

# 書 評

## Reviews

### **The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice Government in Early Han China: Liu An, King of Huainan**

Translated by John S. Major, Sarah A. Queen, Andrew Seth Meyer, and Harold D. Roth, with introduction by Michael Puett and Judson Murray

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Kuang-ming Wu (吳光明)\*

This brief review is made of three sections, on this translation, on translation as beauty transfer, and conclusion. The major stress is placed on rhythmic beauty as *the* pivotal essence of the *Huainanzi*, as such musical rhythm typically throbs through *all* Chinese writings, even between “non-poetic” essays such as historical and argumentative ones. It is precisely this life-throbbing beauty that is missed in this historical translation.

#### a. On This Translation

Extremely meticulous and informative, this massive translation, handsome 986 pages long, of the massive *Huainanzi* took twelve long years of four historians’ labors to complete. Its long Acknowledgement, lasting two and a

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\* Professor, University of Denver

half pages, conveniently describes the vicissitudes of its extended process of translation and expositions.

Its longer Introduction (40 pages in all) has the Early Han background to the *Hainanzi*, its content and organization that includes its impressive schema, its self-claim, its place in Early Han, its sources, its intellectual affiliation, description of its translation process, and conventions used in this book of translation. Every chapter has its summary, appended with many detailed footnotes at the drop of a hat. “Wow! What more can anyone desire for on the *Huainanzi*?” we would think.

Still, “government” or politics is taken in this translation to be straight inter-human push-and-pull as in the West, which differs from “politics in the *Huainanzi*,” the grand unity of homo-cosmic management, inclusive of cosmology with social-ethical depths. Thus this *Huainanzi* includes a vast variety of themes in the heavens, on earth, and between them, the myriad aspects of matters and themes non-human and human.

This translation ends with a bibliography and an exhaustive index. Of course we can quibble over its omissions of pivotal commentaries by Gao You 高誘 and Xu Shen 許慎, and numerous sets of three-volume commentaries by Japanese expositors, each appended with its own extensive bibliography. This vast literature on the *Huainanzi*, over 160 titles in China alone, beyond adequate listing in the bibliography of this translation, is due to historic fame on the massive *Huainanzi* that, with its apt synthesis of various schools, has exercised varied influences on Chinese thinking through the ages.

The *Huainanzi* is thus a virtual encyclopedia of those days, yet not in random bits and pieces but throbbled through and *unified* with the heartbeat of beauty. The *Hainanzi* is a system alive, as even all historical writings in China — 春秋三傳 and 史記 come to mind — are beautiful essays. The thread of the whole *Huainanzi* lies in “embodying Dao 體道” to become the

true person 真人, ultimate 至人 and sagely 聖人, living natural, spontaneous and alive, to thereby socio-ethically unify affairs throughout the cosmos.

All this is usually and casually called “politics” but entirely homo-cosmic, quite serious and comprehensive. Description of this vast management of affairs appears in Prince Huainan’s peculiar parallel poetic-prose (賦) and rhythmic verse, all so vast and all-comprehensive that they rhyme with the style of beauty of nature all over.

As beauty of nature is composed by crisscrossing the detailed beauties of specific flowers and trees, so Prince Huainan’s beauty, with the holistic organic style and structure distinctively his own, is a complex unity of specific gems of small essays he exquisitely crafted. We call this distinctive organism Mr. Huainan’s own beauty throbbing through his whole *Huainanzi*, unifying it.

All this pivot and thread of living beauty, this translation sadly, seriously, missed, to become a gigantic grab-all of whatever scattered bits and pieces even remotely relevant to the *Huainanzi*. Although verbose, this translation is clear enough to serve a good handy aid to studying idiomatic flowing English, but perhaps unfit for studying compact powerful Chinese wording, especially that of the *Huainanzi*.

## b. Translation as Beauty Transferred

From here on, to prevent this short review from taking off in all directions, I will focus on one pivotal defect of this translation alone, a lack of literary sensitivity to the rhythmic beauty that pervades the whole *Huainanzi* to skewer it essentially, integrally. To show so, we must first take note of a distinctive feature of all Chinese writings.

This is rhythmic resonance in time and space that is part and parcel of the message. And so bypassing resonant time-beauty of an essay misses what the

essay says. All this beauty-message unity came about in an historical way; this trinity of beauty, message, and history, is dubbed “文哲史合一” that typifies all Chinese writings.

From time immemorial, we Chinese people have been feeling the regular constant impacts of myriad matters inside and out, hitting on our hearts, calling on us. We naturally respond by compressing their sights-and-sounds into their senses, and such compressed voiced-images are poetic ideograms, Chinese characters 文字. We then collate them, arrange them, and lug them around into essays to express our heartfelt heart-rhythms to rhyme with Heaven and Earth, and myriad matters in us and around us. These rhymed rhythms 文 compose the musical senses 哲 of things, and their flowcharts of senses in time are called history 史.

So, Chinese writings compose a melting pot, the unity, of literature 文, thoughts 哲, and history 史. The sense of an essay 哲 is expressed in literary beauty 文 of ongoing history 史 of things human and non-human. All this is in sharp contrast with the eternal logic in the West abstracted from unpredictable contingencies. Essays are written according to such staid analytical logic, to tell of their meanings.

Now, if sense consists in coherence, then Western coherence lies in universal logic, while Chinese coherence flows in historical beauty. Western sentences are logically organized to make sense. It is analytical coherence that clues us to what an essay means; the West calls it “reading an essay.” In contrast, Chinese sentences beat their heart-rhythm of integrity crisscrossing 文 in rhyme with things’ senses 哲 flowing timely 史. It is rhythm 文 rhyming on historical 史 that shows the senses of sentences 哲. Bypassing their throbbing rhyme 文 in actuality-flow 史 misses *what* is said 哲. In China, meaning is caught beautifully, historically, not told abstractly, analytically.

A Chinese essay is composed of timed beauty; it has its distinctive music. Dancing its music “reads” the essay, actually dancing singing its tune. Not

hearing music, we take the dancer mad. Being out of the music of an essay, we take Chinese writings boring barren, nothing worth noting. Music sings sense; no music, no singing, no sense. After all, we listen to music undergoing it; we do not read it sub specie aeternitatis of staid logic. Translation without the music of the Chinese original does not translate.

Just “telling what is said” just mumbles in word-for-word literalism, reading notes to miss their music bouncing alive that is the sense, sentiment, and essence of an essay; bypassing the rhythm of an essay misses the essay. Literalism misses the essay. Our translators’ principle one — accounting for all words in the original — risks literalism to risk missing the essay.

Now, with this background knowledge of Chinese writings as unity of beauty, history, and message, we see how senselessly scattered this translation of the *Huainanzi* is. To begin, it has five translation principles on p. 33: one, to account for *all* Chinese words, nothing added or paraphrased, two, to use standard readable English, no esoteric syntax or contrivance, three, to preserve original vitality such as parallel prose, verse, and aphorisms, four, use non-literary chapters (precepts, sayings, persuasions) as clues to separate literary chapters from non-literary chapters, and five, to follow the last chapter of overview of the whole *Huainanzi*.

Obviously, such disparate principles all run in separate ways, contradicting one another to cut down one another. They are so scattered and ad hoc, culled from various pieces of historical information and our common sense today, oblivious to the situation of *Huainanzi*’s days despite the translators’ historical expertise.

The translators meticulously try to (for it seldom succeeds) render every word of the original (principle one) in usual “standard English” alone (principle two), as the translators notice verse passages on the way (principle three). Nor must the translators impose genre-distinction (principle four) onto the original *Huainanzi* that has its own *unity*, its own style and structural

coherence, all the way through the whole volume. How do the translators classify, e.g., “Chapter One: Originating Dao”? Is it poetry or precepts?

Their trial, so conscientious so commonsensical, results in a thin soup bland and boring; it omits no original, it offends no English, to turn insipidly intelligible. All this translation-coverage, inoffensive, wandering, boneless, shows how this translation lacks an overall *life* thrust of rhyming beauty to integrate these scattered insights so random. The translation has no beauty-breath to enliven, to integrate lifeless bits and pieces into an organic whole bouncing alive.

At this point, a tough question inevitably arises, “How do we breathe the breath of Chinese beauty into English translation?” Translation should indeed make the original Chinese beauty reborn in English beauty, and yet beauty is by nature incorrigibly culture-specific. No beauty-in-general exists, indifferently applicable to both Chinese and English. Chinese beauty must be appreciated *as* we appreciate English beauty; this “as” is the tough task of translation while keeping full Chinese distinctness from English.

To pull off the stunt, we simply cannot slavishly keep to “standard readable English” (principle two). Adhering to usual English *alone* kills China’s peculiar original beauty, though of course the translated English cannot be so out of line as to be barbaric-unintelligible, to mar English beauty.

All this amounts to saying that these historian-translators need a philosophical poet of bilingual sensitivity. Thomas Merton lacks bilingual sensitivity. Wai-lim Yip lacks philosophical sensitivity. Both did their best to translate Chinese beauty into English. They are the least obnoxious of translators. Chow and Mair give us other good translators.<sup>1</sup> I omit

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (NY: New Directions, 1965). Wai-lim Yip, *Chinese Poetry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997). Tse-tsung Chow, ed., *Wen-lin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968). Victor Mair, ed., *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1994).

commenting on A. C. Graham, J. Y. Liu, and Burton Watson, each with their respective strengths and weaknesses.

Now I hear someone saying, “If you are so smart, do it yourself!” All right, my friend. I am not smart at all, but I can try my hand, on the magnificent beginning paragraph of the *Huainanzi*. The original Chinese goes this way. “原道: 夫道者, 覆天載地, 廓四方, 析八極, 高不可際, 深不可測.”

Our dear historian-translators put this paragraph this way (p. 48). “Originating in the Way:/ As for the Way:/It covers Heaven and upholds Earth./ It extends the four directions/ and divides the eight end points./ So high, it cannot be reached./ So deep, it cannot be fathomed.” I would put it *this* way. “Originating Dao:/ Dao is what/ covers heavens, bears ground;/ spans four ways-far,/ details eight end-bounds;/ high, can not border,/ deep, can not measure.” Can you see it tighter, and rhymed punchier?

Now, I think Dao so pregnantly dynamic is best left untranslated, as Dharma, Logos, or Yahweh had better, too. The title in two characters, “原道,” must be “originating Dao,” not three words “Originating in the Way” that make no sense in English and add unneeded connotations. Original rhymes 覆-方, 地-極, 極-際, and 際-測 are barely reborn in “covers-far,” “ground-bounds,” and “border-measure.”

I say “barely” because the rhyme 極-際 is beyond my “bounds-border” to render, and my “covers-far” rhymes not too well. I did manage to rehearse the original’s ponderous progression of parallels, 3-4, 3-3, 4-4. But, seriously, my English lacks the original resonance so magnificent, intoning the majesty of vast Dao. In all, I wish I were a bilingual poet philosophical, sensitive.

But I do hope my clumsy trial has made an important point, that translation is a thankless though necessary art of intercultural midwifery that brings birth to a new baby, the new original magnificence in a target culture-milieu. The “new original” is a tough baby to give birth to. Translation is a treacherous art, the pivot of interface of cultures.

Translation of Chinese writings is particularly tough since they are age-old gems alive dancing singing their sentiment alive, even among historical and argumentative essays. Especially the *Huainanzi* sings various senses in all themes imaginable, framed in bouncing rhythm of history, which is easily killed by word-for-word literalism transfer.

“So? What’s so special about an extra commotion of beauty? After all, don’t we want just information however conveyed?” O, No, the situation is nothing of the sort, pal! Let me show you a concrete example. The whole *Huainanzi* begins at whamming us with a quiet phrase on Dao, “覆天載地.” This phrase reverses our usual “天覆地載.” Dao covers even the covering Heaven and bears even the bearing Earth, two vastest “things” of the cosmos. Dao is *the* pan-supporting all-base covering even the greatest father Heaven and mother Earth. Dao is vaster than anything there exists.

What subtlety of compact allusion the *Huainanzi* pulls! Sadly, such poetry of wonder is flattened into “So? What else is new?” when we lose all this intense wonder, when we bypass this allusive parsimony that provokes us into rapt attention. Now the whole point of probing the majestic Origin of the myriad, nicknamed “Dao,” is evaporated in thin air.

Even the prosaic Aristotle begins his massive *Metaphysics* by saying: “Wonder” is the essence of metaphysics that hits Being qua Being behind all things. “Wonder” is the fundamental tone-key that resounds throughout the being-music to bind together the whole complex niceties of his *Metaphysics*. Pull out musical wonder, and all *Metaphysics* falls apart into random bits and pieces, quite chaotic, lifeless, and insignificant if not senseless.

The *Huainanzi* is more subtly dynamic; it provokes pervasive wonder with quiet allusive parsimony, to draw the readers into this pan-throbbing cosmic beauty that is the sense of all its writing. After all, losing wonder flattens us humanity, “the Spirit of the myriad 萬物之靈,” into bare instinctive animality. Life is no longer worth living. It is thus quite significant that the *Huainanzi*



begins at this fundament of all things and all knowledge, with its typical subtle allusion such as what we appreciated above.

The translators under our consideration sadly lose sight of this kernel of the *Huainanzi*'s vibrant grain, as they laboriously thrash all over to collect its mere chaffs, all because the translators in their busy investigation and survey are blinded by their conscientious historical busy-ness to this pivotal thread, this power of allusive provocation of the *Huainanzi*'s parsimonious beauty alive so majestic.

### c. Conclusion

In all, I would say that this massive translation is a good resource reference for background information about the *Huainanzi*, but the *Huainanzi* itself is far beyond what it says, and we would be sorely misled if we rely solely on this translation for proper understanding of the *Huainanzi*.