

Kingdoms in Peril: A Novel of the Ancient Chinese World at War. By Feng Menglong. Trans. Olivia Milburn. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022. Pp. vii + 344. 2 maps. \$17.95/£13.99 paperback.

Kingdoms in Peril is a highly readable abridged translation of Feng Menglong's 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) historical novel *Xin Lieguo zhi* 新列國志 (New Chronicles of the Kingdoms), perhaps better known as *Dong Zhou lieguo zhi* 東周列國志 (Chronicles of the Eastern Zhou Kingdoms), printed in the late 1630s or 1640s, perhaps his last major work.¹ By 1640, Feng Menglong was already known as a prolific writer. He had produced three anthologies of short vernacular (*huaben* 話本) stories—the *Sanyan* 三言 (Three Words) collections—and several collections of classical language tales, as well as anthologies of humorous anecdotes, rustic folk poetry, and elegant poetic plays. He had also rewritten *San Sui pingyao zhuan* 三遂平妖傳 (The Three Sui Quell the Demons' Revolt, hereafter referred to as *The Three Sui*), an earlier, ostensibly historical, novel whose central characters have magical powers, in the process doubling its length. Like the vernacular stories and his version of *The Three Sui* novel, *Xin Lieguo zhi* was loosely based on an earlier text, which Feng thoroughly revised. The source text, *Lieguo zhizhuan* 列國志傳 (Chronicles of the Kingdoms) had been written by the Fujian author Yu Shaoyu 余邵魚 (fl. 1570) several decades earlier, in the late sixteenth century, at a time when most novels were being printed in Fujian.²

The period covered in the *Xin Lieguo zhi* is one of nearly continuous warfare, as the many small vassal states of the Western Zhou were amalgamated militarily after the Zhou court lost its overarching authority in the eighth century B.C.E. Clearly, Feng must have found the fictionalizing in the earlier work too free and unsophisticated; his rewritten version draws heavily from texts from and about the period, including the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 (Zuo's Tradition, covering the period fifth to fourth centuries B.C.E.), *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 (Intrigues of the Warring States, covering the period before 165 B.C.E.) and Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (ca. 145–86 B.C.E.) monumental history, *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Historian, 104–87 B.C.E.). Feng's novel is representative of a second wave of novelistic innovation that appeared after 1600, during the final decades of Ming rule, when

¹ The edition I use for comparison here is Feng Menglong 馮夢龍, *Xin Lieguo zhi* 新列國志, ed. Hu Wanchuan 胡萬川 (Taipei: Lianjing, 1982), based on the Jinchang 金閶 (Suzhou 蘇州) Ye Jingchi 葉敬池 edition. Hereafter referred to as *XLGZ*.

² One example is the Santaiguan 三台館 edition of *An Jian yanyi quanxiang Lieguo pinglin* 按鑑演義全像列國坪林, with an advertising blurb on the cover signed by Yu Wentai 余文台 and illustrations along the top register of every page. Two versions of this edition have been reproduced in the *Guben xiaoshuo congkan* 古本小說叢刊 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987–1991), sixth series.

authors developed the arts of writing ostensibly to match or surpass the standards set by the four “masterworks” of the Ming novel (*si daqishu* 四大奇書), *Sanguo zhi yanyi* 三國志演義 (Romance of the Three Kingdoms), *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (Water Margin or Outlaws of the Marsh), *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (Journey to the West), and *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 (Plum in the Golden Vase).³

Modern authors of historical fiction, such as the prize-winning American father-and-son team Michael and Jeff Shaara, frequently choose to focus on military conflict as experienced by individuals, both the commanders of forces and the soldiers on the ground.⁴ Those writing about relatively recent events such as the American Civil War rely heavily on battle reports, diaries, personal letters, and a host of other first-hand documents to create character portraits that greatly outweigh narrations of battlefield strategy. In sharp contrast, premodern Chinese historical novels generally take a broader look, narrating campaigns and crafty battlefield strategies rather than dwelling on what was going through the minds of the field commanders before, during, and after violent conflict. Most early Chinese historical romances lean heavily on older texts of various degrees of historicity, summarizing, paraphrasing, or even quoting directly from them. These sources range from formal histories (*zhengshi* 正史 or dynastic histories) and chronologies, such as Sima Guang’s 司馬光 (1019–1086) *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (the Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government), through a raft of shorter informal historical sketches to narrative poems and even historical fiction. Although the reactions of individuals appear frequently enough in these Chinese works, the general perspective is that of a detached observer, an unidentified narrator with whose values the reader is invited to identify.

Rather than battle scenes, Feng Menglong focuses on the intrigues at the various feudal courts as the impetus behind acts of violence large and small. To a much greater extent than his predecessors in the writing of historical fiction, Feng Menglong reveals the motivations of his protagonists with subtlety and wit, creating new depths in characterization using a concise, simple narrative style derived from classical language sources. The episodes translated in *Kingdoms in Peril* give the reader a clear sense of this deep understanding of human nature. Many of Feng’s protagonists are self-interested to such an extent that they are blind to the potentially disastrous outcomes

³ The term *si daqishu* was in circulation by the middle of the seventeenth century; the dramatist, novelist, and cultural critic Li Yu 李漁 (1610–1680) attributes Feng Menglong as having coined it, but no other proof can be found for that attribution.

⁴ I refer to Michael Shaara’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Killer Angels* (New York: Random House, 1974) and Jeff M. Shaara’s *Gods and Generals* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996) and *The Last Full Measure* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998).

of their decisions and actions. Lust for power and control, sometimes rationalized as revenge for earlier wrongs, provides the impetus for military campaigns involving tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of combatants.

The sheer detail of all of the resulting struggles can be overpowering for the reader. Of the novel's original 108 chapters, Olivia Milburn has wisely chosen to translate nine groups of one, two, or three, each group of chapters smoothly edited to constitute a complete narrative arc. The effect is that of an anthology of great stories. She gives each a name: "The Curse of the Bao Lords" (chapters 1–3, *XLGZ* 1–3); "An Incestuous Love Affair at the Court of Qi" (chapters 4–5, *XLGZ* 9, 13–14); "The Wicked Stepmother, Lady Li Ji" (chapters 6–7, *XLGZ* 20, 27–28); "The Fight for Lady Xia Ji" (chapters 8–9, *XLGZ* 52, 56, 57); "The Orphan of the Zhao Clan" (chapter 10, *XLGZ* 57–59); "The Downfall of the Kingdom of Wu" (chapters 11–12, *XLGZ* 80–81, 83); "Rival Students of the Master of Ghost Valley" (chapters 13–14, *XLGZ* 87–89); "The Family Troubles of the King of Qin" (chapters 15–16, *XLGZ* 99, 105); and "The Assassins Strike" (chapter 17, *XLGZ* 106–07). Some of the best-known anecdotes of the Eastern Zhou period appear here, chosen to represent the entire period from the eighth to the third century B.C.E. Although one might regret that the tales of many favourite figures from this period had to be left out of this translation (Jiezi Tui 介子推, Feng Xuan 馮煥 and Mengchang Jun 孟嘗君, Wu Zixu 伍子胥, to name a few), Professor Milburn weaves the selected episodes together so seamlessly that the result makes a very appealing read in translation.

However, even the abridgement of the original and careful editing do not always produce reading that is easy. Even in translation, the novel has hundreds of characters. A newcomer to the history of this period might easily get lost while trying to keep all of them straight—especially when many of them change status and thereby get new names or titles. As an aid to the reader, Professor Milburn's translation tends to refer to individual characters with the same name even when the text does not, the exception being when a character gets a new title: then the translation shifts to the new name. Another difficulty is that reading these stories exacts an emotional toll. Because the novel concentrates on the ever-shifting power relations among a number of contending states, the resulting narrative contains a litany of assassinations, executions, gory deaths in battle, and gratuitous acts of meanness and brutality, most of which are the consequences of plots to gain or hold power. Exceptions include the loyal fighter who commits suicide in order that his head might be used by an assassin to gain access to a hated enemy, and the host that cuts off a woman's hands to demonstrate his willingness to go to any lengths to convince his guest to act.

A modern reader might admire the first, but the second strikes me as barbaric, even in a context (fictional and historical) in which women could be treated like property, easily given as gifts from man to man or exploited in plots to distract a rival leader. Yet these images are balanced by the exploits of several powerful women whose

appetites for authority and physical gratification surpass even those of the men around them. Unsurprisingly, these women are credited with causing the corruption of their male overlords and the fall of states. Thus, in a few instances, the usual exploitation of women by men is turned on its head.

Although the narrative generally allows even these bad women to continue living, their power ultimately wanes, and death confronts them as well. They are not subjected to the physical mutilation visited upon men. Punishments, often given at the whim of childish rulers or to disable a rival, also come across as unspeakably cruel. But these details are not made up for their shock value; they represent what is recorded, often far more dryly, in the novelist's source texts. As Olivia Milburn observes, "There are not heroes or villains here, just flawed individuals trying their best to survive in often impossible circumstances, all too often discovering that the choices available to them ranged from bad to worse" (p. 3). These choices might be thrust upon them, as the result of unforeseen circumstances, or necessitated by various obligations to family and clan, administrative superiors, and friends.

As the narrative of the lives of numerous individuals, the novel presents innumerable lessons in human behavior. Selfishness, cupidity, uncontrollable anger, cruelty—all are balanced by tales of devotion to a leader or a cause, loyalty to a friend, honesty to the point of gullibility, and hope—hope for a less violent future. The bleakness of centuries of bloodshed is tempered by the regular reassertion of the belief that virtues and cultural values do matter, and that many uphold them, even if doing so costs them their lives.

Kingdoms in Peril has a long and exceptionally useful Introduction (pp. 1–32). Professor Milburn begins with an overview of the breakdown of Eastern Zhou social classes and the values that upheld these distinctions. She observes, "As a novel about politics, much of the narrative in *Kingdoms in Peril* concentrates on the exercise of power" (p. 2). Unsurprisingly, many who wield power have little sense about how to do so effectively, leaving them dependent on advisors who often have agendas of their own. She provides a synopsis of each of her groups of stories, emphasizing the moral messages that Feng Menglong drew from the events he narrates. In order to foreground their historical veracity, every synopsis provides the dates of the period when the central figures of each story lived and ruled. This book also has two maps, "The Zhou Confederacy circa 500 B.C.E." and "The Kingdoms of the Warring States Period in circa 260 B.C.E." Together they dramatically represent the process of amalgamation of states under an ever smaller number of rulers, just before the unification imposed by the Qin conquest.

A prime example of how Feng Menglong's narrative style comes across in translation may be seen in the section identified here as "The Wicked Stepmother, Lady Li Ji" (chapters 6–7, *XLGZ* 20, 27–28). Introducing Li Ji, the description in the original reads: "那驪姬生得貌比息媯、妖同妲己、智計千條、詭詐百出。在獻公前，

小忠小信，貢媚取憐。”⁵ Literally, “That Li Ji was born to be as beautiful as Xi Wei, as evil as Daji; she had a thousand schemes and was crafty in a hundred ways. When she appeared before Duke Xian, she faithfully followed his wishes and was truthful in minor matters, always ingratiating herself and making herself appealing to him.” In *Kingdoms in Peril*, this line becomes “Lady Li Ji was the most beautiful woman in the world, but as wicked as the temptress Da Ji. She was also extremely intelligent, but this concealed a vicious cunning. Whenever Lord Xian was present, she made a play of her affection for him and her loyalty, all the while making sure that she looked as attractive as possible” (p. 116). As we can immediately see, Feng Menglong’s terse and rhythmic original has been rendered into easy and natural-sounding English sentences.

Clearly Professor Milburn’s purpose is to make her translation sound as natural as possible to English readers. This conforms to the well-known strategy of “domestication” in translation theory, an approach that takes expressions that may be unfamiliar and, in some cases, situations that may seem alien to the inexperienced reader and renders them into something functionally more familiar.⁶ For example, in the tale of Lady Li Ji, when the suggestion is made that the heir to the throne that he supports will be overthrown, the indecisive General Li Ke 里克 is described as *xinzhong ji buneng ren* 心中急不能忍, which Milburn renders as “he was still on tenterhooks” (p. 123), while Li Ji’s control over Lord Xian of Jin, *junfuren zhi dejun* 君夫人之得君 (“the Lady has won over the Lord”) in the original, becomes “Her Ladyship has His Lordship wrapped around her little finger” for the original (p. 124). Li Ke’s response is 中立而兩無所為，可以自脫否？(If I take no position and do nothing, will I be able to escape [danger]?) In Milbrook’s translation, this anguished plea becomes “If I just sit on the fence and do nothing, do you think I will be able to get through this crisis?” (p. 124; *XLGZ*, 276) This translation is a bit “free”: there are no hooks, fingers, or fences in the original, and yet the translator’s terms certainly convey

⁵ Feng Menglong, *Xin Lieguo zhi*, p. 191. Xi Wei 息媯 was the wife of the Marquis of Xi, whose family name was Wei. According to the Western Han compilation *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳, when King Wen of Chu wiped out the state of Xi, he took her back with him. To vindicate her honor, she committed suicide, and the Lord of Xi then killed himself as well. Daji 妲己 was the seductress who brought about the downfall of King Zhou 商紂王, the last ruler of the Shang Dynasty, in the eleventh century B.C.E.

⁶ “Functional equivalence” is a term originated by Eugene Nida; see Mark Shuttleworth, *Dictionary of Translation Studies* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014). For a more extensive discussion of “domestication” vs. defamiliarization or “foreignization” in translation, see Lawrence Venuti (a stern critic of domesticating practices), *The Translator’s Invisibility* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1995).

an equivalence of meaning. Although such a style of translation thus runs the risk of sounding a bit too westernized to readers acquainted with original texts and the cultural context of the period, it surely invites newcomers to the old Chinese novel to see the language as familiar, thereby enabling them to focus on the characterization and the twisting plots of Feng Menglong's overlapping tales.

Olivia Milburn's translation is a happy addition to an expanding list of the works of Feng Menglong in English. Selections from his *Qingshi leilue* 情史類略 (1628) appeared as in *Chinese Love Stories from Ch'ing-shih*, translated by Hua-yuan Li Mowry (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1983). Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang translated all 120 stories in Feng's three *huaben* collections, all published by the University of Washington Press in Seattle: *Gujin xiaoshuo* 古今小說 as *Stories Old and New: A Ming Dynasty Collection* (2000), *Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言 as *Stories to Caution the World: A Ming Dynasty Collection* (2005), and *Xingshi hengyan* 醒世恆言 as *Stories to Awaken the World: A Ming Dynasty Collection* (2009). The same press also published their anthology of tales selected from these three collections as *Sanyan Stories: Favorites from a Ming Dynasty Collection* (2015). English readers also have access to Feng's joke collection *Xiaofu* 笑府 in *Feng Menglong's Treasury of Laughs: A Seventeenth-Century Anthology of Traditional Chinese Humor*, translated by Hsu Pi-ching (Leiden: Brill, 2015). The other novel mentioned above that Feng extensively rewrote, *San Sui pingyao zhuan* 三遂平妖傳 (1620), was translated by Nathan Sturman as *The Sorcerer's Revolt* (Rockville, MD: Silk Pagoda, 2008). A partial translation of *Xin Lieguo zhi*, by Erik Honobe, appeared in 2021 as *The Rise of Lord Zhuang of Zheng: First Ten Chapters of Chronicles of the Eastern Zhou Kingdoms* (Hong Kong: Research Centre for Translation, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2021). Now, with Olivia Milburn's fuller and highly readable translation of this major historical novel, students and comparatists can gain a much better sense of Feng Menglong's literary accomplishments, even if they do not have the Chinese language skills required to read his works in the original.

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