



## Translation and Historiography: How an Interpreter Shaped Historical Records in Latter Han China

### Traduction et historiographie : comment un interprète a façonné les archives historiques chinoises sous la dynastie Han postérieure

Rachel Lung

Traduire les Amériques  
Translating the Americas  
Volume 19, Number 2, 2e semestre 2006

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/017830ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/017830ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)  
Association canadienne de traductologie

ISSN  
0835-8443 (print)  
1708-2188 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

#### Cite this article

Lung, R. (2006). Translation and Historiography: How an Interpreter Shaped Historical Records in Latter Han China. *TTR*, 19(2), 225–252.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/017830ar>

#### Article abstract

This article analyzes evidence of interpreting activities in first-century China between the Latter Han (25–220 AD) Chinese administration and non-Han Chinese minority tribes along the then Southwestern frontier (modern Yunnan and the west of Sichuan basin). Besides confirming the existence of interpreting events and the subsequent Chinese translation of three tribal sung poems, a tribal tribute to Emperor Ming (r. 58–75) in a Qiang dialect (without a written language, apparently), this piece of evidence is also of interest to historians of interpreting in four aspects, namely, the nature of interpreting activities in China in antiquity; possible political rewards for the amateur interpreter who was a frontier clerk by profession because of possible translation manipulation; textual traces from the Chinese translation of the poems that suggests a possible manipulation in meaning and style; and the (interpreter's) superior's part in the manipulation of the translation, which eventually found its way into the standard history of the Latter Han dynasty. Considering the political needs of Latter Han China to promote the Sinicization cause among non-Han tribesmen in the empire, this article argues, based on analyses of the four factors above, that the interpreter, with his rare knowledge of the tribal tongue in the imperial court, might have consciously shaped the translation of the poems to pander to the liking of his superior and the emperor. This article further shows how and why the interpreter, in his official capacity as a frontier clerk, might have capitalized on his competence in a tribal language and manipulated, albeit mildly, the historical records on the Chinese translation of the poems.

# Translation and Historiography: How an Interpreter Shaped Historical Records in Latter Han China<sup>1</sup>

**Rachel Lung**

## Introduction

A budding branch of interpreting studies in the 1990s was the writing of histories of interpreting in Western civilizations (Delisle and Woodsworth, 1995). Apparently, the best way to trace the earliest interpreting activities is to examine historical records textually. In a seminal paper on interpreting history, Margareta Bowen *et al.* (1995) argue that interpreters, equipped with their multilingual skills and diplomatic experience, play concrete roles in the making of histories. Similarly, Ruth Roland (1999), trained as a political scientist, outlines the macro-connection between interpreters and histories in both the East and the West. These studies in the West incidentally show an interest in the link between interpreters and histories. In this regard, China has an inarguably long and rich historiographic tradition and conveniently provides an ideal source to document its diplomatic contacts, which naturally called for interpreting services. Justifiably, ancient traces of interpreting, between speakers of different languages along the borders of China, were reported in Ma Zuyi's (1998; 1999)

---

<sup>1</sup> This research has benefited from financial support (DR06B3) from the Research and Postgraduate Studies Committee of Lingnan University, Hong Kong. The author is particularly grateful for the constructive and insightful comments from the anonymous reviewer on the earlier draft of the manuscript. Stylistic assistance generously offered by Professor Leo Chan Tak-hung was much appreciated.

pioneering works on Chinese translation history. His writing of the history of interpreting might have inspired Li Nanqiu (2002) to provide a greater data base related to records of interpreting in China.

To pursue the quest for the nature of the link further, Lung and Li (2005) examine interpreters' role as historians based on the standard histories of China, and they find that whereas the Western documentation is based on interpreters' diplomatic activities, evidence culled from Chinese history sometimes offers the "exact" conversations as cited in bilingual exchanges. It is not yet conclusive, however, whether the dialogue inserted in histories of interpreting is a straightforward record of interpreting events or simply the result of literary interventions by the historians. Taking a step further, Lung (in press) establishes a link between the interviews and historical accounts about foreign envoys in China, and concludes that there is a strong possibility that interpreters' notes, in the form of reports, provide important, if not primary, sources for history writing in medieval China. In order to bring to light the intrinsic connection between interpreters and historical records, this article explores the part an interpreter might have played in the shaping of certain historical records in Latter Han China.

### **Frontier Stories of China: Han and Non-Han Chinese**

Multi-ethnicity has long been a feature in Chinese life since the earliest records of its activities along the Yellow River. The Central Plain (zhongyuan 中原) to which it confines its activities has been home to peoples of different ethnic backgrounds. The Huaxia 華夏 (widely known, after the establishment of the Former Han dynasty [206 BC–9 AD], as Han 漢) people created the Xia 夏 dynasty (2100–1600 BC), the earliest political entity in ancient China and considered the Yellow River Basin their base. They were further stabilized, as a prominent ethnic group, during the Qin 秦 dynasty (221–207 BC). Under the Former Han dynasty, the Huaxia people gradually became a leading ethnic group among many others in China and were labeled as ethnic Han because of their predominance in organizing the Han government. According to Zhang Xiaosong: "...the landlord economy of the Han people came to replace the feudal lordship economy on the core of the Central Plain while the frontier (non-Han) ethnic groups still remained quite rudimentary in their mode of survival" (2006, p. 41; my translation). On the rest of the Central Plain lived a large number of

minority groups (generally labeled as Yi 夷 [pictographically, a person carrying a bow; literally, barbarians]), whose material culture and social development were, unequivocally, far less sophisticated than those of the Han people. As such, the Yixia 夷夏 (literally, barbarian, [unlike the Han]) worldview took shape. In this case, the ethnic Han Chinese claimed to be superior in their material and spiritual cultures and the Yi people may roughly, but not exclusively, be referred to as the non-Han Chinese people, who were linguistically and conceptually associated with beasts and lowly animals in the Chinese term of reference (Drompp, 2005; Fu and Zhou, 2000). A case in point was the Sino-centric ideology as seen in the various labels given to minority groups surrounding the Central Plain: most notably, “Hu” 胡 for China’s northern neighbors, “Yi” for the uncivilized people from the southwestern border, and “Man” 蠻 for the barbarians from the southern frontier. But in fact, the co-existence with minority groups was a constant reality in the Chinese empire. Even the Qin kingdom that created the first dynastic empire in China in 221 BC was itself multi-ethnic, and the unified empire practically drew together a number of aboriginal populations on the Central Plain. The inter-ethnic mixing through the time-honored history of China has, however, gradually blurred the distinction between Han and Yi peoples.

### **Southwestern Barbarians in Latter Han China**

Ethnic boundaries and identities were, nevertheless, a lot more pronounced in ancient China. In pre-historic China, the southwestern region was conventionally divided into the Ba 巴 and Shu 蜀 areas (present-day Sichuan 四川 basin and its surroundings) in the east and the southwestern barbarian area in the west. Our concern in this article is the southwestern barbarian area, which includes, approximately, the south and west of the Sichuan basin as well as a large part of modern Yunnan 雲南 and Guizhou 貴州.

“The Southwestern barbarians” generally refer to over a hundred smaller aboriginal tribes distributed around these areas as early as the Qin dynasty (Fu, 1991; Luo, 2000). In the Southwestern barbarian region lived non-Han tribal groups of different ethnicities, such as Qiang 羌, Di 氐, Yi 彝, and Miao 苗. The account of the “Southwestern Barbarians” in *Houhanshu* (History of the Latter Han) was brief. Specific monographs on the “Southwestern barbarians” in standard histories preceding *Houhanshu* all note that the area was a

highly complex region interlaced with tribes of primarily Qiang and Di ethnic origin, some economically and politically more sophisticated than others.<sup>2</sup> Even the larger tribes in the region, such as Baima 白馬, Yelang 夜郎, Ranmang 冉駹, Qiongzhou 邛都, and Zuodu 笮都, were often referred to by name only, not to mention the other smaller tribes, of which we know next to nothing, clustered on the southwestern frontier. Not much was said in histories about their linguistic situation either, except that the languages spoken there were incomprehensible to outsiders, and little trace of a written language was located in historical records.

More recent studies (Luo, 2000; Zhang, 2004) of this region show that the tribute-paying tribes in the mid-first century,<sup>3</sup> such as Bailang 白狼, Panmu 槃木, and Tangqu 唐菽, were of ancient Qiang ethnicity (Luo, 2000, pp. 88-89). They dwelt on the western side of the Ba and Shu area and “practiced wheat farming and hunting and lead a semi-nomadic life” (Zhang, 2004, pp. 326-327). These descriptions fit in quite well with those in the tribal poems composed for the throne, as we shall see below. In terms of linguistic development, there was no evidence indicating the existence of a written language in the southwestern region of China. In reviewing the Yelang tribe of this region, Wang Yanyu says, “the dialects of the minority tribes in this region had no written language and were often casually translated into the Han Chinese (classical) language without a strict standard” (Wang, 1986, p. 114; my translation). The best preserved record of what comes

---

<sup>2</sup> See Zhou Jucheng, 1992, pp. 143-147 for details about various ethnic tribes in this region.

<sup>3</sup> The ideal vehicle for a relationship with tribes was the tribute system. The procedure of meeting the emperor, for newly integrated (non-Han) tribes within the Chinese empire was quite specific and highly ceremonial. Tribal chieftains or rulers were expected to send tributary delegates periodically to the Chinese emperor. When the delegates reached the capital, Chinese officials immediately took charge and coached them on the proper etiquette for their appearance in court. After they had been properly trained, they had an audience with the emperor. Then the rituals had to be performed by the tribal delegates. They had to kowtow to the throne, symbolically acknowledging their subordinate status as tribes. Their conduct implied that their rulers were subordinate to the emperor. Once they concluded this ritual, the emperor summoned them closer for a brief conversation. They then offered their tribute of local products to him, and he, in return, bestowed valuable gifts upon them and their ruler (Rossabi, 1983, p. 2).

closest to a language is the “Dongba 東巴 language” used in the region, but “it should be labeled as a set of pictographic symbols” (Ou, 1998, pp. 162-163; my translation). In contrast, two Chinese linguists on minority languages, Fang Guoyu and He Zhiwu, studied the three dedicated poems (to be explained below), which were more widely known as “the Songs of Bailang,” and concluded that Bailang of the ethnic group Qiang used a language similar to that of the present-day Naxi 納西 tribe of Yunnan.<sup>4</sup>

Since the physical landscape of this huge region ranged from high mountains to plateaus, various economic activities were practiced by different tribes, depending on the character of their environments. Structurally, the tribal peoples in this area had not yet developed into states of their own during the Han dynasties, and were often, but not entirely, headed by tribal chieftains. The situation was such that, in this region, people of the same ethnicity could be ruled by different chieftains and were scattered loosely in the region and lived as tribes of various sizes. Zhou Weizhou points out that “these frontier minority peoples were largely grouped under the Han Chinese administration, in different forms of regional governance, such as commanderies, protectorates, or submitted territories” (shuguo 屬國) (1996, p. 2; my translation). Although the Latter Han did not use force with these tribes, its ultimate goal was to assume authority over all the peoples in the empire. In fact, the classic strategy the Latter Han government employed along the frontier was *Jimi* 羈縻 (loose rein),<sup>5</sup> which empowered the tribal chieftains to govern their peoples directly, with

---

<sup>4</sup> In examining the 44 lines of these three poems, which consist of 176 words, the two linguists pondered the annotated sound and meaning documented in *Houhanshu* thoroughly and claimed that over 90 words were identical or similar to the Naxi language (Zhang, 2004, p. 327).

<sup>5</sup> Conferring titles to these tribal chieftains was one of the primary strategies of the Han dynasties to lure these minority groups into submission to the Han rule. Luo Erhu (2000, p. 89) reveals three categories whereby the non-Han tribal groups were assigned titles. The first category was for kings and dukes of tribes (such as Yelang and Dian 滇) whose sphere of influence could be as sizable as several prefectures (comparable to English counties in size). The second category was tribal chieftains (such as Bailang, Panmu, and Tangqu) whose area of control was much smaller than those of kings or dukes. The third category was for tribal elderly who were in charge of yet smaller population and area.

the eventual goal of integrating and assimilating the tribesmen into an expanded Chinese empire. Under the *Jimi* strategy, which emphasized non-intervention and respect for the native customs and living styles of the indigenous people, these minority peoples were, at some stages, probably loosely placed under the Han government's jurisdiction and could not yet be integrated into the provincial administration structure, as in the case of the other parts of China, without upsetting the internal order.<sup>6</sup>

### **Frontier Officials: Zhu Fu and Tian Gong**

Administratively, the Latter Han Chinese empire was divided into thirteen provinces 州 (each of which was further divided into commanderies, prefectures, districts, and wards), each headed by an Inspector,<sup>7</sup> or *cishi* 刺史, assigned by the central government. As a strategy to maintain a clean government, administrative positions namely Inspectors, Mayors, and Protectorates (see Luo, 2000, p. 89 for a list of frontier officials), were strictly assigned to people whose household registrations were outside the province. Regional and local officials, however, were all assigned by senior officials at the provincial level, and these were local residents who would either be Sinicized non-Han residents or Han immigrants (Zhang, 2006). In order to fully assimilate the submitted minority groups into Chinese civilization, the Latter Han government encouraged them to develop a settled economic life.<sup>8</sup> Notably, senior officials with blameless records

---

<sup>6</sup> It seems that, as a practice, whenever the tribesmen became the newly integrated subjects, they surrendered to China, not as individuals, but as tribal groups, together with their land. The chieftains of the surrendered tribes would report to the Han government the exact number of their people, household, and the size of their territory, at the time of their integration.

<sup>7</sup> Emperor Wu of the Former Han dynasty divided the country into thirteen provinces. The Inspector would “normally tour the commanderies and prefectures in the province in autumn every year, to ensure proper functioning of the administration within the province” (Yang and Ren, 1996, p. 15; my translation).

<sup>8</sup> Besides actively teaching the indigenous peoples how to plow and weave, these officials also introduced the concept of match-making and marriages as well as setting up schools to indoctrinate “proper etiquette and values” in the community.

or Sinicized local officials were often assigned to assist in the social and economic development of these frontier minority peoples, with a specific view to “civilizing” them.

Zhu Fu 朱輔, who was keen on promoting Han governance among the frontier tribes, was then Inspector of Yi province 益州, where the non-Han Southwestern tribes in question resided. As seen from the following quotation from *Houhanshu*, the forward-looking and aspiring Zhu Fu demonstrated great zest in his frontier job and was distinguished by virtue of his accomplishments in assimilating the tribal peoples in China. With no knowledge of the tribal vernacular, however, Zhu Fu had to rely on his Senior Clerk,<sup>9</sup> Tian Gong 田恭, to communicate with and collect information from the tribesmen. According to the ranking structure of Han officials, Zhu Fu was professionally atop of Tian Gong, who was but a junior local official in a commandery. Since the appointments (or advancements) to these locally held posts were “made by provincial, rather than the central authorities” (Loewe, 1968, p. 36), Tian Gong’s official career, in principle, was in Zhu Fu’s control. Such a power relationship explains why they both represented the official stance on the assimilation issue. In short, they shared the same “professional” goal and wanted eventually to Sinicize the minority tribes. When the chance came, they might be able to showcase their success to the central government. Coming, as Zhu Fu did, at the initial stage of empire building for the Latter Han, he knew the Sinicization agenda of the throne too well. It is not entirely surprising, therefore, that with over just a few years’ efforts, Zhu Fu was able to integrate a number of tribes into the mainstream administration (*Houhanshu*, p. 2854). The tribes’ gesture to submit to the Chinese administration and their wish to become Chinese subjects were documented in *Houhanshu* as follows:

---

<sup>9</sup> Apparently, Tian Gong only learnt the tribal tongue after spending much time mingling with the tribesmen. But the surviving evidence does not indicate if the mingling took place before or after Tian’s official career. We cannot therefore establish if tribal language skills were a prerequisite for his official position at the frontier, (although Terry Kleeman suggests that it was the policy through most early imperial history “to select for administrators in border regions long-time inhabitants of the region, either Chinese immigrants or highly Sinicized locals”) (1998, p. 14).



(後漢明帝)永平中，益州刺史朱輔，好立功名，慷慨有大略。在州數歲，宣示漢德，威懷遠夷。白狼、槃木、唐菽等百餘國，戶百三十餘萬，口六百萬以上，舉種奉貢，稱為臣僕。輔上疏曰：“……今白狼王唐菽等慕化歸義，作詩三章…襁負老幼，若歸慈母。遠夷之語，辭意難正。草木異種，鳥獸殊類。有犍為郡掾田恭與之習狎，頗曉其言，臣輒令詳其風俗，譯其辭語。今遣從事史李陵與田恭護送詣闕，並上其樂詩。”帝嘉之，事下史官，錄其歌焉，並載夷人本語為注。(Shortened by author)

(Translation):

In the middle of the Yongping reign period (emperor Ming of the Latter Han), the Inspector of Yi province,<sup>10</sup> Zhu Fu, aspired to be commended in his career and was known to be a generous person with vision. During the several years posted in the province, he preached the virtues and benevolence of the [Latter] Han [dynasty], which overwhelmed the distant barbarians. Over a hundred tribes, Bailang, Panmu, and Tangqu included, amounting to more than 1.3 million households and six million people,<sup>11</sup> paid tribute as a [non-Han ethnic] group (via their tribal delegates) and called themselves subjects and servants.

In Zhu Fu's memorial,<sup>12</sup> one can read the following: "... Now, Bailang, Tangqu, and other tribes composed three poems out of their utmost admiration and respect for [Chinese] civilization and righteousness. ... The babies and the elderly rode piggyback on [the young and strong] on their trip to the capital—a trip that was likened to a homeward-bound journey to greet their loving mothers. The language of the distant barbarians was incomprehensible, and their vegetation, birds, and animals were equally exotic. A Senior Clerk in

---

<sup>10</sup> A province is a series of contiguous commanderies and kingdoms which are commonly supervised by one official, usually called Inspector “*cishi*” (Beck, 1990, p. 192).

<sup>11</sup> Mansvelt Beck (1990, p. 177) points out that the compiler of *Hanshu*, Ban Gu (32–92 AD), even mentioned the population figures for separate Prefectures, both in households and in individuals, in some parts of his “Treatises on Geography”.

<sup>12</sup> I am using ‘memorial’ to refer to “a statement of facts addressed to a government and often accompanied by a petition or remonstrance” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 10<sup>th</sup> ed., p. 725). The rough synonym “memorandum” is perhaps more readily understood, but this sense of the word “memorial” is widely used by Sinologists to refer to a written statement submitted by an official to the emperor.

the Qianwei commandery, called Tian Gong, was familiar with them and therefore mastered their language quite well. Your servant (I) had him investigate their customs and interpret their language often. Then, [I] asked my general staff, Li Ling, and Tian Gong to chaperone them so they could come [to the imperial court] and dedicate their music and poems.” The emperor commended Zhu Fu and asked the history officer to make a record of the sung poems, with annotations on barbarian pronunciation.<sup>13</sup> (*Houhanshu*, ch. 86, pp. 2854-2855; my translation)

Thanks to the emperor’s immediate instruction to have the sung poems written down in Chinese and to the subsequent record kept in *Houhanshu*, we have now a better understanding of the early interpreting and translation activities in ancient China. Indisputably, this informative historical account was a rare treasure for interpreting historians, but the way it was constructed, I believe, appears to be somewhat at odds with the conventional practices of Chinese historiography. Three points, in particular, in which this account diverges from the historiography on interpreting activities in China, demand attention. First, interpreting records in dynastic histories of China were hardly ever elaborate as such, since, presumably, neither the nature of the interpreting activity in diplomatic encounters nor the interpreter(s) involved mattered, conceptually, in Chinese historiography. Second, the names and background of interpreters were rarely mentioned in regular historical records of interpreting events, unless they were state martyrs (Li, 2002, p.12). In fact, numerous textual accounts of interpreting in dynastic China indicate that references to interpreters consist of no more than the sheer use of the word “*Yi*” 譯, a generic and anonymous reference to interpreters or translators, as in “*Yi* said...” and “*Yi* replied...,” if the presence of interpreters was not otherwise understood contextually (Lung and Li, 2005, p. 1002). Third, tribal submission was not uncommon during the first few decades of Latter Han, but it was rarely recorded in such detail. For example, in 69 AD, the Ailao 袁牢 chief submitted to Emperor Ming with a tribal population of over 550,000. In 100 AD, another Bailang tribe from a different region of the southwestern frontier and

---

<sup>13</sup> Emperor Ming’s poetic interest was also noted in 72 AD. On hearing his brother’s [Liu Cang 劉蒼 (39–83 AD)] composition of an ode on the acceptance of the mandate by Guangwu and the restoration, he was “at a loss for words with which to praise the ode” and ordered Jia Kui 賈逵 (30–101 AD), a scholar with a profound literary talent, to write a commentary for it (*Houhanshu*, p. 1533, in Beck, 1990, p. 21).

the Loubao 樓薄 tribe both submitted to Emperor He 和 with a combined population size of 170,000. These cases of submission, although of a smaller scale as far as the population size is concerned, were not nearly as elaborate as the one written down in the memorial of Zhu Fu, nor were they deliberately memorialized by the Inspectors of their respective provinces. These three points, considered as a whole, legitimately suggest that Zhu Fu did make a conscious attempt to make his case known to the throne. The way in which Zhu Fu might have engineered the tribal submission saga should therefore be critically examined with respect to his personal political gains, which we will return to after discussing the three sung poems presented to the throne.

### Presentation of the Three Sung Poems

Folk songs and ballads in the Han tradition usually “express the hopes and dreams of ordinary people, their routine lives, the tragedies which beset them, their brief moments of happiness, the values and beliefs they cling to...” (Birrell, 1988, p. 1).<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, judging by the political nature of the tribal submission and the possibility that the content or style of the tribal poems might have been tampered with in the process of translation or interpretation, the poems should be appreciated with reasonable caution, unlike other folk songs of the time. Even so, the Chinese translation of the tribal poems did sum up briefly the lives, good and bad, of the tribesmen in question. My English rendition of these poems is intended to capture only the literal meaning and makes no literary attempt to retain their poetic form.

其一曰遠夷樂德歌詩，  
 曰：大漢是治（堤官槐構），與天合意（魏冒逾糟），吏譯平端  
 （罔驛劉脾），不從我來（旁莫支留），聞風向化（徽衣隨  
 旅），所見奇異（知唐桑艾），多賜繪布（邪批緝紉），甘美  
 酒食（推潭仆遠），昌樂肉飛（拓拒蘇便），屈伸悉備（局後仍  
 離），蠻夷貧薄（儂讓龍洞），無所報嗣（莫支度由），願主長  
 壽（陽雒僧鱗），子孫昌熾（莫稚角存）。

(Translation):

**The first poem: *Ode to the Virtues of the Han***

The great Han governs well by Heaven's will. The official(s) and interpreter(s) were fair and proper, and never causally intervened in

---

<sup>14</sup> See Zhao Minli (2002) for more recent studies on sung poems in the Han dynasty.

our lives. [We] heard of the superior [Han] civilization and were pleasantly surprised by what we saw. Bestowed [on us] were bundles of cloth, delicious wine, and food. The marvelous music and dance, which showcase [the dancers'] contracted and relaxed body movements, are dedicated to your Highness. Being poor and lacking resources, [we] barbarians do not have presentable gifts to repay your grand favors. [We only] pray for your Highness's longevity and your offspring's prosperity. (*Houhanshu*, ch. 86, p. 2856; my translation)

Stylistically, the Chinese characters represent the translation of the poems; those in brackets represent the original sounds of the tribal poems.<sup>15</sup> This format was adopted directly from the standard historical records and it survived as the solid proof of the delicate effort, quite possibly of the interpreter, alongside the history officer, in rendering the meanings and sounds of the indigenous poems. From the first poem, we know that the tribes were under the rule of Han Chinese, but they seemed to get on well with the officials and interpreters, who were complimented as “fair and proper.” Besides, the tribesmen were particularly delighted with the non-intervening style of governance. As a move to pacify the tribal peoples, imperial favors, in the form of material provisions, such as food, wine, and cloth were bestowed on them. In return, the tribal peoples presented three poems to the throne, by way of song and dance performances. Some critics say the greed for material gain easily explains the tribesmen's readiness to submit to the throne (An, 1979; Li, 1996). Space will not permit a detailed discussion on whether the submission is faked or genuine here, but apparently, these material provisions were valuable to them since their land was barren. In fact, the motifs dealing with their physical hardship were echoed in the other two poems as well.

其二曰遠夷慕德歌詩，

曰：蠻夷所處（儂讓皮尼），日入之部（且交陵悟），慕義向化（繩動隨旅），歸日出主（路坦揀雜），聖德深恩（聖德渡諾），與人富厚（魏菌渡洗），冬冬霜雪（綜邪流藩），夏多和

---

<sup>15</sup> Regarding the linguistic record of these poems, it is safe to assume that the interpreter must also have actively participated in assisting the written record of both the meaning and the sound of the barbarians' literary production (Ma, 1999, p. 275). It is not the focus of this article to pursue the essence of historical and comparative linguistics here (see Ma, 1999, p. 277), but there is no denial that the interpreter's effort, in putting down the meanings and sounds of the tribal poems into Chinese, would make further linguistic enquiries as such possible.

雨（葺邪尋螺），寒溫時適（藐浚瀘漓），部人多有（菌補邪推），涉危歷險（辟危歸險），不遠萬里（莫受萬柳），去俗歸德（術佚附德），心歸慈母（仍路孳模）。

(Translation):

**The second poem: *Ode to the Blessings of the Han***

[We] distant barbarians dwell in places where the sun sets. [We] admire [the Han] civilization and submit to your Highness, who resides where the sun rises. The emperor showers us with immense kindness and generous gifts. [The Central Plain] snows in winter and rains in summer—the perfect climate for the [Han] people to prosper. [We] made a harsh long trip [to come to the capital]. We have changed [our] customs and conform to [your] virtues in a homeward-bound journey to greet [our] loving mothers. (*Houhanshu*, ch. 86, p. 2856; my translation.)

The second poem depicts the geographical differences between the southwestern regions and the Central Plain: the former is in the west and the latter, in the east. It points out that the Han Chinese region is blessed with distinct seasonal weather that is conducive to farming. By deduction, the climate of at least some southwestern regions is not as favorable. The poem also mentions the emperor's generosity in rewarding them and improving their material culture. The fact that these tribes vow to change their customs and conform to the Han civilization suggests, most likely, the superiority of Han material culture and governance over those of the tribal communities. Besides, the allusion to the homeward bound mentality of a child points perhaps to the tribesmen's readiness to submit to Han rule.

其三曰遠夷懷德歌，

曰：荒服之外（荒服之儀），土地墮墮（犁藉憐二），食肉衣皮（坐蘇邪犁），不見鹽穀（莫碭麓沐），吏譯傳風（罔譯傳微），大漢安樂（是漢夜拒），攜負歸仁（蹤優路仁），觸冒險陝（雷折險龍），高山岐峻（偷狼藏幢），緣崖礪石（扶路側祿），本薄發家（息落服淫），百宿到洛（理瀝髭駱），父子同賜（捕范茵秕），懷抱匹帛（懷豪匹漏），傳告種人（傳宜呼款），長願臣僕（陵賜臣僕）。

(Translation):

**The third poem: *Ode to the Grace of the Han Rule***

[Our] distant land is extremely barren and dry. [We] feed ourselves with the flesh of wild animals and wear animal fur [for warmth] since we have hardly any salt, or grow any wheat. The officials and interpreters preached [to us] the peace and prosperity of the great Han.

The babies and the elderly rode piggyback on [us] and [we] weathered rugged mountains and steep cliffs on the way. [We] set out in late autumn and reached Luoyang in a hundred days. [We] were all showered with gifts and bundles of cloth. The word got around in our tribes and [we] all yearn to serve [your Highness] forever.<sup>16</sup> (*Houhanshu*, ch. 86, pp. 2856-2857; my translation)

The contrasts between the physical conditions of the two peoples are more pronounced in the third poem. The poem reiterates that the tribal land was barren and not favorable for farming. Thus they mostly relied on hunting to feed and warm themselves. As opposed to their primitive lifestyles, the Han Chinese were a lot more developed. The tribesmen learnt of the culture, wealth, and peace of Han China through the active publicity of the official(s) and interpreter(s). The propagandist role of the interpreter, as depicted in the poem, may seem to be incongruent with our conventional expectation concerning the neutrality of interpreters. I infer that the interpreter, referred to here, was simply “transferring” the publicity message to the tribesmen on behalf of other senior officials. But to the tribesmen, the impression they got was probably that the interpreter, too, was doing publicity work to highlight the supremacy of the Chinese civilization there. However, in the light of the pacifist policy of Latter Han China, frontier interpreters-cum-regional officials, like Tian Gong, might possibly have taken up, as required by their official capacity at the time, a role as “cultural ambassadors” to blow the emperor’s trumpet.

## Implications

The translation of these three poems in the mid-first century represents the second oldest surviving record of poetry translation, after the translation of “The Song of the Yue People 越人歌” roughly around 559–543 BC.<sup>17</sup> But its importance does not stop here. The translation of

---

<sup>16</sup> What intrigues me, at this point, is the possible time sequence of this poem’s composition and the tribute-paying event. The part about receiving generous gifts in China suggests that, apparently, these few lines were, probably, newly added (by the interpreter or the history officer?) contents after their arrival at the capital and were not written before the trip. In the end of the poem, the tribes expressed, yet again, their intention to be ruled by the Han Emperor as subjects of China. This indicates that the barbaric tribes were not yet officially integrated as Chinese subjects at the time of the tribute event.

<sup>17</sup> A Yue 越 (modern Vietnam) lady on a boat was singing to Yue 鄂, a half-

the tribal poems is also of interest as one of the earliest documentation available of interpreting and translation activities in first-century China.

### **1) Interpreting Activities in First-century China: Platform for Possible Manipulation**

The fact that two out of the three poems record the work of interpreters among minority tribes shows the latter's actual contact with interpreters and the existence of interpreting activities in their community (Ma, 1999, p. 275). Nevertheless, nobody knows with absolute certainty if "the interpreter(s)" mentioned in the poems refers to interpreters (which would probably include Tian Gong) working with the tribal community or to just one single interpreter—Tian Gong. The nature of their interaction seems to be social rather than purely professional. Considering that Tian Gong actually acquired the tribal language through mixing with the tribes, there must be some sort of personal networking which blended him into their community on a social basis. Besides, Tian Gong's "insider" identity was apparently testified by his knowledge of the tribal customs, which seemed to have impressed Zhu Fu. From the specific case of Tian Gong, at least, it can be reasonably assumed that the interpreter was already quite an "accepted member" of the tribal community before he was asked to interpret for Zhu Fu.

The interpreting competence and the in-group social belonging of Tian Gong naturally made him the best candidate to chaperone the tribal delegation in their tribute journey to the capital. He had continuously rendered interpreting services and discharged his duties to the satisfaction of Zhu Fu. As indicated in Zhu Fu's memorial to the throne, this particular interpreter was also named and complimented for the work he had done in and for the tribal community. In a new phase in his career, subsequently, Tian Gong was assigned to interpret for, and chaperone, the tribute delegation. Zhu Fu's decision to make Tian Gong the chaperone turned out to be brilliant. As suggested earlier on, Zhu Fu might have initiated and engineered the paying of tribute to please the throne; this idea was not just realized, but also taken further, literally, as a significant fact in histories, wherein it now offers traces of

---

brother of King Kang of Chu 楚康王 (ruled 559–543BC) on the other boat. The brother was charmed by this beautiful song, but had no idea what it was about. He then asked someone to have the lyric translated into Chinese (see Li, 2002, p. 244). The translation quality was complimented as a classic in literary translation.

interpreting records in first-century China. Without Tian Gong, perhaps, it would have been difficult to find someone in the imperial court sufficiently competent to carry out the emperor's casual instructions and to annotate the sounds and meanings of the tribal poems. Before the tribute mission came to Luoyang, Zhu Fu probably had no idea that the emperor who was fond of poetry would take the performance so seriously as to immediately ask the history officer to make a verbatim record, with annotations, of the three poems.

Obviously, this is not a task the history officer alone was capable of undertaking. Since Zhu Fu's memorial suggested that Tian Gong was the mediator familiar with the language and customs of the Southwestern tribes, Tian might also be the one who helped the history officer in rendering and recording the meanings and the sounds of the three sung poems, which found their way into the standard history of Latter Han China, *Houhanshu*.<sup>18</sup> If this speculation is sustainable, then the record of the three sung poems and their sounds, as annotated in the standard history, might well be taken as the traces of the interpreter's work, apart from what he did in mediating between languages for the Chinese administration and its tribal subjects. Apparently, without Tian Gong, the emperor's intent to have the poems recorded in Chinese might be difficult to substantiate. If Tian Gong was really the only one who could interpret the tribal tongue and translate the tribal poems for the imperial court, he was practically the only viable link between the tribal poems and the historical records we hold today.

The history officer, who was not likely to be conversant in the tribal tongue, did not actually explain how he managed the task, but we can imagine that the interpreter might have actively helped out either as a consultant, or as the actual translator, in the process of rendering the tribal poems into Chinese and adding annotations. In this regard, Zhu

---

<sup>18</sup> As reported in *Jinshu* 晉書 (History of Jin [265–420AD]), (ch. 12, pp. 693–694), “at the beginning of the Wei dynasty (220–265AD), the Libationer for Military Planning, Wang Can 王粲, was ordered to reproduce the lyrics of a number of Ba Yu 巴渝 (The Yu River 渝水 flows through Langzhong 閬中 and the dances are named for their residence, hence they are called Ba Yu dances.) dance-songs, whose language was too ancient and alien for anyone to parse. Wang then asked Li Guan 李管 and Zhong Yu 種玉, the leaders of the Ba Yu, for the meaning of the songs, and then had them try out the new lyrics, listen to them, and compare them to the melody. Wang Can's rewriting of the lyrics was preserved in *Songshu* 宋書 (History of Song [420–479AD]).



Fu's idea to arrange for the interpreter to come along to the capital turned out to be a sound move, a move that facilitated the documentation of the poems as well as the interpreter's playing a part in history. If, again, the assumption about the linguistic inadequacy of the history officer is correct, he might not even be professionally competent, in this specific case, to ensure that the tribal poems were accurately—in terms of both sound and meaning—rendered in Chinese either. Following this line of argument, a platform was provided to the interpreter so that he could play a role in shaping, in the form he chose, this particular record of Latter Han history.

## **2) Political Gains of the Interpreter**

Now that we have established that it was technically feasible, with due consideration for circumstantial evidence, for the interpreter to shape the translation of the tribal poems in the historical record, we can turn to the question of motivation. Why would the interpreter be interested in altering the mood or tone, if not the message, of the tribal poems? What would he get out of a possible modification, if any, of the translations? Textual analyses of these poems suggest that the work of interpreters in the region was not entirely limited to linguistic mediation between officials and tribesmen, but possibly also included the promotion and publicity of Chinese culture and governance. These combined duties, however, were not mutually exclusive at the time, given the dual identity of Tian Gong. Undeniably, the role of the interpreter was crucial in facilitating the tribute mission and ensuring that the correct protocol was observed on the part of the tribal delegation during the imperial audience. In the three months' journey to the capital, the interpreter would be expected to experience as much hardship as the other tribal delegates did. In a modern sense, after earning himself a reputation in interpreting for Zhu Fu and the tribal community, Tian Gong was assigned an interpreting mission, which involved a three-month trip, mostly on foot, to the capital. Despite the physical hardship, chaperoning the tribesmen to the capital was, unquestionably, a landmark in Tian Gong's life and career. Michael Loewe observes that

...the more junior officials, in both the central and the provincial administration, conducted most of their work in their offices, where they received reports from their colleagues; interviewed members of the public; drafted reports on their work; pronounced judgment in cases that were brought for arbitration; completed their records of

taxation duly levied; or prepared suggestions for submission to their superiors. (Loewe, 1968, p. 43)

With some luck, Tian Gong went beyond the narrow scope of the humdrum life of a frontier clerk. To a junior official posted to the remote border area, the chance to chaperone a tribute mission to an imperial audience could be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and considered a personal honor. This personal honor was only made possible because of his mastery of the tribal vernacular, his familiarity with the tribal customs, and satisfactory interpreting performance for Zhu Fu previously.

Undoubtedly, it was a good deal for Tian Gong, although his role as the interpreter was decidedly passive in this historical account and his historical significance, most often overlooked. As a subordinate of Zhu Fu, he told the Inspector of the customs and the life of the minority tribes, linguistically and socially. The interpreter must also have briefed his superior on the gist of the sung poems prior to the imperial presentation. In every sense of the word, Zhu Fu was the patron of Tian Gong's interpreting services. By duly and gracefully presenting a low-ranking frontier official to the throne via a memorial by an Inspector, Zhu Fu certainly played a pertinent part in easing the potential rise of Tian to a position of eminence. This could well be the crucial turning point whereby, in Michael Loewe's words,

the low and rather scorned ranks of a clerk from a province enters the offices of the central government and might find himself engaged in duties that were very different from those of the humdrum life of a clerk or provincial civil servant. (Loewe, 1968, pp. 42-43)

Since the interpreter worked closely with and for the Inspector, it is not impossible that Tian's translation of the sung poems would be rendered with Zhu Fu's, if not his (Tian), ultimate interests in mind. It would, of course, have been possible for Zhu Fu and Tian Gong to discard the meaning of the original tribal poems and fabricate something fanciful instead, but I suspect that they did not do anything so drastic. One, however, cannot exclude the possibility, given the circumstantial expedience, that the tribal poetic text might have been mutilated, one way or the other, to serve the officials' personal interests.

### 3) Traces of Possible Manipulation of the Chinese Translation

One of the strongest textual proofs for this seemingly bold assumption that the “meaning” of the tribal poems might have been tampered with in translation is the compliments showered on the officials and interpreters in two of the three poems. In the context of a tribal tribute to the emperor, the inclusion of, and the repeated references to, the frontier officials and interpreters in the poems were perhaps both too incongruent and deliberate. It is understandable that, even without any textual changes made by the interpreter or Zhu Fu, the tribute poems would naturally take on the character of flattery, since inflated praises on the emperor would easily bring imperial favors to the tribesmen. What Zhu Fu and Tian Gong might have done was not necessarily to alter the message entirely, but just to sugarcoat the submissive and flattering messages further here and there in the poems, to play to the tune of Sino-centric ideology of Latter Han times.<sup>19</sup>

Another factor that lends support to my hypothesis that the translation might have been tampered with by the frontier officials was the propaganda and trumpeting style of the three poems—they inflate not only the merits of the officials and interpreter(s), but also the virtues of Han civilization and government. Stylistically, the tone and mood of the three poems are almost identical; they all sound like propaganda singing praises of the grace and glory of Han China. It should also be noted, incidentally, that the message of the poems could quite squarely fit into the concept of an ideal government, which gained currency in the Han times. Again, in Michael Loewe’s words

As envisaged by many Han statesmen, paradise on earth spelt a state of peace and plenty, of general contentment in the countryside and of little interference by authority in the daily lives of the inhabitants... Public works should be reduced to a minimum, so that the population would be left to pursue its own work of growing its crops without interruption. At its best government would be effortless and the population free of problems; all ranks of society would enjoy a state

---

<sup>19</sup> The specific way which Chinese people view themselves and the “others” was rooted in their culture as early as in the Zhou (1100 BC–771 BC) dynasty, when the emperor of China was considered the Son of Heaven (Tianzi 天子) ruling All-under-Heaven (Tianxia 天下). The tribute system was then developed “to help consolidate the Chinese belief in the inevitability of her ideal world order” (Pan, 1997, p. 25).

of affluence and preserve a healthy respect for law and order. (Loewe, 1968, p. 64)

It is a surprising coincidence that Loewe's descriptions of the Han ideal government, such as "a state of peace and plenty" and "all ranks of society would enjoy a state of affluence" (部人多有), "general contentment" (大漢安樂), and "little interference by authority in the daily lives of the inhabitants" (吏譯平端，不從我來), were so massively echoed throughout the three poems. I am not, however, convinced that the similarities displayed in the two contexts were no more than a coincidence. It is quite widely acknowledged that the non-intervening (wuwei 無爲) governing style was a popular philosophy during the Han dynasty. But when the same message, with the same key concepts, was reiterated in the three poems, which were supposedly composed by non-Han peoples, one naturally suspects the "intrusion of the authority's voice" in the aboriginal literary production. The ones most closely involved with the textual corruption, if at all, would be the interpreter and Zhu Fu, whose interests were directly at stake here.

Besides, the mood of the poems' translation appears to be one-dimensional since the interpreter probably tried too hard to "incorporate" and promote the ideal state of the Han governance. Earlier, I conjectured that Zhu Fu might have orchestrated the tribal tribute event to flatter the emperor, a sound move to crown his career with more conspicuous success. In the same connection, it is also possible that the tribal delegation gave, in fact, a staged performance, and the content or the style of the poems might also have been manipulated to serve Zhu Fu's purposes, namely, to inflate the ego of the emperor and to showcase Zhu's achievement at the frontier.

As the patron of the interpreting and translation services of Tian Gong, Zhu Fu was acutely aware of the interpreter's exclusive access to the actual content of the poems and of the fact that frontier officials definitely had the resources and motives to "polish" the poems to serve the Sinicization cause of the government; they might venture to "compose" a "decent" chapter on the submissive tribal peoples in the Latter Han histories. The link between the interpreter and the historical record is relatively concrete, and a platform was created for the interpreter to shape the translation of the poems, although the extent of manipulation cannot easily be verified.

#### **4) Zhu Fu's Part in the Possible Manipulation of the Translation**

Why was this particular interpreting account recorded in such detail? Why was the whole tribute saga made ceremonial and dramatic while similar tribal submissions that took place around the same time merely came down to a passing mention in histories? To answer these questions, we need to refer to Zhu Fu's character and his professional relationship with Tian Gong in our analysis. Taking into account Zhu Fu's aspiration to integrate minority tribes into mainstream Chinese administrative structure (by changing their status from being commanderies to prefectures, for instance), one will be more inclined to consider the tribute mission not simply as a plain "initiation" of the Southwestern minority tribes, but rather a project chiefly and deliberately masterminded by Zhu Fu. It should be noted that Zhu Fu was known to have "aspired to merit in his career" and "played up the virtues and grace of the Han dynasty" in the frontier; one cannot, therefore, rule out the possibility that he might have staged the extravagant tributary saga to please the throne and showcase his frontier accomplishments. In line with the non-intervening style of the frontier administration, Zhu Fu might have opted for the solidarity approach of luring the tribesmen, by means of material favors, into "displaying" a submissive gesture to the central administration. Apparently, Zhu Fu's memorial indicated that he had laid all the necessary groundwork to impress the tribesmen with his governing style and his attention to their tribal customs. He had also made use of opportunities, as reflected in the third poem, to indoctrinate the tribal peoples on the merits of the government, via the mediation of Tian Gong.

In this connection, Zhu Fu's memorial can be considered a primary drama script used to chart the course of the tribute event. In a way, the memorial is a concise summary of the meaning and intent of the tribute mission and the poems. He must have acquainted himself with the subject matter of the sung poems through Tian Gong's explanation before the actual tribute event. If there were indeed such initial discussions and understanding between Zhu Fu and Tian Gong, there would be plenty of room for either of the officials, or both, to exchange, if not impose, views on the message the three poems were "supposed" to get across, apart from, possibly, superimposing a laudatory tone onto the poems.

Such a conjecture on the possibility of the manipulation of the poem's real meaning and style is not entirely without grounds. Notably, for some unknown reasons, the expressions in Zhu Fu's memorial, "...out of their utmost admiration and respect for [Chinese] civilization and righteousness" (慕化歸義), "...which was likened to a homeward-bound journey to greet their loving mothers" (若歸慈母), and "The babies and the elderly rode piggyback on [the young and strong...]" (襁負老幼), were surprisingly similar to those we see in the Chinese translation of the first, second, and third poems respectively, showing that Tian Gong might have played a major part in the rendition. One may argue, with good reason, that phrases in the historical record such as "...out of their utmost admiration and respect for [Chinese] civilization and righteousness" (慕化歸義) are largely generic and stock expressions in China's Sino-centric perspective on its barbarian neighbor states. But the specific and coincidental usage of "The babies and the elderly rode piggyback on [the young and strong...]" (襁負老幼), and "...that was likened to a homeward-bound journey to greet their loving mothers" (若歸慈母), in both Zhu Fu's memorial and Tian Gong's translation of the poems might not be merely incidental. Some sorts of exchange must have been conducted, and mutual understanding reached, between the two officials to have produced such identical verbal expressions in the two written records.

After all, it was in this memorial that the background of the tribute event was introduced. It was also in this memorial that the name of the interpreter, Tian Gong, was mentioned, not once, but twice. Considering the low-ranking status of Tian Gong as a Senior Clerk in the Qianwei commandery, the amount of attention drawn to him in a memorial, presented to the throne, seems almost uncanny. Such an inflated and disproportionate emphasis on the Senior Clerk-cum-interpreter would only be justified if there were indeed some secret dealings or exchange of favors between the two officials. This might have been related to their ideas on what the poems did *originally* present and were meant to *eventually* present. Unfortunately, the extent to which the tribal poems were manipulated or tampered with in meaning and mood, if at all, cannot be ascertained, but such a perspective might be useful as a reference in allowing us to re-examine the historical text on the Song of Bailang, which was, quite often, overwhelmingly and unquestionably accepted as a straightforward expression of the tribesmen's admiration for the Han administration (Ma, 1999; Yü, 1967; Zhang, 2004). When we critically examine the

context in which many other instances of contemporary tribal submission could progress quietly and would normally capture one or two lines of attention in the brush of the historians, Zhu Fu chose to blow the trumpet with regard to his regional accomplishments. He knew well that the integration of minority tribes, if packaged with songs and dance performance, would be of great interest to Emperor Ming, who was known to be fond of artistic talents (see note 13). He was right about the positive response of the emperor, but he probably did not prepare himself for the throne's overt enthusiasm over the tribute event or the historical significance of the tribal poems. It would only be natural that the tribute event would sound a positive note to his career because the emperor did compliment him specifically for his accomplishment. In this light, it is understandable why he could think of engineering the tribute performance, in which the interpreter was but a facilitator, to flaunt his frontier accomplishment and profit from his scheme.

## **Conclusion**

The Southwestern tribal presentation of the Bailang sung poems during the Latter Han was well known in relation to the early Sinicization of non-Han minority peoples and their integration into the Han Chinese civilization in the Chinese histories. Although the Chinese translation of the Bailang sung poems managed to excite a small number of linguists etymologically, not much work was carried out on their significance in the history of interpreting and translation in China. The present article set about to do just that: to present the historical records of interpreting and translation activities in antiquity, and to explore their relevance to the study of interpreting and translation history. The article started with facts grounded in histories, viewed them from the perspectives of interpreting studies, and proceeded to ponder on conjectural possibilities through which the interpreter in focus, Tian Gong, might have shaped the Chinese translation of the Bailang poems. By making inferences from the character profiles, and political and personal agendas of Zhu Fu and the interpreter, this article attempts to draw the possible link, albeit hard to fully substantiate, between the interpreter and the historical record of the Chinese translation of the Bailang poems. Considering all the available circumstantial, historical, and textual evidence, there was indeed a good possibility that the interpreter might have consciously shaped and manipulated the Chinese translation of the tribal poems based on his exclusive access to the content and sound of the tribal poems, his professional relation with

Zhu Fu, and their potential political gains in giving an exaggerated description of the grace of the throne and the submissive stance of the Southwestern tribesmen.

It must be admitted that the present article has indeed made a serious attempt to make inferences and conjectures based on analyses of related facts and circumstantial evidence. Inevitably, certain assumptions can best be treated as unsubstantiated possibilities. I would not venture any definite conclusions about the concrete act of the interpreter in tampering with the meaning and style of the original poems. Given the limitation of historical evidence and the distance in time, some of the views presented in this article remain unavoidably inferential in character. It is hoped that my conjectures in relation to the account of the translation of the Bailang poems could provide a platform for interested parties to pursue the related issues further. Just as history can always reinvent itself, I believe the (re)interpretation of historical accounts from multiple perspectives might actually broaden our understanding of what actually happened in interpreting in Ancient China.

**Lingnan University**

### **References**

#### (A) In English:

BECK, Mansvelt (1990). *The Treatises of Later Han: Their Author, Sources, Contents and Place in Chinese Historiography*. Leiden, E. J. Brill.

BIRRELL, Anne (1988). *Popular Songs and Ballads of Han China*. London, Unwin Hyman Limited.

BOWEN, Margareta, David BOWEN, Francine KAUFMANN, and Ingrid KURZ (1995). "Interpreters and the Making of History," in Jean DELISLE & Judith WOODSWORTH, eds. *Translators through History*. Amsterdam, John Benjamins, pp. 245-73.

DELISLE, Jean and Judith WOODSWORTH (1995). *Translators through History*. Amsterdam, John Benjamins.

DROMPP, Michael R. (2005). *Tang China and the Collapse of the Uighur Empire*. Leiden, Netherlands, Brill's Inner Asian Library.



KLEEMAN, Terry F. (1998). *Great Perfection: Religion and Ethnicity in a Chinese Millennial Kingdom*. Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press.

KURZ, Ingrid (1985). "The Rock Tombs of the Princes of Elephantine: Earliest References to Interpretation in Pharaonic Egypt." *Babel*, 31(4), pp. 213-218.

LOEWE, Michael (1968). *Everyday Life in Early Imperial China: During the Han period 202BC –AD 220*. New York, Dorset Press.

LUNG, Rachel (in press). "Interpreters and the Writing of Histories in China." *Meta : Journal des traducteurs*, 53(2).

LUNG, Rachel and Donghui LI (2005). "Interpreters as Historians in China." *Meta : Journal des traducteurs*, 50(3), pp. 997-1009.

PAN, Yihong (1997). *Son of Heaven and Heavenly Qaghan: Sui-Tang China and Its Neighbor*. Bellingham, Western Washington University Press.

ROLAND, Ruth (1999). *Interpreters as Diplomats*. Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press.

ROSSABI, Morris (1983). "Introduction." *China among Equals*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, pp. 1-13.

YÜ, Yingshih (1967). *Trade and Expansion in Han China: A Study in the Structure of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press.

(B) In Chinese:

AN, Zuozhang (1979). *A History of Relationship between Former and Latter Han China with the West Region*. [Lianghan Yu Xiyu Guanxi Shi]. Shangdong, Qilu shushe.

FU, Xuanzong and Jianguo ZHOU (2000). *Collation and Annotations to the Collected Writings of Li Deyu*. [Li Deyu Wenji Jiaojian]. Hebei, Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe.

FU, Zhengcuo (1991). "The Cultural Link of Ba Shu and Southwestern Barbarians" [Bashu yu Xinanyi de Wenhua Lianxi], in LI, Zhaoming,

Xiang LIN and Nanzhou XU, eds. *The Histories, Nationalities, Archaeology, and Culture of Ba Shu* [Bashu: Lishi, Minzu, Kaogu, Wenhua]. Chengdu, Bashu shushe, pp. 186-196.

*Hanshu*. [History of Han Dynasty] (83/rpt.1962). Compiled by Ban Gu. Rpt. Beijing, Zhonghua shuju.

*Houhanshu*. [History of Latter Han Dynasty] (445/rpt.1965). Compiled by Fan Ye. Rpt. Beijing, Zhonghua shuju.

*Jinshu*. [History of Jin Dynasty] (648/rpt.1974). Compiled by Fang Yuanling. Rpt. Beijing, Zhonghua shuju.

LI, Dalong (1996). *Frontier Administration and Frontier Officials during the Former and Latter Han Dynasties*. [Lianghan shiqi de bianzheng yu bianli]. Ha'erbin, Heilongjiang jiaoyu chubanshe.

LI, Nanqiu (2002). *Chinese History of Interpreting*. [Zhongguo Kouyishi]. Qingdao, Qingdao Press.

LUO, Erhu (2000). *The Southwestern Part of China in the Qin and Han Dynasties*. [Qinhan Shidai de Zhongguo Xinan]. Chengdu, Tiandi chubanshe.

MA, Zuyi (1998). *A Concise History of Translation in China*. [Zhongguo Fanyi Jianshi]. Beijing, Zhongguo duiwai fanyi chubanshe.

— (1999). *A History of Translation in China*. [Zhongguo Fanyishi]. Part one. Hanwu, Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe.

OU, Kunbo (1998). *The Culture of Dian and Yunnan*. [Dianyun Wenhua]. Liaoning, Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe.

*Shiji* [Records of the Grand Historian]. (93BC/rpt.1959). Compiled by Sima Qian. Rpt. Beijing, Zhonghua shuju.

*Songshu* [History of Song Dynasty]. (488/rpt.1974). Compiled by Shen Yue. Rpt. Beijing, Zhonghua shuju.

SU, Bing (ed.) (1996). *Han and Tang: Great Cultural Phenomenon*. [Hantang Qixiang]. Xi'an, Xibei daxue chubanshe.

WANG, Yanyu (1986). *Special Topics on the History of Guizhou*. [Guizhou Zhuanti Kao]. Rev. ed. Guizhou, Guizhou renmin chubanshe *Weishu* [History of Northern Wei (Tuoba) Dynasty]. (554/rpt.1974). Compiled by Wei Shou. Rpt. Beijing, Zhonghua shuju.

YANG, Xiyi and Dayuan REN (1996) “On State Administration” [Guojia Guanli], in Bing SU, ed., *Han and Tang: Great Cultural Phenomenon*. [Hantang Qixiang]. Xi’an, Xibei daxue chubanshe, pp. 12-22.

ZHANG, Xiaosong (2006). *A System of Official Posts of Minority Peoples in China*. [Zhongguo Shaoshu Minzu Zhiguan Zhidu]. Beijing, Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe.

ZHANG, Zengqi (2004). *The Southwestern Barbaric Culture of the Yunnan and Guizhou Plateaux*. [Yungui Gaoyuan de Xinanyi Wenhua]. Hubei, Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe.

ZHAO, Minli (2002). “A Literature Search of the Flourished Development of Songs and Dances Entertainment and the Composition of these Artists in Han Society” [Handai shehui gewu yula shengkuang ji congyi renyuan goucheng qingkuang de wenxian kaocha], in ZHAO, Minli, ed., *A Study of Sung Poems in China*. [Zhongguo Shige Yanjiu]. Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, pp. 99-116.

ZHAO, Minli ed. (2002). *A Study of Sung Poems in China*. [Zhongguo Shige Yanjiu]. Beijing, Zhonghua shuju.

ZHOU, Jucheng (ed.) (1992). *The Ch'in and Han Dynasties: History of Chinese Civilization*. [Qinhan Shidai: Zhongguo Wenming Shi]. Taipei, Diqu chubanshe.

ZHOU, Weizhou (1996). “On Territories and Ethnicities” [Jiangyu he minzu], in Bing SU, ed. *Han and Tang: Great Cultural Phenomenon*. [Hantang Qixiang]. Xi’an, Xibei daxue chubanshe, pp. 1-9.

**ABSTRACT: Translation and Historiography: How An Interpreter Shaped Historical Records in Latter Han China** — This article analyzes evidence of interpreting activities in first-century China between the Latter Han (25–220 AD) Chinese administration and non-Han Chinese minority tribes along the then Southwestern frontier

(modern Yunnan and the west of Sichuan basin). Besides confirming the existence of interpreting events and the subsequent Chinese translation of three tribal sung poems, a tribal tribute to Emperor Ming (r. 58–75) in a Qiang dialect (without a written language, apparently), this piece of evidence is also of interest to historians of interpreting in four aspects, namely, the nature of interpreting activities in China in antiquity; possible political rewards for the amateur interpreter who was a frontier clerk by profession because of possible translation manipulation; textual traces from the Chinese translation of the poems that suggests a possible manipulation in meaning and style; and the (interpreter's) superior's part in the manipulation of the translation, which eventually found its way into the standard history of the Latter Han dynasty. Considering the political needs of Latter Han China to promote the Sinicization cause among non-Han tribesmen in the empire, this article argues, based on analyses of the four factors above, that the interpreter, with his rare knowledge of the tribal tongue in the imperial court, might have consciously shaped the translation of the poems to pander to the liking of his superior and the emperor. This article further shows how and why the interpreter, in his official capacity as a frontier clerk, might have capitalized on his competence in a tribal language and manipulated, albeit mildly, the historical records on the Chinese translation of the poems.

**RÉSUMÉ : Traduction et historiographie : comment un interprète a façonné les archives historiques chinoises sous la dynastie Han postérieure** — Cet article analyse des preuves de l'existence d'activités d'interprétation pendant le premier siècle en Chine entre l'administration de la dynastie Han postérieure (25-220 apr. J.-C.) et les tribus minoritaires non-Han peuplant la frontière sud-ouest de l'empire (aujourd'hui la province du Yunnan et l'ouest du bassin Sichuan). En plus de confirmer l'existence d'instances d'interprétation et la traduction chinoise subséquente de trois poèmes tribaux chantés, un hommage tribal à l'empereur Ming (r. 58-75) dans un dialecte Qiang (qui ne semble pas avoir eu de langue écrite), ces preuves présentent un intérêt aux historiens de l'interprétation pour la façon dont elles éclairent les quatre aspects suivants : la nature des activités d'interprétation dans l'antiquité chinoise, les récompenses politiques offertes aux interprètes amateurs, commis frontaliers de profession, en échange de la manipulation possible des traductions; les traces textuelles dans les traductions chinoises des poèmes qui laissent supposer une manipulation possible du sens et du style; et le rôle du supérieur (de l'interprète) dans la manipulation de la traduction,

laquelle se fraie éventuellement un chemin dans l'histoire de la dynastie Han postérieure. Compte tenu de la nécessité politique pour la dynastie Han postérieure de promouvoir la cause sinisante parmi les tribus non-Han de l'empire, cet article soutient, en se basant sur les analyses des quatre aspects énumérés ci-dessus, que l'interprète, doté d'une connaissance rare de la langue tribale dans la cour impériale, a pu modifier consciemment la traduction des poèmes pour les adapter aux préférences de son supérieur et de l'empereur. De plus, cet article montre comment et pourquoi l'interprète, en sa qualité officielle de commis frontalier, a pu se prévaloir de ses compétences dans la langue tribale et manipuler, quoique légèrement, les archives historiques de la traduction chinoise des poèmes.

**Keywords:** interpreting history, sung poems translation, manipulation, interpreting and translation records in first-century China, interpreters and historical records.

**Mots-clés :** histoire de l'interprétation, traduction de poèmes chantés, manipulation, archives de l'interprétation et de la traduction chinoises du premier siècle, interprètes et archives historiques.

**Rachel Lung: Department of Translation, Lingnan University, Hong Kong, China.  
Email: wclung@ln.edu.hk**