu* 牛 (this occurs on p. 231 in the parable of the crossbow), or the name Fei Wuji 費無忌 (d. 515 B.C.E.) being rendered as Bi Wuji.⁶ In addition, some of the main text has become caught up in the recitation given by Wen Zhong before the King of Yue on p. 258 and is therefore set as if it were poetry; and periodically the lords of the Zhou confederacy seem to change their sex, as they come to be designated as the “marquise” of such-and-such a state (as occurs, for example, in footnote 85 on p. 257). These issues all detract significantly from the quality of this translation.

Over the course of the last half century, interest in translating the masterpieces of early Chinese literature has become ossified, with hundreds of translations being produced in Western languages of just three texts—*Analects of Confucius* (*Lunyu* 論語), *Classic of the Way and Virtue* (*Daode jing* 道德經), and *Sunzi's Art of War* (*Sunzi bingfa* 孫子兵法)—while everything else is pretty much ignored. This situation has become so bad that there are now not only translations of these three texts produced by academics and amateur translators (both of which potentially have merit), but also publications of what are essentially mash-ups produced by people who unblushingly admit to not understanding a word of the Chinese language. In such circumstances, Cornell University Press is to be commended for publishing this book, and we can only hope that this will encourage other publishers to

⁶ The character 費 is read as Bi when it refers to the place in Shandong; this is clarified by the gloss by Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581–645) on the relevant passage in Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), *juan 27 zhong zhi xia* 中之下, p. 1434, n. 3. I can find no commentary to suggest that Fei Wuji's surname was ever pronounced Bi, though there is discussion of variant characters in his personal name, which is given both as 無極 and 無忌; see for example Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), Zhao 15, p. 1369.

seek out works that lie outside the extremely narrow confines of the three above-mentioned texts. However, the demand should not merely be for translations of other texts, but *good* translations of other texts. The aim of any translation should be not just to reproduce the surface meaning of the words in the target language but to create a readable rendering of the original text. If the reader is constantly thrown back upon checking the original to work out what the translator is talking about, then the translation has failed. In order to stimulate interest in classical Chinese literature outside the bounds of academia, to encourage people to learn more about Chinese culture and civilization, we really need a much wider range of translations which offer accessible, readable renderings of the original text. There is a role in this process for bilingual editions (as indeed this translation of *Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue* is), for literary translations aimed at the non-specialist reader and academic translations for students and scholars, but the one thing that is non-negotiable is quality. It is only through translations of the same quality as the original text that readers will appreciate the true glories of classical Chinese literature.

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OLIVIA MILBURN
Seoul National University