

PREFACE

“There are 24 dynastic histories,” as the Chinese saying goes, “and one hardly knows where to begin to tell about them.”

China may not be the oldest country in the world, but the Chinese do have an official history that covers 2,000 years or more, along with numerous other written records, to which they constantly refer for edification and guidance. The present anthology gathers together twelve essays that illuminate various aspects of Chinese history and historiography. They represent the work of more than that number of Chinese and Western specialists, because most of the essays are translations or adaptations from original Chinese sources. But in a broader sense all historians are engaged in “translating” the past—its people, their actions and speeches, and the events and institutions surrounding them—in terms understandable and instructive to present and future generations.

Ying-shih Yü’s “The Study of Chinese History: Retrospect and Prospect” attracted wide attention when it appeared in 1979 in the inaugural issue of the journal *Shih-hsüeh p’ing-lun* (Chinese Historical Review). Prof. Yü deplors the dichotomy between Chinese scholars who isolate themselves from the times in their exclusive concern with the “raw data” of history and those who seek to explain, or even justify political exigences by applying what they regard as “historical laws”. Rather, he holds up “the unique pattern of Chinese culture and its process of development” as the main task of Chinese historical study on the road ahead.

Included in this compilation is an excerpt which Stuart Sargent has translated from the *Shih t’ung* (Understanding History), the first important Chinese work of historiographic criticism, written by Liu Chih-chi (A.D. 661-721) of the T’ang dynasty. This selection, reviewing many writers of history before and after the Han, focuses on the question of style in narrative writing and affords an insight into the author’s conception of history as an object of philosophical and moral contemplation.

Burton Watson offers a modern Western view, his appreciation of the early Chinese historical works for their literary qualities and their value in teaching certain motifs or patterns of behavior in traditional Chinese society. He discourses with ease on the *Tso chuan* (Tso’s Commentary), the *Shih chi* (Records of the Historian), and the *Han shu* (History of the Former Han), on basis of his wide experience translating from these classics.

Other essays in this volume, dealing with specific topics and incidents, touch upon two periods of history which happen to be at the opposite ends of China’s long monarchical rule—the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) and the last days of the Ch’ing (Manchu) Empire, close to the beginning of the twentieth century. These essays often bear out the truism that history is but the biography of great men.

Prof. Yü contributes here a graphic analysis of the significance of the seating

order at the famous Hung Men Banquet, a pivotal incident in the struggle for empire between Hsiang Yü and Liu Pang, who was to become the first Han Emperor, Kao-tzu. This intricate piece of psycho-history is made available to us through T.C. Tang's deft translation. The metamorphosis of a historic personality, General Kuan Yü, from his image in the official history of the Three Kingdoms period (220-280) into Kuan-kung (Lord Kuan) of popular fiction, and even something akin to a God of War in folk legends, is traced in a case study by Winston L. Y. Yang.

Ssu-yü Teng, an authority on the Taiping Rebellion, translates and evaluates a firsthand account by T'ao Ch'eng-chang (1878-1912) of the origin and evolution of China's secret sects (*chiao*) and societies (*hui*). Wang Ch'ing-ch'eng, in the translation of C. A. Curwen, supplies a new interpretation of the connection between Hung Hsiu-ch'üan's early conversion to Christianity and the political egalitarian ideology he later embraced in leading a peasant revolution against the Ch'ing rulers. Liang Ch'i-ch'ao (1873-1929), himself an active participant in the abortive "Hundred-Day Reform", has left behind a contemporary biography of the martyred reformer T'an Ssu-t'ung, here rendered into English by Chan Sin-wai.

Two other historic figures are presented in these pages; as specimens of "creative" writing, they could not be more different from each other. One has to do with Viceroy Li Hung-chang, the colorful statesman who represented the Ch'ing court as China's special envoy to Czar Nicholas II and Queen Victoria. What purported to be his memoirs might best be described as an object lesson in "non-translation", or how *not* to write history. The other is an authentic human document, the recollections of the young writer Xiao Hong of the last days of her friend and mentor, Lu Xun. Generally regarded as modern China's literary titan, about whose head swirled the leftist polemics of the thirties, Lu Xun died early enough to be deified by the Chinese Communists and spared the fate that befell many an independent spirit in the years following the 1949 revolution.

It will be apparent to long-time followers of the *Renditions* series that these and other essays were originally assembled to fill a special issue of the journal. However, a mere glance will also show that the pieces, collectively and individually, have much to say about China's ever living past and merit preservation in a more permanent form. To all our contributors, and to the Wing Lung Bank Fund which aided the publication of this volume, we owe a debt of thanks.

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En route Hong Kong-San Francisco
December 13, 1981