Translating twelfth century China

With James M. Hargett’s lucid translation of the text and meticulous annotations of the Treatises of the Supervisor and Guardian of the Cinnamon Sea (Guihai yuheng zhi, hereafter Treatises) by Fan Chengda (1126–1193), a renowned official and scholar of the Song, this work has doubtlessly become more accessible to a much broader readership. Together with his translations of Fan’s other three works, Diary of Grasping the Carriage Reins (Lanpei lu), Diary of Mounting a Simurgh (Canluan lu), and Diary of a Boat Trip to Wu (Wuchuan lu), Professor Hargett, a leading scholar in the fledgling field of Chinese travel literature, has accomplished his aim to provide English readers with translations of all four major prose works of Fan.

Hang Lin

Reviewed publication:

CONSISTING OF 13 SECTIONS, each devoted to a particular category of objects, the book offers a wealth of geographical, historical, cultural, and ethnographic data about southwestern China – mainly Guangxi – in the twelfth century, ranging from landscape, minerals, flora and fauna to the history of various non-Han peoples and their cultures. In this review, rather than recounting the content of individual sections, I would like to touch upon some issues that emerge from the work itself. The original text by Fan, appended in full to the translation, is voluminous at all. As a typical example of the yu (travel records) literature, the Treatises is written, as Hargett expounds, in a straightforward “reportorial-descriptive” language (p.xvi). But a closer look at Fan’s methodological approach and the work’s content reveals that it is not a conventional yu but at once a gazetteer, an encyclopedia, and an ethnography. It comprises both passages outlining the landmarks, vegetation, and people of particular localities, and repertorial accounts on those areas’ customs and products. For Hargett, the Treatises is not only “a personal memoir of Fan’s happy and restful days in Galin [in Guangxi]”, but also “a sensuous and detailed scholarly study” (p.xxxx). Like many of his contemporaries, Fan was not only a curious traveler but also a keen observer. Containing large amount of personal observations and detailed information from informants, many of them “not generally found in local gazetteers” (p.4), the Treatises reflects Fan’s strenuous effort to report information and to relate these facts to potential readers who probably knew little or nothing about these matters. In this sense, this work, like many other yu, is extremely valuable as a source work (p.xxxx).

The particular value of Fan’s accounts contained in the Treatises is enhanced by his relatively neutral attitude towards the area of Guangxi and the various non-Han peoples living there. For a long time in Chinese history, officials were sent to the remote and mountainous region of Guangxi for demotion or political exile. The reason why Fan headed for Guangxi was of no exception. However, Fan did not harbor much fear or distress but was surprisingly enthusiastic about his assignment. Guilin was certainly far from the Song political center in Lan (today’s Hanghou), but when he arrived in Guilin in 1173 he “found peace of mind there” (p.3), and even after his tenure, he still “remained[ed] deeply attached to Guilin, so much that [he] has compiled and edited this [collection] of minuta and trivia” (p.4). Furthermore, Fan did not find himself in “a strange, alien land” (p.xxxi), populated by non-Han “barbarians” who had not been assimilated into the orbit of Han-Chinese civilization, although Fan collectively termed them as men (literally: barbarians). In fact, he “refused from ‘looking down on the [local] people’”, most of them probably non-Han, and “they in turn forgive my ignorance and trusted in my sincerity” (p.3). As the issue of political legitimacy became thorny again under the political and military pressure of the non-Chinese states from the north, in particular after the jurchen seized the Song capital at Kaifeng and took over whole North China in 1127, there was a trend among Song literati to emphasize their cultural superiority over their non-Han neighbors to counteract their political and military inferiority and to strengthen legitimacy of their dynasty. Quite often too, those non-Han Chinese were described as “uncivilized barbarians”. But in the Treatises, Fan has clearly presented another pattern.

In fact, Fan’s observations and attitudes reflect how the Song endeavored to “maximize its control” in the southwestern border regions of the empire by “minimizing military conflict” with the large population of non-Han tribes-people. On the other hand, the organisation brings together a seemingly unlikely group of countries (Afghanistan, India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan), dialogue partners (Belarus, Sri Lanka, and Turkey), and guests (Turkmenistan, the Association for Southeast Asian Nations, and the Commonwealth of Independent States).

Hang Lin, University of Hamburg. (hang.lin@uni-hamburg.de)

Reviewed publication:

THUS, WHAT CONFOUNDS MANY is that regardless of the dissimilarity between its participants, the SCO not only survives, but also has become the most prominent institutional framework in Eurasia – an area notorious for its aversion to any form of meaningful regional initiatives.

At the same time, what makes the SCO even more puzzling is that it is an international organization developed, promoted, and maintained by China. Beijing’s rapid movement during the 1990s, from the difficult task of delineating and disarming the non-Chinese people on the Song’s southwestern borders were considered partially “sinicized”, but more often than not local chieftains still had near-absolute control over land distribution and tax collection within their jurisdictions. But as long as this “loose rein” could bring peace for the Song, it was ready to accept the fact that the tribemen’s subordination existed only in name. As is unavoidable in any translation of medieval Chinese text, some may have other suggestions for the translation or interpretation of individual words or sentences. For instance, on page 163, Fan’s original sentence, which Hargett translates as “they receive rank allowances and office appointments only at the rank of senior or junior envoy”, would much better fit the context if it were translated as “many settlement chieftains […] purchased official ranks [from the Song], but [they got] only military ranks ranging from 9b to 10a”. Nonetheless, such minor quibbles should by no means diminish the remarkable achievement James M. Hargett has made in his conscientious translation and painstaking study of Fan Chengda’s Treatises of the Supervisor and Guardian of the Cinnamon Sea. Containing rich data about the natural world, material culture, and ethnography in China’s southwestern frontier in the twelfth century, this book is bound to attract both experts and students of Chinese history, culture, and ethnography.

Hang Lin, University of Hamburg. (hang.lim@uni-hamburg.de)
Hindu kingdoms, to the Mughals

Sandhya Sharma's pioneering volume investigates Mughal Indian society and politics, as well as family dynamics, and caste, through Riti Kal literature. The author focuses on a form of Riti Kal known as Braja basha poetry, which was predominant in Western and North-Central India from the sixteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Interestingly, although this poetry was traditionally written by male poet-saints, those originating from Northern India are mostly penned from a female point of view.

Rachel Parikh


AS A RESULT, Riti Kal is a genre advocated the conventional roles of women in family and society, and did so with sympathy and understanding. In addition, the majority of Braja basha poetry is mystical in nature, focusing on the spiritual union between a devotee and God. One of the most popular themes was Krishna and his chief consort Radha. Through a chronological and historical framework, Sharma traces the development of the female role and the evolution of the Krishna-Radha narrative against contemporaneous socio-political and religious environments respectively. As a result, she has found through her extensive research that the literature is a reflection of the changes in North India, from being home to medieval Hindu kingdoms, to being controlled by the Mughals. The author's use of this traditional form of Hindu literature offers an innovative and fresh perspective of understanding the influence of the Mughal Empire on North Indian life and culture.

The introduction, which also acts as the first chapter, provides a solid foundation understanding the genre of Riti Kal literature. It is made very clear, from Sharma's concise overview, that Riti Kal is a genre greatly diverse and complex, qualities that have prevented from it being used as a source for understanding Mughal impact on North India. In addition, this section of the book acquaints the reader with the wide variety of primary source material on the subject, and how it can be utilized as historical documentation. Chapter Two, Kinship, Caste, and Gender, investigates the relationship between the individual and society. Sharma addresses how the dynamics of the family emanate in larger kin groups and plays a role in the formation of caste. She is particularly interested in patriarchal joint families, how they affected societal development, and how they were affected by the changes brought on by the Mughals. In her discussion of familial ideologies and their position within society, she takes the opportunity to discuss the individual, and how conformist and non-conformist attitudes are indicators of continuity and change. At this point in the chapter, she shifts her attention to gender relations. What makes this discussion more interesting and especially profound is that Sharma looks at the issues of gender from a historical perspective and not according to our present day views. She also brings up an interesting point in her study; that the idealization of women in Riti Kal literature and its influence on the suppression and objectification of women in society. Her conclusion concedes with a look at how different poets viewed women and gender relations through socio-political, political, and familial frameworks, and how that affected their writings.

Chapter Three, Krishna and Radha, recounts the attributes, incidents, and myths that are legends of history. Sharma looks at different traditions of the deos, as well as their divine and human forms, through a comparison between Indian religious traditions and colonial perceptions. The author brilliantly combines her assessments of traditions by looking at the treatment of Krishna and Radha in devotional poetry and how their roles changed and developed over time. As a result, she demonstrates that Radha takes on the face of the god over the god Krishna, which is an interesting juxtaposition to the contemporary views of women and religious practices.

Three works are acutely examined in Chapter Four. Narratives from the Past: Shelukunta, Probodh Chandra Dey, and Sukin Wilks. Sharma uses these texts to support her argument that either Riti Kal poets, their patrons, or their audience (or perhaps all of the above), were making attempts to revive their literary and traditional past. Her comparison of these eighteenth-century anthropologists to the anthropologists of historicism looks at different traditions of this dual, as well as their divine and human forms, through a comparison between Indian religious traditions and colonial perceptions. The author brilliantly combines her assessments of traditions by looking at the treatment of Krishna and Radha in devotional poetry and how their roles changed and developed over time. As a result, she demonstrates that Radha takes on the face of the god over the god Krishna, which is an interesting juxtaposition to the contemporary views of women and religious practices.

Three works are acutely examined in Chapter Four. Narratives from the Past: Shelukunta, Probodh Chandra Dey, and Sukin Wilks. Sharma uses these texts to support her argument that either Riti Kal poets, their patrons, or their audience (or perhaps all of the above), were making attempts to revive their literary and traditional past. Her comparison of these eighteenth-century anthropologists to the anthropologists of historicism looks at different traditions of this dual, as well as their divine and human forms, through a comparison between Indian religious traditions and colonial perceptions. The author brilliantly combines her assessments of traditions by looking at the treatment of Krishna and Radha in devotional poetry and how their roles changed and developed over time. As a result, she demonstrates that Radha takes on the face of the god over the god Krishna, which is an interesting juxtaposition to the contemporary views of women and religious practices.