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BOOK REVIEW

Les Enfers vivants ou la tragédie illustrée des coolies chinois à Cuba et au Pérou

Pierre-Emmanuel Roux

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"One can't find rest but in death, and one can be afraid that from now on it is the best a Chinese can hope for his sake" (253). The last sentence of *Living Hells: With Plates and Explanations* (*Sheng diyu tushuo* 生地獄圖説) could not better sum up the condition of Chinese coolies in Cuba and Peru in the second half of the 19th century. Cheated, kidnapped, embarked by force on ships described as floating hells, Chinese workers in plantations were exploited, beaten, maimed, mutilated, killed with excruciating methods. Even after passing away, their bones served either as food for wild animals or as materials to refine sugar (226–229). No proper burial was provided for them. Reading *Living Hells* means diving into a rogues' gallery of descriptions, the next being always more macabre than the former. Published in 1875, this book was instrumental in denouncing the horrible conditions of about 250,000 Chinese coolies in the West. Despite its being widely distributed, it was, however, as short-lived as the characters it depicted: Spain, who feared that the great diffusion of such a pamphlet would encourage Chinese mobs to attack Westerners as a form of retribution, obtained agreement from the Zongli Yamen in 1877 that the book be censored. Most of the exemplars were consequently confiscated and destroyed. Only eight remaining original copies have been identified around the world.

As such, with *Les Enfers vivants ou la tragédie illustrée des coolies chinois à Cuba et au Pérou*, Pierre Emmanuel Roux embarks on a quest to save this historical document from oblivion. This text which was published by one of the most important Cantonese publishing houses of the time—Fuwenzhai 富文齋—has already been mentioned in several pieces of literature concerned with the history of the Chinese coolies. But this translation goes further than acknowledging its existence; it propels the book to another level: it makes it accessible to the modern reader while highlighting its political and, more interestingly, its religious impetus. The text of the *Sheng diyu tushuo* is provided in French translation with a facsimile of the original Chinese, including the original illustrations, for each chapter. It is composed of a preface and 42 short chapters, which are framed by an extended introduction and series of annexes (maps, some supplementary illustrations and a bibliography). Among the supplementary illustrations are notably included images taken from the *Manuscript of the Jade Calendar*

(*Yuli chaozhuan* 玉歷鈔傳)[1], a religious text from which the author of the *Sheng diyu tushuo* drew much inspiration regarding both pictorial representations and writing tropes.

The introduction precisely relocates the pamphlet in its context by presenting the general situation of Chinese coolies during the 19th century—here Roux gives a good synthesis of their legal status, their place in late Qing international politics, but also of the terminologies deployed by historical participants, be they Chinese or Westerners, to label them. The importance of this book which shed light on the life of the coolies abroad and its conjunction with the 1874 Qing Commissions to Cuba and Peru and more generally the talks between China and Spain regarding the status of the coolies are notably clearly expounded on. Through his description, Roux incidentally offers a new perspective on the history of Qing diplomacy: far from being a secondary issue, the problem of coolies was dovetailed with a renewed approach by the Qing towards diplomatic missions. Roux's introduction to the text also gives clear precision on the material conditions in which the book was printed, offering in passing an interesting window on the world of Cantonese publishers at the end of the 19th century, and how a Guangdong governor could have all the existing copies of a book destroyed when needed. Regarding the question of who wrote this pamphlet, the definitive answer remains unfortunately elusive. Roux discusses several hypotheses that have been formulated, and seems to lean towards the possibility that the Reverend Daniel Vrooman (1818–1895) may have largely contributed to the redaction of this book. But because of some inconsistencies, "speculations remain open" (48).

Considering the text, apart from a few exceptions, the chapters are concerned with the stories of 37 men. They follow the same architecture: after a brief personal record of the coolie, and how he was "enrolled," a description is given of his trip to the Americas, and the hell that was awaiting him there. Each story is concluded by a short maxim or a moral lesson to be drawn from the tale. Nonetheless, as Roux astutely points out, these short accounts are not random scenes, and their sequence is subject to a specific

[1] This morality book (*shanshu* 善書) is by the way available in French translation with the original Chinese in Goossaert, Vincent. 2012. *Livres de morale revélés par les dieux*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 105–155.

organisation. The narration stresses successively the different moments of these journeys to hell. While the first chapters delve into the danger of seafaring, the last put the emphasis on what happens to the bodies of the deceased coolies. There is an agenda behind the composition and the structure of the text. Besides, one should here emphasise the fact that the horrors of the tales narrated were far from fictional. They were slightly adapted from official reports produced by Chinese officials regarding the situation of the coolies in Cuba and in Peru. In his detailed footnotes, Roux identifies the original documents from Chen Lanbin's 陳蘭彬 and Yung Wing's (Rong Hong 容閎) reports that served as original materials for each passage.

It is obvious at first glance that *Sheng diyu tushuo* conveyed a political message. The text "succeeded in synthesising and making audible the voices of hundreds of thousands of Chinese who were eager to denounce this slave trade" (59), Roux asserts. Being one of the earliest illustrated books that offered a representation of Chinese coolies in Chinese language and through Chinese pictorial codes, *Sheng diyu tushuo* rebalances the general representation of the West: Chinese were not necessarily dazzled by its modernity—as an important strand of literature could let us believe—; facing laudatory depiction of the West were also books such as the *Sheng diyu tushuo* that denounced the cruelty of the foreigners. It also reminds us that when Westerners lambasted China for its savagery and the cruelty of its people, they were often but a pot calling the kettle black. Yet, one of the specificities of this pamphlet was the medium through which it marshalled its denunciation. The critique of cruel Western treatment of Chinese coolies was spearheaded by an iconography closely entwined with popular religion. In his preface, the author even clearly mentioned taking inspiration from the *Manuscript of the Jade Calendar*—this fact makes me think that the Vrooman hypothesis is all the more plausible: a Chinese would not have needed to state the obvious.

Regarding now the translation: the French is limpid and respects the general meaning of the original. Sometimes, a few words like "living hell" (which doesn't sound as good in French as it does in English) seem a little too much, but this choice is justified as Roux wants to single out this terminology as a key concept of the text, and the genre in which it found its place. He also provides a great number of notes that shed light on the context, the concepts and the terms that the text deploys. Many remarks dwell on

the religious vocabulary put to use, while others fact-check many elements asserted by the writer. Roux has done here some minute detective work that is praiseworthy. Details in some explanation, notably regarding Buddhism, could of course be improved—*e.g.* the expression *ban you xin zao* 半由心造 (67) sounds to me more like an adaptation of *jing you xin zao* 境由心造 than what the translator proposes—but it is, all in all, a great work of scholarship. The non-specialist reader will find plenty of information to nourish her understanding of this prose and its background. In the end, Pierre-Emmanuel Roux has produced a serious translation with a very good introduction that rightly restores this forgotten work to the historical place it deserves. I concur with much of the analysis he provides. However, I cannot help thinking that more remarks on the iconography of the pictures opening each chapter might have been welcome for the neophyte.

Some other contextual elements could also have been given more explication. For instance, the author always presents the protagonists as people who were tricked into the "piglet house" (*zhuzai guan* 豬仔館) and forced to sign a working contract that would doom their life. How did that happen? When reading the text, it seems that no sooner had they entered the building than they were doomed to hell. More explanation could have been provided on this very elliptic but crucial node in all the stories narrated. In my reading, I have also noticed an aspect of the book that Roux has failed to single out: the denunciation of lucre and the search for profit. I found quite revealing that most of the stories start with a description of a Chinese person who was duped when he was looking for opportunities to make a pile of money. It seems to me that there is even an ambivalent discourse here: the author denounces the savage practices of the Westerners but by writing his book with reference to the *Yuli chaozhuan* and enlisting therefore the logic of "retribution", doesn't he imply that those coolies reaped the consequences of their acts or at least intentions? Finally, the author of the *Sheng diyu tushuo* affirmed several times that the condition of Chinese workers was far worse than that of the "Black slaves" (e.g. 70, 73)—who are incidentally often presented as participants or accomplices of the White masters in the ordeals of the Chinese. Such assertions can be commented on, but ought not be uncritically reproduced.

In conclusion, the book here under review is an important addition to our understanding of the history of Chinese coolies, and more generally to the transnational history of the late Qing era. I hope that with this translation and lengthy commentary, this book is now reborn to a new and longer life. May it also find new reincarnations into other languages, for it deals with a subject that should not be swept under the carpet. I should just add two remarks regarding the editing. First, I cannot understand why the spacing between the lines is so wide, or why some pages are not even printed double-sided. Presenting the text in this way is absolutely not environmentally friendly, and it does not look serious. The second comment is linked to the nature of this illustrative book. As Roux explains it, in the original Chinese, the illustration was supposed to be placed on the front of the page, while the text was located on the verso. Texts and images were disconnected from each other to create a peculiar effect: the picture entices the reader to turn the page in order to get the story overleaf, while the new drawing, disconnected from the text she has just read, draws her to another story. Although the French text indeed comes after the image, the Chinese text is now put before it. When translating Chinese, it should be encouraged to translate not only words, ideas, and emotions, but also the cultural practices through which they are channeled, which entails that the original materials (especially when reproduced) should not be altered.

Bibliography

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