

AINA THE LAYMAN (ed. ROBERT HEGEL):

Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor: A Seventeenth-Century Chinese Story Collection.

xxviii, 288 pp. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2017. £32.50. ISBN 978 0 295 99997 5.

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After publishing in three handsome volumes a complete translation of Feng Menglong's celebrated *Sanyan* trilogy, the University of Washington Press has now performed a further service for students of Chinese literature by releasing a translation of another seventeenth-century story collection, *Doupeng xianhua*, or *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*. Over the years, the interest and importance of this book have been recognized by a number of scholars, notably Patrick Hanan, who devoted a whole chapter of *The Chinese Vernacular Story* (1981) to it, and Yenna Wu, who in the 1990s published a pair of articles about the collection and translated one of its stories. With a full French translation having appeared in 2010 and this English translation now available, these absorbing stories are finally accessible to a wider Western readership.

Little is known about the author of *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*, who wrote under the pseudonym of Aina the Layman and completed this set of twelve stories in the 1660s, about twenty years after the fall of the Ming dynasty. Published in Hangzhou, the book enjoyed considerable popularity in the early Qing: it is mentioned by the Zhejiang poet Lu Rou (1630–99) and may well have had some impact on Pu Songling (1640–1715), the great chronicler of the strange. Like the bold and provocative stories of Li Yu, another Hangzhou-based author, Aina's work is a product of that fertile period in the opening decades of the Qing when, at least in some quarters, an irreverent, questioning spirit still prevailed and orthodoxy had yet to be fully established. Whereas Li Yu is typically playful and flippant, Aina is mordant and sober. Celebrated episodes from ancient times are sardonically re-imagined and the seamy side of seventeenth-century life is depicted; in the wake of the trauma attending the collapse of the Ming, questions of causation and cosmic order are broached and debated. The twelve stories are linked with a narrative frame that imagines a series of storytelling sessions under the shade of a bean arbor that take place over a period of weeks from early summer to late autumn.

There is much to commend in this English edition, edited by Robert Hegel with contributions by nine other translators. Hegel supplies a concise but wide-ranging introduction; the translation is well annotated and appended by a useful collection of short "Afterthoughts", reflections on the meaning and significance of the individual stories by the scholars who translated them. The postscript comments by Ziran the Eccentric Wanderer, presumably a friend of the author, which appeared in the earliest Qing editions but are sometimes omitted in modern reprints, are also included.

An innovative feature of this edition is that it translates each of the twelve instalments (*ze* 則) within the book not as a "story" or "chapter", but rather as "session", in recognition of the fact that within each section multiple stories may be told by different characters. Varying fonts and distinctive formatting serve to differentiate the various stories on the written page and help to convey the polyphonic effect that the author wished to evoke.

The translation itself, although generally reliable, is a little uneven. It is clear that all the translators have worked hard to convey accurately the substance and tone of

Aina's stories, and on the whole they have executed their assignments with sensitivity and aplomb; Zhang Jing, for example, does a fine job of presenting Sessions 5 and 6 in fluid and natural English, and Robert Hegel and Xu Yunjing handle skilfully the poetry in Session 10. Just occasionally, however, the translation falls short of an elegant and fully idiomatic rendering of Aina's expressive yet economical language. Part of the problem is that the translators tend to favour a rather literal translation, when sometimes a more creative solution is called for. For example, the line 始知小弟之言，不似那蘇東坡姑妄言之、姑妄聽之一類話也 (p. 58: "You'll know that my story isn't what Su Shi called 'speaking with reckless words, listening as if it were reckless words'") might have been more helpfully rendered as "You'll know that my story is not the kind of tall tale that Su Shi said can't be taken too seriously". And if one wants to make the book truly come alive for the English reader, a description such as 挺著那件海狗腎的東西相似 (p. 167: "thrusting with that thing like the testicles of a seal") surely invites a translation along the lines of "thrusting with a pecker the size of a seal's penis". It is also unfortunate that some lines for which Hanan or Wu provided an excellent translation are here given an inferior treatment. In Session 9, for example, "Hearing this filled me with panic" (p. 134; the original text reads 在下一聞此言，不覺十分驚駭) does not capture what is meant nearly as well as Hanan's simple "I was astonished". In Session 1, "Now, in the entire world, there are only two ferry crossings haunted by jealous women. The one you just heard about in Shandong sounds pretty common. Let me tell you about one that was really fierce" (p. 14; the Chinese reads 妒婦津天下卻有兩處，這山東的看來也只平常，如今說的才是利害哩) is wordy and awkward compared with Wu's rendering: "There are actually two 'Jealous Wife Fords'. The one in Shandong seems pretty run-of-the-mill, but the one I'm going to tell you about is truly formidable".

Although one may quibble about the translators' word choice here and there, this is a perfectly serviceable English edition of Aina's stories that can be profitably read and consulted by all who are interested in Chinese vernacular fiction and early Qing responses to dynastic change. Its publication is much to be welcomed.

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ZHANG YINGYU (trans. CHRISTOPHER REA and BRUCE RUSK):

The Book of Swindles: Selections from a Late Ming Collection.

(Translations from the Asian Classics.) xxxvi, 226 pp. New York:

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One of the most pleasing trends in the translation of pre-modern Chinese literature over recent years has been the appearance of renditions of a number of lesser-known works, broadening the variety of works available in English far beyond the most famous classics. Adding to this variety is this abridged translation of *The Book of Swindles* from Christopher Rea and Bruce Rusk, both associate professors of Chinese studies in the University of British Columbia.

The Book of Swindles, first published 400 years ago, in 1617, is a unique collection of tales from an obscure seventeenth-century writer named Zhang Yingyu. As the title suggests, it is a themed work, containing 84 brief tales (44 are translated here) of deception and fraud. Each tale is followed by a comment from Zhang