

Family Instructions for the Yan Clan and Other Works by Yan Zhitui (531–590s).

Translated by Xiaofei Tian. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021. Pp. xliii + 585. \$36.99 hardcover.

One of the most important primary sources for the study of early medieval China (220–589) is Yan Zhitui's 顏之推 (530–590s) *Yanshi jiaxun* 顏氏家訓 (Family Instructions for the Yan Clan). Yan was an erudite scholar from an illustrious family who personally experienced the turmoil and instability that frequently marked this era: enemy armies captured him three times; he served under four governments; and he lived in southern, northeastern, and northwestern China. His lengthy *Yanshi jiaxun* sheds light on a vast number of subjects: education, child-rearing, family management, government service, etiquette, economics, phonology, literature, Sino-steppe interactions, northern and southern cultural differences, gender expectations, warfare, literature, Confucianism, *Xuanxue* 玄學 (Dark Learning), and Buddhism. It is a must-read for anyone hoping to understand the early medieval era. In 1968, Teng Ssu-yü 鄧嗣禹 (1906–1988) produced the first and only full English translation of the *Yanshi jiaxun*. In 1976, Albert Dien included the first English translation of Yan Zhitui's autobiographical “Guan wosheng fu” 觀我生賦 (Rhapsody on viewing my life) in his *Pei Ch'i shu* 45: *Biography of Yen Chih-t'ui*. Although both translations have aged well, they were produced over forty years ago. Unfortunately, given the publishing constraints of the time, they lack the Chinese text of the work.

Xiaofei Tian has made an outstanding contribution to the field of early medieval China studies by providing readers with translations of both Yan Zhitui's *Yanshi jiaxun* and the “Guan wosheng fu” rhapsody in the same volume. She also includes several of his other extant poems, as well as his biographies in the *Bei Qi shu* 北齊書 (History of the Northern Qi) and the *Bei shi* 北史 (History of the Northern Dynasties). The Chinese text of each work is included in a side-by-side facing format. Thus, within this single volume, one has access to almost all of Yan Zhitui's extant writings. For scholars, the accompanying Chinese text means that one no longer must have a Chinese edition of the work open to see the original text; moreover, it allows the reader to see how Tian translated certain words and phrases. The inclusion of both the *Yanshi jiaxun* and the “Guan wosheng fu” is particularly important because the latter illuminates much of what Yan says in his *Yanshi jiaxun*. Hence, if one wants to get a first-hand look at what Yan Zhitui thought and how he made sense of his world, all one has to do is peruse this one volume.

Making this book even more wonderful is the fact that the Library of Chinese Humanities has made it and all the other titles in this series open access, which means that anyone with computer access can download a PDF copy of the book. If one wants to read the translations of either Teng or Dien, one has no choice but to obtain a physical copy. However, since these books have long been out of print, doing so is

not easy, unless one has access to a good university library. By making this volume open access, in just a matter of moments, anyone anywhere can possess an electronic copy of this book. Kudos and many thanks to the Library of Chinese Humanities for making sure that everyone has equal and easy access to these significant texts of premodern China.

One of the great virtues of Tian's translation is its readability. The two main texts, the *Yanshi jiaxun* and the "Guan wosheng fu," are formidable to translate. The former touches upon a vast array of subjects, from education and managing the household to Daoism and Buddhism. Professor Tian handles all the diverse contents with a deft touch, even the technical chapter on phonology. Not only does she make the contents understandable, but also easy to read as well. That is true too for Yan Zhitui's "Guan wosheng fu." Because of their rich vocabulary, rhapsodies are notoriously difficult to render into English. Tian, though, does so with ease. Albert Dien translates the first two lines of the rhapsody in the following manner: "Looking up, there are the far reaches of the drifting pellucidness, / Looking down, the vastness of the recondite recesses. / Once man had been brought forth, [the sages] set up their teachings, / And then the officials and warders divided the territories."¹ If my students read this, they would be completely lost. I doubt that they would reach for their dictionary to look up either "pellucidness" or "recondite." "Warders," too, would confuse them. In contrast, Tian's rendition is easy to comprehend: "I look up at the vastness of the floating clarity, / then look down at the massiveness of the sunken depths. / After the birth of the folk, teachings were established, / and territories were divided, presided over by shepherding officers" (p. 463). My students would have little trouble understanding what Yan Zhitui is saying here. Hence, by using everyday language, Tian makes Yan Zhitui's meaning much clearer. For example, in the *Yanshi jiaxun* chapter on "Phonology" (*Yinci* 音辭), Teng has this translation:

Very doubtful, furthermore, is the distinction between back and open words (*nei-yen* 內言) and front and closed words (*wai-yen* 外言), between fast and slow utterances, as well as the indication of the reading of a character by means of another character said to be pronounced in the same way. Sun Shu-yen 孫叔言 (3rd century A.D.) wrote the *Erh-ya yin-i* 爾雅音義 (Pronunciations and meanings of the *Ery-ya*), which proves that only near the end of Han did scholars begin using the *fan-yü* 反語 spelling system.²

¹ Albert E. Dien, *Pei Ch'i Shu 45: Biography of Yen Chih-t'ui* (Bern: Herbert Lang; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1976), p. 42.

² Teng Ssu-yü, trans. *Family Instructions for the Yen Clan* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), p. 188.

Tian's translation of the same line is as follows:

In addition, there are also confusing issues such as the internal and external sounds, the fast and slow utterances, and the practice of "reading X as Y." Sun Shuyan wrote *Sounds and Meanings of Erya*, thus proving himself the only one toward the end of the Han dynasty who knew about the *fanqie* [反切] system. (p. 397)

Professor Tian's translation is both more to the point and clearer. Instead of translating exactly what Sun Shuyan wrote, the "*fanyu*" system, she uses its more familiar name of *fanqie*. For someone who is familiar with that word, s/he can immediately read the next line. If she had kept the more unfamiliar term, "*fanyu*," even a China specialist would have to look down to the footnote to realize what that term was referring to. Hence, by putting the texts into familiar language, she makes the process of reading much easier and more enjoyable.

One problem with the book, which has more to do with the overall series, rather than Professor Tian, are the skimpiness of the footnotes. Looking at other titles in the Library of Chinese Humanities series, it is obvious that the authors are instructed to keep footnotes short and use them only to explain terms or allusions. They are not meant to be lengthy or invoke other scholarship that might shed light on the passage at hand. The effect of this is that most footnotes are short and mention no secondary literature. The virtue of this rule is that it keeps footnotes brief and few. Oftentimes non-scholarly readers find footnotes intimidating. However, advanced students of Chinese culture and specialists will want the context and additional information that substantial footnotes supply. For that, they will still have to turn to Teng and Dien's translations, which have copious and informative footnotes. For example, in the chapter on Buddhism, Yan Zhitui lists the five most common criticisms that his contemporaries had of Buddhism (p. 289). This paragraph has no footnotes in Tian's translation. But, if we turn to Teng's translation, we find a long footnote that spans two pages, which explains that the five criticisms Yan lists are somewhat different from the five most common criticisms found in other sources from the period. Teng then talks about how modern scholars have characterized those criticisms and cites their articles and books on the subject (pp. 139–40). Thus, the weakness of minimizing and simplifying footnotes is that the reader has little sense of the importance of the passage, its social or political context, and pertinent scholarship that could help the reader learn more about it. That the book lacks a bibliography makes it so a reader looking for more information on Yan Zhitui will be at a loss. Again, this is not Professor Tian's fault; it is just one of the trade-offs the series' editors have made to produce these full and easily accessible translations.

Where I do differ with Professor Tian is with her assessment of Yan Zhitui's thought. She maintains that Yan Zhitui was not a Confucian. She tells us,

Upon close inspection, the Confucian label, even applied in a generalized and ahistorical manner, does not fit well with the values held by Yan Zhitui, either. Yan Zhitui has been regarded as a Confucian primarily on the grounds that he cared deeply about family tradition, and that he never entered the religious order himself or encouraged his sons to become monks. (p. xxvii)

Here she is merely reacting to Teng Ssu-yü's characterization of Yan as a Confucian, rather than the more nuanced assessment that Albert Dien offers.³ Teng rightly makes the important point that the books often cited in the text are Confucian ones, whereas Yan neither cites specific Buddhist sutras nor does he frequently invoke Buddha's name.⁴ His chapters on education, running the family, marriage, etiquette, the importance of study, matching names to reality, and serving in government overwhelmingly reflect long-held Confucian positions. His emphases on hierarchy, the virtues of *xiao* 孝 (filial piety), *ren* 仁 (benevolence), *yi* 義 (righteousness), *zhong* 忠 (loyalty), and *li* 禮 (propriety), *Xianwang zhi dao* 先王之道 (the Way of the Ancient Kings), self-improvement, the importance of learning, humility, self-reflection, frugality, funerary rites, emulation of the worthy, government service, and remonstrance all highlight the importance of Confucianism. His chapter on "Manners and Etiquette" (*Fengcao* 風操) is all about acting according to the precepts laid out in the Confucian ritual guides (p. 53). When someone questions how establishing a reputation benefits the dead and why the sages regarded this as part of the Teachings of Names (*Mingjiao* 名教), Yan gives a full throttle endorsement of Confucianism, by pointing out that it encouraged people to improve their moral conduct (pp. 232–34). That is not to say that Yan did not criticize his fellow Confucians. In the "Manners and Etiquette" chapter, he castigates Confucians who too rigidly adhere to the rites; in the "Encouraging Study" (*Mianxue* 勉學) chapter, he castigates Confucians who solely rely upon learning derived from the Classics and their commentaries. For him, Confucian wisdom provides the means to live a moral and meaningful life; however, its teachings needed to be leavened by practical learning that would allow one to survive in a rough and unpredictable world.

³ See Albert E. Dien, "Yen Chih-t'ui (531–591+): A Buddho-Confucian," in Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett, eds., *Confucian Personalities* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 84–122.

⁴ Teng, *Family Instructions for the Yen Clan*, p. xxx.

The unwillingness to acknowledge that Yan Zhitui was a Confucian unfortunately affects Tian's translation in a small way. A word that Tian usually leaves untranslated is *Ru* 儒, which Western scholars now commonly translate as "classicist," but many East Asian scholars render as "Confucian." In a few cases, Tian translates the term as "scholar": "Master Xun began to travel for study at fifty, and still became an erudite scholar [*shuo Ru* 碩儒] . . . they all became great *Ru* scholars [*da Ru* 大儒] in the end" (p. 137). Here in the same sentence, Tian translates *Ru* as scholar, but then leaves it untranslated at the end of the sentence. If *Ru* means "scholar" then great *Ru* scholar means they became great scholarly scholars? How does that make sense? Similarly, we read, "Besides, we have never heard of a Wang Can among former *Ru* scholars [*xian Ru* 先儒]" (p. 143). Using the same logic, this line again means something like former scholarly scholars. How is a non-specialist supposed to make sense of the untranslated word, *Ru*? Why not simply translate *Ru* as "Confucian"? They all became great Confucian scholars; we have never heard of a Wang Can among former Confucian scholars? Translating *Ru* as Confucian not only clarifies these lines but also makes them meaningful. The reader now understands that these men belonged to a particular ideological group who shared a common identity and value system. Even translating *Ru* as "classicist" would be preferable to leaving the term untranslated.

By downplaying Yan Zhitui's commitment to Confucianism, Tian emphasizes instead his adherence to Buddhism. Tian is correct that he regarded Buddhism as superior to Confucianism, which is why he considered the former to be the "Inner Teaching" (*Neijiao* 內教) and Confucianism as merely the "Outer Teaching" (*Waijiao* 外教). But his Buddhist faith does not preclude that he was a Confucian. Indeed, it seems that he very much compartmentalized both Buddhism and Confucianism and viewed them as complementary to each other. For ultimate concerns, such as why bad things happen to good people, or what happens to one after death, Yan Zhitui looked to Buddhism for answers. Hence, after his death, he only wants Buddhist types of sacrifices. However, for how one conducts oneself in this world, he followed Confucianism. Indeed, he tells us that originally Confucianism and Buddhism were the same and only gradually became different. The text reads: "內外兩教，本為一體，漸極為異，深淺不同。" Tian's translation of this passage is as follows:

The Inner and Outer Teachings were originally one. Their differences lie in fact that {one advocates enlightenment through gradual cultivation and progress while the other advocates absolute sagehood [that cannot be attained through study]}; that one is profound while the other is shallow. (p. 287; curly brackets mine)

Please note that none of the words in the curly brackets appears in the original text. This is one of the few cases where Tian's translation does not adhere closely to the original. Here is Teng's much more accurate translation of the same passage:

“The two religions, the Inner (Buddhism) and the Outer (Confucianism) are however fundamentally the same. Gradually they became very different from each other in depth and shallowness.”⁵ Yan follows this statement by saying that the Five Prohibitions for Buddhist initiates closely match the Confucian virtues of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, *zhi* 智 (wisdom), and *xin* 信 (trustworthiness). He also thinks that one can accumulate good karma by embodying Confucian virtues—practicing Confucian filial piety and benevolence leads to Buddhist enlightenment (p. 301). For Yan, the Buddhist notion of karma helps explain why good men, such as Yan Hui 顏回 (521–481 B.C.E.), died young, and why evildoers, such as Robber Zhi 盜跖, lived a long life:

But if one becomes resentful or feels deceived because good deeds accidentally lead to disaster or bad deeds inadvertently produce good fortune, then he may find that even [our beliefs about] Yao and Shun are false, and [our convictions about] the Duke of Zhou and Confucius are unreliable—what can such a man believe, and on what can he establish himself? (p. 297)

Here we see Yan’s blending of Buddhism and Confucianism. Buddhism reinforces Confucianism by explaining moral inequities, which is important, because without Confucianism men would not be able to lead good lives. Yan’s compartmentalization of Buddhism is also evident in that he merely dedicates one chapter to it (Chapter 16, “Turning to Buddhism” [*Guixin* 歸心]) and only makes brief mentions of Buddhist funerary rites in his last chapter, “Last Will” (*Zhongzhi* 終制).

Because traditional Chinese literary collections (*wenji* 文集) do not include story compilations, Tian does not include in this translation Yan Zhitui’s *Yuanhun zhi* 冤魂志 (Accounts of wronged souls). She attributes this text of sixty short stories about retribution to Yan’s Buddhist faith (xxxviii). However, as with all things connected with Yan Zhitui, it is complicated. As both Albert Dien and Alvin Cohen note, there is very little mention of Buddhism within this work. In the tales, when wrongfully killed people want revenge, they turn to the Confucian deities of Heaven (*Tian* 天) or the Lord on High (*Shangdi* 上帝), not to a Buddha or Bodhisattva. Since this type of tales long predated the entry of Buddhism to China, for Yan it served two purposes: it reaffirmed traditional social mores and demonstrated that the idea of karma, as a form of moral retribution, was in no way alien to Chinese tradition.⁶

⁵ Teng, *Family Instructions for the Yen Clan*, p. 138.

⁶ Alvin P. Cohen, trans. and annot., *Tales of Vengeful Souls: A Sixth Century Collection of Chinese Avenging Ghost Stories*, by Yen Chih-t’ui (Taipei: Ricci Institute, 1982), pp. viii–ix; Albert E. Dien, “The *Yüan-hun Chih* (Accounts of Ghosts with Grievances): A Sixth-Century Collection of Stories,” in Chow Tse-tsung, ed. *Wen-lin: Studies in the Chinese Humanities* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), pp. 226–28.

Despite my disagreement with Tian over how we should characterize Yan Zhitui's thought, this translation is an impressive achievement and a major contribution to early medieval studies. Tian has provided us with a stellar translation of Yan's most important works in one convenient volume. Just as importantly, the translation is very readable and will be appreciated not only by scholars but also by undergraduates. That the Library of Chinese Humanities has made it accessible to everyone by means of open access makes it even more precious.

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