

City of Marvel and Transformation: Chang'an and Narratives of Experience in Tang Dynasty China. By Linda Rui Feng. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. Pp. x + 197. \$57.00.

Throughout the twentieth century Western scholarship on the classical tale of the Tang dynasty was not commensurate with the importance of the genre in Chinese literature. While we had a few fine in-depth studies of individual tales (such as James Hightower's pioneering article on Yuan Zhen's 元稹 *Yingying zhuan* 鶯鶯傳 and Glen Dudbridge's superb monograph on Bai Xingjian's 白行簡 *Li Wa zhuan* 李娃傳),¹ most other publications were collections of translations, aimed at a general audience and of very varying quality. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, this situation has greatly changed. Linda Rui Feng's *City of Marvel and Transformation: Chang'an and Narratives of Experience in Tang Dynasty China* is the latest addition to this quickly growing body of scholarship.

As far as recent translations are concerned, one has to mention the two volumes edited by William H. Nienhauser, Jr. as *Tang Dynasty Tales: A Guided Reader*.² The first volume offers translations of six well-known Tang tales by Nienhauser and his collaborators; the second volume offers twelve more. All these translations are extensively annotated (including discussions of textual variants) and accompanied by a discussion of the textual transmission of the tales and their pre-modern and contemporary interpretations (the second volume also includes the Chinese texts of the stories included).³ In the introduction to the first volume Nienhauser provided a short history of the Western translations of Tang tales, which he updated in his Introduction to the second volume.⁴

¹ James R. Hightower, "Yüan Chen and 'The Story of Ying-ying,'" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 33 (1973), pp. 90–123; Glen Dudbridge, *The Tale of Li Wa: Study and Critical Edition of a Chinese Story from the Ninth Century* (London: Ithaca Press, 1983).

² Singapore: World Scientific, 2010; volume 2, 2016.

³ Some of these interpretations by traditional and contemporary Chinese scholars go to great length to discover hidden political messages in some of the tales. In view of the ingenuity that is displayed in hunting down these innuendoes one wonders whether the contemporary readers really would have been able to catch them. For an English-language example of such style of interpretation one may read Chen Jue, *Record of an Ancient Mirror: An Interdisciplinary Reading* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), which in an appendix contains a new translation of the tale.

⁴ In this connection one may also want to mention Luo Ye, *The Drunken Man's Talk: Tales from Medieval China*, trans. Alister D. Inglis (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2015). Because Luo Ye's 羅燁 *Zuiweng tanlu* 醉翁談錄 (c. 1300?) alongside a number of Song-dynasty tales and anecdotes also includes several versions of some well-known Tang-dynasty tales, it allows Western readers to see how these tales circulated during the Song and Yuan dynasties.

The available selections of translations, including the two volumes edited by Nienhauser, all have a tendency to focus on a limited group of relatively long tales, many of which date from the early decades of the ninth century and nowadays are often classified as *chuanqi* 傳奇. In this respect the translators of these selections followed the lead of Chinese scholars, who in turn followed the lead of Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936), who in his pioneering *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shiliie* 中國小說史略 (1923–24) had hailed *chuanqi* as the first examples of fiction in the history of Chinese narrative. That some of the most popular *chuanqi* dealt with tragic love stories will only have enhanced their popularity in the 1920s and 1930s when traditional patriarchal morality was seen as standing in the way of true love. When Stephen Owen in his *The End of the Chinese 'Middle Ages': Essays in Mid-Tang Literary Culture*⁵ identified the “Mid-Tang” as the period in Chinese cultural history that saw “the rise of a culture of romance, with the representation of individually chosen and socially unauthorized relationships between men and women” (p. 130), he illustrated his argument by a detailed analysis of *Huo Xiaoyu zhuan* 霍小玉傳, and he followed his chapter on “Romance” by one in which he discussed *Yingying zhuan*. For many decades, however, Dudbridge has argued that by limiting our attention to these so-called *chuanqi* we ignored a wealth of equally fascinating tales and anecdotes, and that we misunderstood the nature of these materials if we wanted to read them as works of creative fiction. Daniel Hsieh in his *Love and Women in Early Chinese Fiction*⁶ clearly had taken Dudbridge’s advice to heart to look beyond the most popular *chuanqi* when he surveyed the many aspects of the relation of men and women in Tang-dynasty China as reflected in the classical tales of the time.

Dudbridge demonstrated his own approach in his *Religious Experience and Lay Society in T'ang China: A Reading of Tai Fu's Kuang-i chi*.⁷ In his reading of the stories in Dai Fu’s 戴孚 collection *Guangyi ji* 廣異記, illustrated by a wealth of translated tales, Dudbridge distinguished between an inner and an outer story. While the inner story often was the record of a deeply personal experience such as a dream, a vision, a meeting with a god or ghost, or a case of demon possession, and therefore is inherently beyond objective verification, the outer story narrates society’s public reaction to the abnormal event. Enlightening and useful as such an approach may be for the study of Tang-dynasty religion and society, it turns away from a literary reading. Dudbridge moved even further towards an historical approach in his most recent work, *A Portrait of Five Dynasties China: From the Memoirs of Wang Renyu (880–956)*.⁸ This work offers a fascinating kaleidoscope of life during the Five

⁵ Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996.

⁶ Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2008.

⁷ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

⁸ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Dynasties period in Western and Northern China on the basis of an extensive selection from the preserved items from Wang Renyu's 王仁裕 two collections of tales and anecdotes, *Yutang xianhua* 玉堂閒話 and *Wangshi wenjianlu* 王氏聞見錄. Of the over two hundred preserved items, Dudbridge has translated and analysed eighty stories (brief summaries of all preserved items are also included in the book). In the chapter on “The Khitan” (pp. 144–60), Dudbridge makes good use of the extensive anthology from the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 that was printed in Korea in 1462 as *T'ae p'yǒng Kwang ki sang chǒl* 太平廣記詳節.⁹ He translates three items that have only been preserved in this Korean edition and that are not found in any of the late Ming printings of the *Taiping guangji*, the earliest editions known from China. In view of “the vigorous anti-barbarian sentiments” (p. 146) that are expressed in these items, Dudbridge ventures the suggestions that the late-Ming editions of the *Taiping guangji* may be based on an expurgated version of the Mongol Yuan dynasty, whereas the Korean anthology may be directly based on a Song edition. A historical approach, very similar to Dudbridge's approach in his latest work, may also be observed in Oliver J. Moore, *Rituals of Recruitment in Tang China: Reading an Annual Programme in the Collected Statements by Wang Dingbao (870–940)*,¹⁰ which focuses on the rituals surrounding the *jinshi* 進士 examinations in the late Tang as described by Wang Dingbao 王定保 in his *Tang zhiyan* 唐摭言. Carrie E. Reed's research on Duan Chengshi 段成式 and his *Youyang zazu* 酉陽雜俎 resulted both in a monograph and a volume of translations.¹¹

The English-language scholarship on the classical tale of the Tang has now in quick succession been further enriched by three major works by younger scholars: Sarah M. Allen, *Shifting Stories: History, Gossip, and Lore in Narratives from Tang Dynasty China*;¹² Manling Luo, *Literati Storytelling in Late Medieval China*;¹³ and Linda Rui Feng, *City of Marvel and Transformation*. All three authors broadly cover the entire corpus of preserved Tang-dynasty tales and anecdotes, and while they do not deny that a limited number of works in the corpus are deliberate fictions, they treat these stories and anecdotes as deriving from the gossip and stories that circulated

⁹ The *T'ae p'yǒng Kwang ki sang chǒl* has only partially been preserved. For an eight-volume translation, reprint, and critical study of this work, see *T'ae p'yǒng Kwang ki sang chǒl*, comp. Sǒng Im (1421–1484), trans. and ed. Kim Chang-hwan, Pak Chae-yǒn, and Yi Rae-chong (Seoul: Hakkobang, 2005).

¹⁰ Leiden: Brill, 2004.

¹¹ *A Tang Miscellany: An Introduction to Youyang zazu* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003); *Chinese Chronicles of the Strange: The “Nuogao ji”* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

¹² Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014.

¹³ Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2015.

among the literati elite, which means that the authors of the tales, for all their display of literary craftsmanship, rarely if ever invented the plot or the characters of their stories. Of these three authors Allen is most focused on the literary aspects of these tales as she explores the various ways in which these stories might have come to be written down, and the manner in which these various ways might affect the final shape of the narrative. And if stories even when written down for a long time could be freely rewritten by later collectors, Allen also notes the emergence by the end of the ninth century of an appreciation of these tales as texts on the part of some readers at least. Luo highlights the preponderance of *jinshi* among the Tang-dynasty authors of classical tales. As a reflection of the concerns of this social group she discerns four “dominant themes” in these tales: “sovereignty, literati sociality, sexuality, and cosmic mobility” (p. 13). Her chapter on “sovereignty” focuses on the many tales that deal with the figure of Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗; the chapter on “literati sociality” focuses on anecdotes on fellow officials and literati; the chapter on “sexuality” deals with a number of well-known love stories but introduces the theme of the competition of elder and younger generations of literati for the same desirable women, while the chapter on “cosmic mobility” deals with some miraculous tales.

Feng, an associate professor of premodern cultural studies in the Department of East Asian Studies of the University of Toronto, also treats the classical tales of the Tang as primarily reflecting the experiences and sensibilities of the *jinshi*, but her focus is not on the four themes of Luo but on a single locality: the city of Chang’an. As the capital of the Tang empire, Chang’an likely was the most magnificent city of its time, but more important in this context, it was therefore also the place where the annual *jinshi* examinations were held. And while passing the examination did not immediately promise an appointment in the imperial bureaucracy, it was an increasingly prestigious stepping stone in one’s career. Especially in the second half of the Tang dynasty ambitious young men from all over the empire continued to flock to the capital to sit for the examinations, which only a few of them would pass on each occasion. No wonder therefore that Chang’an loomed large in the imagination and the emotional life of all literati. The young men who had left their families behind and had to find their own way in the big city until they were admitted into the imperial bureaucracy often spent years (if not decades) in a liminal stage, outside and in-between the major institutions that provided status and meaning to one’s existence. As the exemplary tale of a young man lost and seduced in the city but saved at last by the object of his affections, Bai Xingjian’s *Li Wa zhuan* is quoted and referenced repeatedly.

Feng’s monograph consists of an Introduction, five chapters, and a very short Epilogue. In her Introduction (pp. 1–25) she first presents a brief description of the

city,¹⁴ and then proceeds to detail her methodology, sources, and aims. Feng quotes Henri Lefebvre to argue that urban space is not a given, but very much a social construct, and also quotes Michel de Certeau to argue that commonplace activities often circumvent the disciplinary powers of institutions such as city planning. For her notion of liminality Feng is, like many others before her, inspired by the work of Victor Turner. While her sources are not limited to anecdotes and tales, her main sources are the collections of anecdotes and stories (as reconstructed on the basis of the *Taiping guangji*) from the second part of the ninth century and beyond.¹⁵ “These narratives,” Feng states on the first page of her Introduction, “echoing one another in multifaceted ways, often raise this implicit question: how should an aspirant and/or newcomer behave in Chang’an?” (p. 1) Later in her Introduction Feng will conclude that “there was no single answer to this question” (p. 21). Chapter One, “Narrating Liminality and Transformation” (pp. 24–43), can be read as a continuation of the Introduction as it notes the increasing importance by the ninth century of passing the *jinsshi* examination as a biographical milestone, to the extent that failing to pass the exams can become the defining event of a lifetime (p. 30). Feng further defines the years young men spent in the capital waiting to pass the examinations as a new “chronotope” (pp. 30–34) that emerged in the eighth century. She also characterizes the tales of the adventures of examination candidates on their way to and from Chang’an as well as while in the city as a form of “Unbiography” by imagining

¹⁴ Feng’s monograph does not attempt to be an urban history of Chang’an. Feng quotes Victor Cunrui Xiong, *Sui-Tang Chang’an: A Study in the Urban History of Medieval China* (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2000), but her Bibliography doesn’t list the far more detailed studies of Thomas Thilo, *Chang’an: Metropole Ostasiens und Weltstadt des Mittelalters 583–904, Teil 1: Die Stadtanlage* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1997), and *Chang’an: Metropole Ostasiens und Weltstadt des Mittelalters 583–904, Teil 2: Gesellschaft und Kultur* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006). Thilo had earlier published an extensive selection of Tang-dynasty classical tales in German translation as *Der Fremde mit dem Lockenbart: Erzählungen aus dem China der Tang Zeit* (Berlin: Rütten und Loening, 1989).

¹⁵ Feng mentions the theory that classical tales were written by aspiring young men for submission to their examiners, and while she rejects it as “erroneous” (p. 14), she neglects to reference Victor H. Mair, “Scroll Presentation in the T’ang Dynasty,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 38 no. 1 (June 1978), pp. 35–60. This is regrettable not only because Mair’s article predates the Chinese scholarship she quotes on the subject, but also because when writing in English we should make an effort to direct non-specialists to the available fine scholarship on any given topic in English. When referring to collections with heterogeneous contents Feng repeatedly used the awkward expression “collection of miscellany” (for instance pp. 28, 74). A better copy-editor might have suggested another term.

how an official biography would have formulated the biography of the male protagonist of *Li Wa zhuan* without any reference to his dalliance with a prostitute and the resulting misadventures (pp. 34–36). And while *Li Wa zhuan* shows that even the most unlikely candidate still may eventually enter officialdom, she contrasts this tale with others in which the candidate abandons all thought of a career or makes a fortune not because he is selected by an examiner but because he attracted the attention of foreigners.

Chapter Two, “The Lure of Chang’an” (pp. 44–67), describes the various ways the writings of Chang’an literati away from the city, whether aspiring students or banished officials, betray their longing for that place. The chapter also discusses some stories about unsuccessful examination candidates who after staying on in the capital for many years are enabled by magical means to pay a short visit to their family back home. In Chapter Three, “Navigating the City Interior” (pp. 68–87), we follow various characters as they make their way through the city as young and naïve visitors from outside (or as an emperor in disguise to whom the city outside his palaces is equally strange). If the complexity and size of the capital that allow for “anonymity, artifice, and complexity of identity” (p. 71) made some lose their way, criminals and crafty madams used it to their advantage as we learn from the stories discussed here. Feng concludes, “For the aspiring literati elite, gaining cultural capital meant being at home in capital culture. . . . Literati personhood in the latter half of the Tang was a distinctly metropolitan one” (p. 87). Chapter Four, “Staging Talent in Urban Arenas” (pp. 88–111), discusses the various ways in which ambitious young men might show off their talents to potential patrons and to the urban crowd, turning talent (*cai* 才) into “a spectator sport” (p. 90). In this connection Feng also points out the importance of inscriptions on walls, at the Great Goose Pagoda and elsewhere, concluding her chapter with a threesome of anecdotes of inscriptions of poems and names in the courtesan quarter of the Pingkang Ward. Chapter Five, “Negotiating the Pleasure Quarters” (pp. 112–34), is fully dedicated to that section of the city and relies heavily on the anecdotes collected in Sun Qi’s 孫榮 *Beili zhi* 北里志 in narrating the joys and pitfalls of relations with courtesans.

While Allen, Luo, and Feng do not shy away from discussing the well-known *chuanqi* when their arguments make such a discussion appropriate and while in doing so their original approaches often provide startling new insights, one of the main attractions of these three monographs is that their approaches result in the discussion of many tales and anecdotes that earlier had not attracted much scholarly attention if any. In many cases these discussions are accompanied by complete or partial translations. Their approaches not only show how these tales and anecdotes mattered to their original authors and readers, but also how these tales can be entertaining and enlightening to contemporary readers, and as such confirm Dudbridge’s argument

that we have ignored too much of these materials for too long. The wealth of these materials is further shown by the fact that in their introduction of new materials these three monographs display very little overlap. But the emphasis on the nature of these anecdotes and tales as the reflection of the shared mentality of Tang literati, more in particular the *jinshi* candidates, also tends, especially in the studies of Luo and Feng, to a neglect of the characteristics of the individual collections as they may be reconstructed on the basis of the *Taiping guangji*. In view of their thematic approach one cannot blame them for this, but especially the latest publication of Dudbridge shows that at least some of the authors concerned had distinctive personalities and created a highly personal body of materials. As students of Chinese literature we can only be grateful for the work of these scholars and the different ways in which they explore these rich sources.

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