

China



Yang Erzeng, *The Story of Han Xiangzi: The Alchemical Adventures of a Daoist Immortal* (Trans. by Philip Clart)

Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2007. 472 pages, 31 illustrations, notes. Hardback, US\$40.00; paper, US\$34.95; ISBN-13: 978-0-295-98690-6.

YANG ERZENG (fl. 1601–1623), the Recluse of Mount Pheasant-Yoke, Master of both the Hall of Purity in Poverty and of the Thatched Abode of Mysteries, who also styled himself the Daoist who Travels Recumbently, was one of those men from the prosperous southern city of Hangzhou who straddled the late imperial Chinese worlds of letters and books. Publisher, editor, novelist, and scholar, and a man it seems with something of a predilection for the “marvellous,” his particular talent seems to have been the production of commercially successful books that were at once both edifying and entertaining.

The best known extant work from his various publishing houses is the wonderful *Hainei qiguan* (Marvellous sights from within the seas), a copiously illustrated literary and geographical guidebook to the sacred places (the mountains, rivers, and temples) of late Ming dynasty China that appeared in 1609. “Who amongst us, with the limited span of years allocated us by Heaven, can ever hope to exhaust the delights of the limitless number of sites of surpassing beauty to be found throughout the empire,” reads an item from the “Guiding Principles” prefaced to this work, “and thus have I produced the following volume for the delectation of all recumbent travellers.”

This work was concerned with introducing to a burgeoning and largely urban reading public aspects of geographical knowledge in a manner that was both in keeping with their particular level of literacy whilst also being exciting enough to attract their custom. However, other productions of his various publishing houses dealt with the historical—Yang edited a version of the *Dong xi liang Jin yanyi* (Romance of the eastern and western Jin dynasties) given to him by his friend, the Master of the Hall of Great Peace—and the aesthetic: his *Tuhui zongyi* (Paintings of the masters) of 1607 was a guide to the techniques of painting, and, particularly, religious knowledge.

In this last category, aside from the book under review, Yang Erzeng seems also to have been involved, as editor, in the production of a collection of Zen poems by the Song dynasty scholar Su Shi (1036–1101) attributed to Chen Jiru (1558–1639) and entitled *Su Dongpo xiansheng chanxi ji* (A collection of Zen poems by Master Su Shi, 1590); as compiler, of the *Xianyuan jishi* (Records of the immortal beauties, 1602); and, again as editor, of the *Xu Zhenjun jingming zongjiao lu* (Record of the ancestral teachings of the perfected Lord Xu’s way of purity and light, 1604). As is implied by the titles of these last two works and as the focus of his 1623 novel *Han Xiangzi quanzhuan* (The story of Han Xiangzi: The alchemical adventures of

a Daoist immortal), Daoist ritual, alchemy, and meditation appear to have held a particular importance for Yang Erzeng, and his work in this vein is heavily freighted with didactic and proselytising intent.

Yang Erzeng was, by his own account, a modest but conscientious practitioner of his various crafts. Several other items in the “Guiding Principles” attached to his *Hainci qiguan* speak of how the illustrations are modeled on paintings by the great masters, and the poems are those of the great poets of old—and of the extent to which in the preparation of his work Yang has had recourse to local gazetteers. In the specific case of the developing aesthetics of the novel, two particular issues seem to have been of pressing contemporary concern: the relative proportionality of historical fact as opposed to flights of fancy included in the story, and the techniques whereby one could maintain narrative coherence over the course of a lengthy and complicated tale.

His close contemporary Feng Menglong (1574–1646), a man also much concerned with bridging the gulf between the big and little literary traditions, addresses the first of these issues in his “Preface” to his reworking of the novel *Ping yao zhuan* (Quelling the demons revolt), published in 1620:

For novelists, whilst the real (*zhen*) must constitute the main concern of their work, the unreal (*huan*), however, serves to add an element of the marvellous to their story. As the saying has it, “It is easier to paint a ghost than to depict a person.” *Xiyou ji* (The journey to the west) is unreal in the extreme, and for this reason, it cannot be compared with the *Shuiliu zhuan* (Water margin), by reason of the gulf that separates the ghost from mortal men. If a book concerns itself only with ghosts and not with the affairs of men, it can serve merely to provide us with topics of conversation, for it can never move our emotions. *Sanguo yanyi* (The romance of the three kingdoms), on the other hand, concerns itself only with the affairs of men, and although its descriptions are masterfully written, what is lacking entirely is precisely that element of the unreal. And if a novel does not naturally allow for the introduction into its narrative of the unreal as well, only a writer of genius will be able to bring an element of the unreal to it—otherwise, the novel will remain but a minor example of the art.

Yang Erzeng, for his part, addresses the second in his “Preface” (dated 1623) to *The Story of Han Xiangzi*:

In this book the parts and the whole do not conflict with each other, beginning and end do not contradict each other. It has the sternness of *Record of the Three Kingdoms* and the wondrous transformations of *Water Margin*, while lacking the cruel satire of *The Journey to the West* and the indecent license of *The Plum in the Golden Vase* [*Jin Ping Mei*]. (6)

The story at the core of the novel focuses on Han Xiang (b. 793), said to be a nephew (or perhaps grandnephew) of the great Tang dynasty scholar Han Yu (768–824), and his quest for immortality, mainly through his practise of “Inner Alchemy” (*neidan*). By the Song dynasty, this man, by all accounts an unexceptional minor official, had become one of the “Eight Immortals,” perhaps as the result

of a conflated reading of several of Han Yu's poems, and thereafter, his story as a member of this Daoist band underwent the tyranny of rewriting and translation from one genre to another that is such a marked feature of the interaction between the elite and popular literary traditions of China. In the popular traditions, Han Xiangzi, in popular tradition always depicted with a flute to his lips, became the patron of the musician; in this novel, his story ends with his final ascent to immortality, accompanied by his entire immediate family.

As a novelist, Yang Erzeng distances himself explicitly from the more popular and musical of contemporary Han Xiangzi traditions:

His story is only transmitted by the blind storytellers who either sing in a loud voice while holding documents like officials, or recite ballads in a wild manner dressed up as Daoist priests, singing three times for every line they chant. These stories everywhere delight the hearts of ignorant people and village matrons, and are listened to by school teachers and their pupils. Yet their style is disorderly and erroneous, their poems are inept and awkward. (4)

Chapter 9 of Yang's novel ("Han Xiangzi's Name is Recorded at the Purple Office/ Two Shepherds Recognize a Divine Immortal"), wherein Han Xiangzi meets with the Jade Emperor and decides that he should return to the world of man in order that he may also save his relatives from the "sea of suffering," is a good illustration of both his method and his strengths as a storyteller. In this chapter, he weaves into his fluent, vernacular story a series of citations of texts from a very different end of the literary and philosophic spectrum, including the *Analects* of Confucius, the *Mencius*, and the *Han Feizi*, along with a lengthy section of Han Yu's essay *Yuan dao* ("On the True Way").

Philip Clart's complete translation of the thirty-one chapters of this interesting but minor work of late-imperial Chinese fiction is both elegant and highly readable, and is accompanied by the extent and type of endnotes that will assist readers without a background in Chinese Studies to better understand the story told in this novel. His fine translation, however, will be read, I suspect, more for its religious interest and importance than for its literary qualities, a circumstance that is probably very much in keeping with the intended purpose of the book in the mind of its author and publisher. As Yang Erzeng states in his "Preface" to it: "This book explains the secret scripts of the Perfected Man Zhuowei Mumu; exhaustively explores the illusory realms of humanity and Heaven, in water and on land; explicates the profound purposes of way and virtue, nature and life; and displays extraordinary tidings from the realms of gods and ghosts" (6).

Duncan M. CAMPBELL
The Australian National University