

The World of Wu Zhao: Annotated Selections from Zhang Zhuo's "Court and Country"

By N. Harry Rothschild. London: Anthem Press, 2023. 301 pp. \$110 (cloth).

Reviewed by Mark Halperin

University of California, Davis, United States
Email: mhalperin@ucdavis.edu

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The World of Wu Zhao is a sad book. The work marks the final publication in N. Harry Rothschild's tragically short life and career. More than anyone else writing in western languages, Rothschild devoted his efforts to the investigation of one of China's most infamous, anomalous eras, the ascendancy of the Tang (and Zhou) woman emperor, Wu Zhao (624–705). The monograph under review completes Rothschild's trilogy of book-length studies of this fascinating monarch, begun with the biography *Wu Zhao: China's Only Woman Emperor* (Pearson, 2008) and continued with the innovative *Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and Dynastic Mothers* (Columbia, 2015). Traditional and modern historiography have villified Wu Zhao, and Rothschild's research sought to balance this view, taking a skeptical look at Confucian condemnations and viewing seriously her creative use of the Chinese heritage and ideologies. All those examining this era are and will be in Rothschild's debt.

The book's subtitle is *Annotated Selections of Zhang Zhuo's Court and Country*. *Court and Country* refers to *Chaoye qianzai* 朝野僉載, a miscellany (or *biji* 筆記), compiled by Zhang Zhuo 張鷟 (658–731). A true *wunderkind*, Zhang won a *jinshi* degree at seventeen, but he spent the bulk of his career in county-level positions, including a stint in exile in Lingnan. Both Tang dynastic histories called him "unrestrained," and readers sense a talented man too clever by a half, often unnecessarily offending his peers. *Court and Country* stands as one of the earliest examples of this genre in the Tang. Time took a fearsome toll on its contents, and what began as a twenty-chapter book had shrunk to only six chapters by the dynasty's end. Corrupt sections mar the surviving text, with some entries reporting incidents after Zhang's death. Many historical sources suffer from such damage, but one speculates that the absence of over two-thirds of the original work drew perhaps in part from political considerations. Despite these issues, *Court and Country*, as Rothschild underscores, constitutes an extraordinary source of lore and opinion concerning Wu Zhao's era.

The monograph's body has nine sections. They commence with Wu Zhao and her favorites and then extend outward from the throne, treating cruel officials, local officials, commoners, family ties, military officials, foreigners, clerics and the supernatural, and the natural world. This arrangement makes things convenient for readers searching for particular topics. While many annotated translations spotlight the original source, explaining matters solely in the introduction and footnotes, Rothschild takes the reader by the hand and elucidates at length in the work's body these sometimes exotic Tang materials.

By my count, the work contains 221 translated entries, amounting to about half of the extant contents of the collection. Wu Zhao figures in twenty-three entries, and so

one ought to conceive the book's title as denoting the world she lived in, rather than one that she created or exerted direct control over.

While *Court and Country*, like the miscellanies that would follow, contains a broad range of subjects, Zhang had a distinct agenda. As Rothschild notes, "One of the clear objectives in [the book] is to shock and intrigue." (108) A complete translation of the text's Chinese name might be *A Full Record of Court and Country*, but a title more descriptive of its contents would be *Brutes, Sychophants, Frauds, and Omens*. Zhang had an unmistakable taste for relating savagery, and the work helped shape the opprobrium for Wu Zhao and her rule in later historiography. Yet, as noted, relatively few selections mention the female emperor, and, of those, only a handful suggest noteworthy cruelty on her part. Rather, the misdeeds of the Zhang brothers, Wu's relatives, various officials, and assorted foreigners together compose a fearsome tableau, calling to mind at times the more fantastical creations of Hieronymous Bosch. Indeed, Rothschild condemns Zhang Zhuo for devoting an "inordinate amount of time and space" to gruesome matters. (10) Unfortunately, readers will never have the chance to ask Rothschild further about these tales. Did he believe them to be true? Exaggerated? False? Atypical?

How to interpret this extensive portrayal of carnage? On the one hand, Rothschild attributes this picture to a Confucian animus toward a female sovereign, or, to use the author's own language, an "unfailing schematic Confucian playbook" (83) with a "pungent androcentric Confucian fetor" (39). On the other hand, Zhang Zhuo made a very poor Confucian and offered his readers very little edifying material. Significantly, Rothschild's subsection on good officials from the collection has only three entries (59–61). We hear nothing about classical studies, ritual practice, worthy rulers, and very little about exemplary conduct. Beyond the violence and torture, readers see a great deal of one-upmanship, venality, corruption, as well as accounts where astral bodies, feces, and semen play key roles. Rather than virtue, it is ingenuity, be it literary or manual, that wins Zhang's attention. One could propose that this child prodigy, after his early triumph, found little use for canonical precepts and later in life used this work to settle scores with his more successful colleagues.

The World of Wu Zhao, however, offers more than broken bodies. The collection introduces an unusual Tang literatus and offers us a lively panorama of his era. Highlights include Zhang's assuming a Sima Qian-like, Grand Historian persona and delivering a caustic appraisal of contemporary literati (66–68); the crimes and punishment of a grandson of the Tang dynasty's founder (88–89); the spectacular, comic cultural incompetence of General Quan Longxiang (146–49); and a broad exposition of the range of non-Han peoples on the Tang periphery (Chapter 8). Especially valuable is the part labelled "Relationships" (Chapter 7), whose anecdotes offer a stunning variety of how husbands, wives, and concubines associated with each other in the seventh and eighth centuries. Any instructor eager to scramble assumptions about women and family in traditional China need look no further. In addition, Zhang's anecdotes about uncommon commoners give a rare glimpse of people who had little to do with state power. Finally, despite the age's turmoil, Zhang's reports of omens, celestial and terrestrial, illustrate how he saw heaven, earth, and humanity as a coherent whole, where events in one sphere necessarily resonated in another.

Historians searching for a broader picture of the early Tang will find intriguing silences. Strikingly, Rothschild says nothing about Zhang's ancestry or inlaws, indispensable parts of any Tang literatus's identity. Readers looking for telling remarks about the medieval aristocracy will be disappointed. Nor do we hear much about those cultural highlights of the Tang era, poetry and Buddhism. Later *biji* compilers

often provided accounts of dynastic founders, but Tang Gaozu (r. 618–26) and Tang Taizong (r. 627–49) go unmentioned. Zhang’s accounts do not cite his own experiences as an official, and he does not comment on institutions such as the equal-field system (*juntian zhidu* 均田制度) and the examination system. One might interpret their absence as part of Zhang’s idiosyncracies, but in Zhang’s time the personality-driven *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 still dominated the genre and perhaps influenced Zhang’s choices of what to write and what to leave out.


Rothschild’s prose has a breezy, conversational style, which echoes, in a way, the *biji* genre’s informality. His exposition, studded with exclamation marks and comparisons with contemporary Chinese and American cultures, will appeal to many. Rothschild had a gift for rhymed translations, and his renditions of medieval Chinese read smoothly.

At times, though, the monograph would have benefited from a firmer editorial hand. “Parlay” (to maneuver an asset to advantage) is consistently misspelled as “parley” (a conference between adversaries) (33, 36, 60, 83). What on one page is translated as “Filial Sentiment” (62) and as “Filiality” on the next one (63) is the same term, *xiao* 孝, seen in the same tenth-century encyclopedia, *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽. Rothschild uses too many redundant constructions, such as “volatile and mercurial” (28), “bloodthirsty and savage” (77), “coarseness and utter lack of refinement” (148), “animalize or bestialize” (153), as well as purple passages, to wit, “an acquisitive donkey who covets wealth and rank” (39) and “a fetid cesspool at the base of history’s ravine” (72). Many will use this work to learn more about Wu Zhao, but the index misses many references to her, especially in the book’s latter two-thirds. Most troubling, however, is the decision to set the translations in nine-point italic font. Ostensibly, the book aims to make accessible a voice from medieval China, but this format sabotages this goal and distances unnecessarily the reader from the historical source. The problem weighs especially in the longer translated passages. Harry Rothschild and Zhang Zhuo deserve better.

These issues aside, *The World of Wu Zhao* will soon become a staple in Tang dynasty historiography. Rothschild’s last work adds a fascinating perspective on what remains a vital yet understudied period, and scholars and teachers undoubtedly will make extensive, productive use of the book in the years to come.

Boundless Winds of Empire: Rhetoric and Ritual in Early Chosŏn Diplomacy with Ming China

By Sixiang Wang. Columbia University Press, New York, 2023. 424 pp. \$140.00 (hardcover), \$35.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Felix Kuhn 

University of Tokyo, Japan

Email: felixkuhn@g.ecc.u-tokyo.ac.jp

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The relationship between Chosŏn Korea and Ming China cannot properly be understood from the perspective of any general framework, such as the “tributary system”; rather, it must be appreciated on its own terms, based on the choices made by both