

Book REVIEWS

The Three Sui Quash the Demons' Revolt: A Comic Novel Attributed to Luo Guanzhong. Translated, with an interpretive essay, by Lois Fusek. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010. Pp. xv + 299. \$49.00.

In late 1047, a corporal by the name of Wang Ze 王則, inspired by an eschatological belief in the coming of Maitreya, started a rebellion in Beizhou 貝州. He and his followers quickly took the town and defeated the first detachment of government troops sent against them, but in early 1048, soon after Wen Yanbo 文彥博 (1006–1097) had been put in charge of the campaign, the city was taken and the revolt suppressed. Wang Ze was captured and taken to Kaifeng 開封, where he was executed. The official sources for the history of the Song mention the revolt but provide tantalizingly few details—after all, the events lasted for barely two months. But perhaps because the revolt took place close to the capital, it captured the popular imagination. By the end of the Southern Song dynasty the tale of “Wang Ze of Beizhou” had established itself as part of the repertoire of Hangzhou's 杭州 professional storytellers, and the story apparently was widely popular in the early years of the Ming, when the Hongwu emperor 洪武帝 condemned it in 1387. By the second half of the sixteenth century the tale of Wang Ze had provided the nucleus for a novel in twenty chapters, entitled *San Sui pingyao zhuan* 三遂平妖傳 or *The Three Sui Quash the Demons* (hereafter *Pingyao zhuan*). This work has been preserved in a “new printing” (*chongkan* 重刊) of the final years of the sixteenth century, which claimed the novel had been composed by Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中. The obscure fourteenth-century playwright Luo Guanzhong is of course better known as the reputed author of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and the co-author of *Water Margin*. Two different editions of a novel entitled *Pingyao zhuan* are already listed in Chao Li's 晁灝 (mid-sixteenth century) *Baowentang shumu* 寶文堂書目, and may well refer to the same text.

For all its literary qualities, which are well brought out in this translation, the twenty-chapter *Pingyao zhuan* quickly disappeared from sight once the prolific editor and publisher of vernacular fiction Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) had produced a forty-chapter version of the novel in the early seventeenth century. Feng's version, which included twenty additional chapters, remained in print in later centuries, and has been translated into Korean, Japanese, and German. It effectively supplanted the earlier work, which only survived in three copies, all printed (at different moments) from the same set of blocks, probably at a time when Feng's version had already cornered the market as they come with a title page claiming Feng Menglong as the author! The copy kept at the Tenri Library 天理図書館 in Nara

奈良, Japan, has been reprinted as a facsimile in 1981;¹ while the copy in the Peking University Library (originally in the collection of Ma Lian 馬廉, 1893–1935) served as the basis of modern typeset edition edited by Zhang Rongqi 張榮起.² In both copies the text of Chapter 20 is incomplete. The third copy belonged to Fu Xihua 傅惜華, but was moved to Beijing Library after his collection had been confiscated by the Red Guards at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. This particular edition of the twenty-chapter *Pingyao zhuan* had been collated by one Wang Shenxiu 王慎修. While the twenty-chapter novel identifies him as a man from Hangzhou, he probably may be identified, as Lois Fusek argues, with a Suzhou 蘇州 man of the same name. This Wang Shenxiu, a scion of a prominent family, was active in the second half of the sixteenth century and enjoyed a certain reputation as a calligrapher. The blocks for this edition had obviously been prepared with great care; it also includes a number of expertly designed and exquisitely executed woodblock illustrations. It is much to be regretted that these superior prints have not been reproduced in the volume under review (with the exception of the partial reproduction of one print on the dust jacket).

This publication is a major contribution to the study of Chinese vernacular fiction. Lois Fusek not only has provided English readers with a full and extensively annotated translation, but also has included a critical study of the novel. Additionally, the major sources on the rebellion of Wang Ze are provided in the first of two appendices (pp. 235–48), while the second is devoted to a discussion of the data on Wang Shenxiu and his family background (pp. 249–56). The translation, clearly a labour of love, is a joy to read. As the translation itself leaves little room for criticism, the remainder of this review will by default be mostly concerned with the “interpretive essay” entitled “A Fantastic History: *San Sui ping yao zhuan* Reconsidered,” which follows the translation on pp. 175–233.

Chinese scholarship on the twenty-chapter *Pingyao zhuan* is very limited, and Western-language scholarship is almost non-existent. The novel’s negative attitude towards a popular uprising and its detailed descriptions of black magic (and its disgusting countermeasures) are sufficient to explain the almost total silence of Mainland scholars in the period 1949–1978. Scholarship of more recent decades has mostly focused on such issues as date and manner of composition, and authorship.³ In a pioneering article entitled “The Composition of the *P’ing Yao Chuan*,”⁴ Patrick

¹ Nara: Tenri daigaku shuppanbu 天理大學出版部.

² Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe 北京大學出版社, 1983.

³ A convenient survey of this scholarship has recently been provided by Ji Yunlu 冀運魯, “Ershi shiji *Pingyao zhuan yanjiu zongshu*” 二十世紀《平妖傳》研究綜述, *Yuwen xuekan* 語文學刊, 2006, no. 7, pp. 18–21.

⁴ *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 31 (1971), pp. 201–19.

Hanan has pointed out the large degree to which the novel relies for its subject materials on pre-existing classical and vernacular fiction, and how many of its scenes are reworkings of motifs we also encounter in earlier works. He concluded that the novel was very much the product of popular tradition, probably dating from the period 1400–1550. While acknowledging Hanan's findings, Lois Fusek suggests that the novel is made up out of six originally independent vernacular stories (*huaben* 話本), which have been rearranged as twenty chapters by the novelist. This thesis is first laid out in the “Translator's Introduction” (pp. xiii–xiv) and later developed in the interpretive essay on pp. 179–83. Her main argument in support of this hypothesis is that the novel is clearly made up of a number stories that have very little connection with each other, apart from the fact that the protagonists in these stories all have or acquire some magical skill and eventually join Wang Ze in his rebellion.

Wang Ze first appears in the novel in Chapter 13, when he spots Hu Yong'er 胡永兒 selling candles made of mud. Hu Yong'er is the character who dominates the first six chapters of the novel: She is the daughter of a rich pawnbroker who soon after her birth is reduced to poverty but who is later able to re-establish himself in business as a silk merchant thanks to the magical skills his daughter has acquired. Her magical skills scare him so much, however, that at one moment he kills her—without any lasting effect! When he marries her off to an idiot, she rids herself of that inconvenient husband. While travelling alone, she disarms the man who tries to rape her. She then disappears from the narrative by jumping into a well upon her arrival in Zhengzhou 鄭州. The main character of Chapters 7 and 8 is thereupon the friendly peddler Bu Ji 卜吉 who had brought her to Zhengzhou on his wheelbarrow, and is later punished for her murder by banishment. Chapters 9 and 10 are then taken up by an account of the ways in which the Daoist priest Zuo Chu 左黜 hoodwinks a trio of tradesmen in Kaifeng. Chapters 11 and 12 focus on the deeds of the Pellet Monk 彈子和尚, who creates havoc in the capital and cannot even be captured by Judge Bao 包公. Lois Fusek points out that the novel structurally very much resembles *Water Margin*, which also starts with the several accounts of *haohan* 好漢, who each run afoul of the law and eventually join the rebels of Liangshanbo 梁山泊 (the twenty-chapter *Pingyao zhuan* also borrows many set pieces, poems, and couplets from *Water Margin*). But whereas the goodfellows of Liangshanbo all have real fighting skills, and later assist the government in putting down internal rebellions and outside foes, the protagonists of the *Pingyao zhuan* rely on magic and join a doomed rebellion. Lois Fusek convincingly argues that twenty-chapter *Pingyao zhuan* is best read as a parody of *Water Margin*. But if the twenty-chapter *Pingyao zhuan* was indeed composed as a burlesque spoof on *Water Margin*, the structure of the novel probably also mimics its predecessor, and there seems to be no urgent reason to assume the existence of six pre-existing *huaben*. Such a hypothesis would have been strengthened if Lois Fusek could positively prove that one or more of the stories in *Pingyao zhuan* had circulated independently before the middle of the sixteenth century. She does

point out that the tale of the Pellet Monk is also included in much shorter form in the *One Hundred Cases of Judge Bao* 包龍圖判百家公案 of 1594, but as that work is a hodgepodge of materials from earlier sources, it seems more likely to me that the *One Hundred Cases of Judge Bao* is borrowing from the *Pingyao zhuan* than the other way around. Also, while Lois Fusek on the one hand stresses the lack of connections in terms of plot and character between the different stories that make up the first twelve chapters of the novel, she on the other hand underlines that these stories have been carefully arranged so as to demonstrate an increasing disturbance of social authority, moving from inside the family to outside the family in the first ten chapters, and moving from open defiance of Judge Bao as prefect of Kaifeng to the murder of a district magistrate and a futile rebellion against the dynasty in the second ten chapters. While it is an original and stimulating hypothesis to suggest that the novel may have been written on the basis of six pre-existing *huaben* that have been only poorly integrated, Lois Fusek's own convincing demonstration of the careful construction of the novel would seem to argue against that hypothesis. And while the translator of course has every right to highlight her hypothesis in her interpretive essay, I would have preferred it if she would not have indicated the presumed beginning and end of each of her hypothetical pre-existing *huaben* in the translation itself.

Perhaps we have to conclude that the author of the *Pingyao zhuan* had a different conception of unity than Lois Fusek, one that did not require a single central character and single unified plot. Chapters 9 and 10 and Chapters 11 and 12, I would suggest, are very much contrasting pairs, as in the first couple a threesome of simple tradesmen cannot capture a Daoist priest, whereas in the second couple even Judge Bao cannot permanently arrest a Buddhist monk. In the same way, the longer stories of Hu Yong'er and Wang Ze may be seen as each other's mirror image: if Wang Ze is a rebel against the state, Hu Yong'er is a rebel against patriarchal authority. The equivalence of these two stories is stressed by making Hu Yong'er the wife of Wang Ze—the rebellion comes to an end when the coupling couple is surprised in the act by the government soldiers who have tunneled their way into Beizhou. I have elsewhere argued that a quadripartite structure is not uncommon in *huaben* from the early and middle period⁵ and that it already may be encountered in one of the vernacular prose narratives from Dunhuang.⁶ I would like to suggest that the model of

⁵ “The Meeting of Dragon and Tiger, Prince and Baron: Contrastive Structure and Complex Theme,” *Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens* 136 (1984), pp. 65–74.

⁶ “Emperor and General: Some Comments on the Formal and Thematic Continuities between the Vernacular Stories from Dunhuang and the Vernacular Stories from Later Dynasties,” in *The Harmony and Prosperity of Civilizations: Selected Papers of Beijing Forum (2004)* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005), pp. 114–27.

such a quadripartite structure may be one way to understand how the original author conceived of the unity of his work.

Lois Fusek's scrutiny of the careful composition of the novel leads her in the second part of her interpretive essay to a detailed investigation of the importance of names in the final eight chapters of the twenty-chapter *Pingyao zhuan* which deal with Wang Ze's rebellion and its suppression as such. While the historical sources on the rebellion of Wang Ze only mention two persons with the personal name Sui 遂 involved in the suppression of the rebellion, the addition of a third character with that element in its personal name was most likely inspired, Lois Fusek points out, by the way the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 discusses "the three passageways" (*sansui* 三隧) as three attributes of a consummate military leader. I must confess that I am less impressed by the hidden meanings she claims are contained in many of the other names. I am happy to entertain the thought that the figure of Wang Ze may have been conceived partly as a criticism of Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋, who started out as a simple soldier in a sectarian rebellion, but that connection can be made without the long and learned analysis of names to which we are treated here. One wonders how many of the late-Ming readers of the novel would immediately have grasped the connotations and implications Lois Fusek discerns. For instance, on p. 210 she argues that the name of Bu Ji 卜吉, one of the magicians in the novel, was chosen to suggest the name of Yu Ji 于吉, a Daoist magician killed by Sun Ce 孫策: "There is evidence that *bu* 卜 was written for the character *yu* 于 (to give) in certain of the early texts, and this provides a basis for presuming that *bu* also could be read *yu*, which would make it homophonous with the surname *Yu*." One is left to wonder which "early texts" are intended, but even if one would want to argue that the two characters concerned may easily be mixed up in manuscript, it doesn't mean they share the same pronunciation. And while there may be some vague echoes in our novel to the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, I cannot see how they warrant the long comparative discussion of Liu Bang 劉邦 and Zhu Yuanzhang, and their cruel executions of former associates. We all are tempted at times by the urge to seek for a deeper meaning than the surface of the text promises. Perhaps we should be more willing to accept that burlesque and parody are often written for the sheer fun of it. One would hope that we had advanced to a stage in the study of traditional Chinese vernacular fiction that we do not have to defend the field by detecting a serious message in each and every novel. Good humour is very difficult to write. Perfect slapstick as we find in this novel is even more difficult.

Lois Fusek pays considerable attention to the character of Luo Guanzhong and his possible connections with the story of Wang Ze's rebellion as included in the twenty-chapter *Pingyao zhuan*. Even though she clearly would love to establish a positive link between Luo and this novel, she has to admit that we lack the positive evidence to do so. She does argue, however, that at least the tale of Wang Ze, roughly the last one-third of the novel, dates from Luo's lifetime, but the conclusion she

reaches in this regard seems to be self-contradictory: “Despite the lack of solid proof, we may reasonably conjecture that the story as we have it came into being during the last years of the Yuan dynasty” (p. 225). But on the same page she has to admit that “there is no evidence that the Wang Ze story as it appears in the novel is in any way related to the ‘concocted tale’ that Zhu Yanzhang objected to.” Later on the same page she states: “Where so little is known, however, almost anything is possible.” That may be true, but my personal temperament would be more inclined under those circumstances to stick to the little we know rather than indulge in complicated speculations, especially if they turn an exceedingly entertaining read into a guessing game.

The Three Sui Quash the Demons' Revolt is a perfect text for a class in Chinese literature in translation. Whereas most other premodern Chinese novels that are available in a reliable and readable translation are way too long to be assigned to students in their entirety, this novel can easily be read from beginning to end, allowing for detailed discussions of structure and characterization, which are awkward if the students have read only part of the novel concerned. Moreover, the often picaresque and at times scandalous nature of the narrative should appeal to many students who otherwise are not all that interested in literature. If I would teach this novel to undergraduates, I would also be happy to assign my students the first part of Lois Fusek's interpretive essay to read as it would provide them with all the relevant available information on background, editions and authorship, and introduce them to the close relationship of this work to *Water Margin*. Most likely I would not assign the second part of the “interpretive essay,” starting from “What's in a name” on p. 201, as I very much doubt whether the learned and erudite but abstruse and quite speculative researches on the hidden meanings of the names of the novel's characters would contribute to their enjoyment of the text. Other teachers may of course be of a different opinion.

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