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REVIEW OF *THE BRIGANDS' SONG: SERVING IN THE ARMY OF A NATIVE CHIEFTAIN. A TRADITIONAL SONG TEXT FROM GUANGXI IN SOUTHERN CHINA*

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The Brigands' Song: Serving in the Army of a Native Chieftain. A Traditional Song Text from Guangxi in Southern China, translated and annotated by David Holm and Yuanyao Meng. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2022). ISBN 978-90-04-44983-1 (hardback), ISBN 978- 90-04-49875-4 (e-book).

The work under review is an annotated English translation of an original Zhuang text, a major traditional Zhuang verse in the form of an epic song. The 833-page book first gives introductory information about the Zhuang and then provides the story text, with interlinear glosses of Zhuang pronunciations using the International Phonetic Alphabet, followed by free translations, sentence by sentence. Appendices at the end provide other kinds of linguistic data, in addition to images of the manuscript.

Background

The Brigands' Song is a unique ancient text of the Zhuang ethnic group that spread across South China's Guangxi Province and surrounding regions. Zhuang is the largest minority group in China, larger than the Tibetan or Uygur groups, with a population of over 17 million. The Zhuang language belongs to the Tai branch of Kra-Dai. It has many varieties showing significant phonological differences. Zhuang is divided into two main dialect groups—Northern and Southern Zhuang—under Fang-Kuei Li's (1977) three-way classification scheme, with Northern Zhuang and Southern Zhuang belonging to Northern Tai and Central Tai respectively, as opposed to Southwestern Tai.

Written in Chinese character-based Zhuang scripts, *The Brigands' Song* is a long song sung by the Zhuang people in the You River Valley of Guangxi. The exact date of the creation of the original texts is unknown, although it is conjectured to date back to the Ming (1368–1644 AD) and the Qing (1636–1912 AD) times, when the Imperial government in China managed an administrative system over the native chieftains. The current version of the text is a hand-written copy believed to have been passed down from past generations.

Prior to this English translation, a Chinese version was first published in 1980. The original work takes the form of a hand-written songbook, which is used by men and women to sing duets at song fairs. Translated and annotated by David Holm and Meng Yuanyao, *The Brigands' Song* represents yet another important achievement following their publication of several works on Zhuang.

The successful completion of this book has a lot to do with the fact that the two authors were fortunate enough to find enthusiastic collaborators. Before starting to work on this book, Holm had already published several works on similar topics, such as *Killing a Buffalo for the Ancestors* (2003), *Recalling Lost Souls : The Baeu Rodo Scriptures, Tai Cosmogonic Texts from Guangxi in Southern China* (2004), and *Mapping the Old Zhuang Character Script* (2013), as did Meng, a native speaker of Zhuang who also has several works on Zhuang culture and who is familiar with the local Zhuang language.

The two also authors recently co-authored a monograph: *Hanviemg: The Goose King and the Ancestral King* (2015), a translation and annotations of an epic song that tells the story of the enmity between two royal stepbrothers, where ritual text is recited in times of adversity: fraternal feuding, death by violence, outbreaks of smallpox, or other such disasters. Thanks to the authors' expertise, the meaning of the text of The Brigand's

Song is carefully translated to ensure that the sense of each word is fully conveyed, and the meaning of the translated text is faithful to the original.

The manuscripts appear in the form of a male and female duet. It tells the story of two young men who were in love with their girlfriends and were drafted into the army because of the war between the chieftains. The lyrics begin with a scene of peace and farm work, followed by words about the breakout of war and notification that the chieftains were calling for conscription. This leads to the two young men being drafted. The two go through countless hardships in their long journey during which they encounter life-and-death conflicts before the war finally end. The two men return home in embarrassment. The moment they arrive back home, they can hardly wait to see their sweethearts. After testing each other to make sure that neither side has changed their hearts, they continue their relationships. The song is full of anti-war sentiment and yearning for a peaceful life, which is characteristic of Zhuang folk customs.

Organization of the work

The book is divided into four main parts. It begins with an introduction, which provides background information of the socio-economic conditions of South and Southwest China, particularly Guangxi where the story takes place. This is followed by English translations of the Zhuang texts before interlinear glosses of Zhuang text are given. Next are some two thousand ethnographic and textual notes which supply historical and cultural information about the Zhuang group, and which include several ethnobiological notes on certain native plants. A glossary and concordance wrap up the volume, which also has a Chinese character index, arranged alphabetically. It is complemented by a vernacular character index, a Zhuang character index, and an English-Zhuang index for ease of reference.

In the introduction, the authors offer an account of song markets—a unique form of social interaction characteristic of the Zhuang community, and the source of a great many literary works of the song culture of the Zhuang people. A concise literature review is also provided of the scholarship on Liaoge, the regional song style in which *The Brigand's Song* is sung. The internal structure of the song is then laid out. Scholars working on the Chinese writing system will be pleased to see Chinese characters incorporated in the Chinese character-based Zhuang writing system, a writing system that bears resemblance to Chữ Nôm, a highly complex logographic writing system used in the past in Vietnam to write both Chinese and native-Vietnamese words. The introduction also includes a description of the sound system of the Zhuang variety of the Pingguo area where the current version of *The Brigand's Song* is based.

Significance

The value of *The Brigand's Song* is multi-faceted and has research benefits to multiple disciplines, including linguistics, translation, and ethnohistory.

- First, *The Brigand's Song* is a rich corpus for the compilation of Zhuang dictionaries. Many of the words have been shared in English for the first time. Careful examination of the syntactic and semantic properties of these words and expressions will benefit dictionary compilers, linguistic typologists and ethnographers with a focus on mainland Southeast Asia and bordering areas of southern China.
- Second, a Zhuang epic song has been made available to the English-speaking world, providing a translation with extensive and rich contents, a fluent writing style, and precise interpretations. For specialists of the Zhuang language, this work provides a model for translating Zhuang into English.
- Third, *The Brigand's Song* is a product of the Zhuang song-fair culture. The duet recorded in the song book will help researchers to understand that the culture and folk customs of the antiphonal songs in the Youjiang Valley, allowing them to have an enhanced understanding of the production and living conditions of the local Zhuang people.
- Fourth, the battle scene as depicted in the song is a rare description of this kind in Zhuang military culture. The description of firepower and armaments supplies evidence to demonstrate that the Zhuang native troops had firearms during the turbulent Ming times. In addition, the description of conscription is a representation of military service under the chieftain system, which is relevant to the study of chieftain history in Zhuang territory.
- Finally, the meticulous translation and annotation will help researchers of the history of Zhuang literature to further understand the literary status and artistic value of this culturally significant song.

All in all, *The Brigand's Song* is a welcome addition to the scholarship of comparative Kra-Dai studies and the interdisciplinary study of cultural history of southern China and mainland Southeast Asia more broadly.

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