

OLIVIA MILBURN (trans.):

Kingdoms in Peril: A Novel of the Ancient Chinese World at War. x, 332 pp. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022. £13.99. ISBN 978 0 520 38051 6.

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The Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–256 BCE) was an era of political instability in which traditional social norms were challenged. This is highlighted in Feng Menglong’s historical novel *Xin Lieguo zhi* 新列國志 [lit. “new records of the various states”] and well captured by the title *Kingdoms in Peril*. This translation by Olivia Milburn, based on the critical edition edited by Hu Wanchuan for the Lianjing Publishing Company in 1981, reproduces the earliest extant edition, from the early seventeenth century.

In the introduction Milburn provides historical background sufficient for readers to understand the “momentous historical events” and the individuals caught up in them (p. 3). She showcases how Feng’s hometown, scholarly background, and contemporary political events (e.g. the decline of the Ming dynasty) may have influenced the novel. Situating the text in the context of the late Ming Romantic movement, she also draws attention to its portrayal of unusual sexual relationships such as incest and unconventionally complex characterizations of women. The introduction brings the vivid world of Eastern Zhou into focus from three perspectives (pp. 20–28): “place”, the kingdom’s spatial structure; “people”, names, physical features, and kinships; and “ideas”, regional and ethical considerations. The introduction also contains an annotated bibliography of Feng’s writings, translations of his other works, and several translations of the key sources to which Feng referred. A reader might also appreciate the inclusion of two maps depicting Eastern Zhou’s domains and the discussion of recent archaeological discoveries that shed light on the novel.

From the text’s 108 chapters, Milburn has selected and translated nine key story-lines that run through the original novel’s span and depict several of the text’s representative themes: lust, love, faith, warfare, revenge, and killing. The first story, “The curse of the Bao lords”, describes a prophecy (and its fulfilment) of the fall of the Western Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–771 BCE). The second, “An incestuous love affair at the court of Qi”, documents the affair between Lord Xiang of Qi (r. 697–686 BCE) and his younger sister Lady Wen Jiang (d. 673 BCE), and its consequences; the third, “The wicked stepmother, Lady Li Ji”, takes place in the state of Jin and relates the murder of the heir, Shensheng (d. 655 BCE), plotted by his stepmother Li Ji (d. 651 BCE), and the subsequent political disorder. The fourth, “The fight for Lady Xia Ji”, tells the story of a beautiful, licentious woman’s affairs with noblemen in the states of Chen and Chu. “The orphan of the Zhao Clan”, the fifth story, describes how Zhao Wu (598–541 BCE), the only survivor of the wiped-out Zhao lineage, grows up and avenges his family. In the sixth story, “The downfall of the Kingdom of Wu”, the King of Yue, Goujian (r. 494–465 BCE), defeated by the King of Wu, Fuchai (r. 495–473 BCE), endures Fuchai’s humiliation for years before finding an opportunity to defeat him. The seventh story, “Rival students of the Master of Ghost Valley”, depicts how the rivalry between Pang Juan and Sun Bin, outstanding military strategists, leads to Sun’s crippling and Pang’s death. The last two stories, “The family trouble of the King of Qin”

and “The assassins strike”, focus on the first emperor of Qin (r. 221–210 BCE): the former depicts the emperor’s birth and accession to the throne (despite not being the king’s biological son) and his later power struggles with his half-brother and mother, while the latter spotlights Jing Ke’s failed attempt to assassinate the emperor.

In translating *Kingdoms in Peril*, Milburn primarily eschews literal translation in favour of a free style that, besides keeping the text’s flow fluent and natural, works well for this novel: Feng’s novel is full of allusions and references to characters and plots in other (usually untranslated) chapters that, were the translation literal, would require footnotes. Because the original novel contains multiple narrative threads and the translated storylines are taken from multiple chapters, the translator sometimes summarizes the original text’s transitions between narratives, a method that echoes Feng’s own invention of characters and plots to fill gaps in his historical sources. The translation also offers glimpses of the novel’s original form by quoting poems, including Feng’s explanations of difficult terms, and using couplets for many of the chapter titles that are imitations, if not translations, of the original.

Though the translation is generally of very high quality, it contains several small errors. For instance, in one poem (p. 72), *fendai* (粉黛) is translated as the colours of “the beacon fires”, though it should refer to Queen Bao, the *femme fatale* of the dynasty: literally face powder and eyebrow pigment, *fendai* is used as a metonymy for imperial consorts in many poems. Another example is the title *guojiu* (國舅, “brother-in-law” of a lord or a king), which is translated as “Leader of the Nation” (p. 137). Some romanization of names is also confusing – the table of contents lists “Ai Lao” (p. vii) despite his appearance as “Lao Ai” in the story (p. 303) – and there are several mistakes in the romanization of characters’ names, such as Zhao “Xi” rather than “Su” (p. 120). It is also regrettable that Milburn does not address how Feng reconciles inconsistencies among his sources or her reasons for selecting these nine stories from the text’s forty or fifty. None of this, however, keeps *Kingdoms in Peril* from being a fluent, pleasant translation equipped with a helpful introduction. For readers who enjoy fascinating historical novels and researchers interested in Feng Menglong or late imperial Chinese literature generally, *Kingdoms in Peril* is a must-have.

Yixuan Cai

University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, USA

XIAOSHAN YANG:

Wang Anshi and Song Poetic Culture.

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Wang Anshi and Song Poetic Culture studies Wang Anshi’s 王安石 (1021–86) poetic works and activities and their interrelations with Song poetic culture. As the author indicates in the introduction, the five chapters of the book may be read independently, while together they form a mosaic of Wang’s work and the literary and historical contexts that define Wang Anshi. Topics of the five case studies include Wang’s influential but controversial “Song of Brilliant Lady” 明妃曲, his