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TRANSLATION REVIEW

The Misadventures of Master Mugwort: A Joke Book Trilogy from Imperial China

By Su Shi, Lu Cai and Tu Benjun

Translated by Elizabeth Smithrosser

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Master Mugwort is an imaginary Warring-States-era philosopher, apparently the brainchild of the eminent Song-dynasty literatus Su Shi 蘇軾. ‘Master Mugwort’ is the translator Elizabeth Smithrosser’s rendering of his Chinese name Aizi 艾子; her other suggestions are Aicius and Mugwortius. Perhaps, as artemisia is the genus to which the plant *ai* belongs, one could also consider Artemisius. She points out too that the name may be a pun on ‘Master Fool’ 騃子, making him a jester who speaks truth to power; the author of the final book in the trilogy specifically places Master Mugwort in the lineage of Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 biographies of jesters or humourists.

The first book in the trilogy (all are quite short), *Miscellaneous Stories of Master Mugwort* (*Aizi zashuo* 艾子雜說), is traditionally attributed to Su Shi, and it is clear that this attribution was accepted by the later (Ming-dynasty) writers of its sequels, the *Further Sayings* and *Outer Sayings of Master Mugwort* 艾子後語、艾子外語, respectively Lu Cai 陸采 and Tu Benjun 屠本峻. Humorous writing in pre-modern China has received less attention than it perhaps deserves, and Smithrosser, a young scholar formerly at Leiden and now at Oxford University, argues in a short but knowledgeable and comprehensive introduction to this volume that the humour in these three works of ‘masters’ literature’ is mainly directed at satirising the foibles of the societies in which their authors lived, rather than having anything much to do with the Warring States era in which Master Mugwort and his more historical colleagues existed. Thus, many of the *Miscellaneous Stories* may be intended to poke fun at or criticise the reforms of Wang Anshi in the Song (as the author of the *Further Sayings* suggests), while the *Further* and *Outer Sayings* are more broadly directed at bureaucracy and corruption in Ming society. For example, a short passage in the *Further Sayings* (no. 13) satirises the power of eunuchs, those bugbears of the scholar-official class:

Master Mugwort kept two goats in a pen. The billy goat was fond of tussling, and every time he encountered a stranger he would chase and butt him, much to the dismay of Master Mugwort’s disciples whenever they paid a visit. They petitioned Master Mugwort, saying “Dear master, that billy goat of yours is so violent! We implore you to get him fixed. That’ll settle him down.”

Master Mugwort laughed and said, “Haven’t you heard? These days once the balls come off they get a lot more violent!”

艾子畜羊兩頭於囿。羊牡者好鬪，每遇生人則逐而觸之。門人輩往來，甚以為患。請於艾子曰：「夫子之羊牡而猛，請得闡之，則降其性而馴矣。」艾子笑曰：「爾不知今日無陽道的更猛裏。」

As can be seen from this example, the language of these anecdotes is a lapidary classical Chinese, with occasional diversions into colloquialism.

But this is a translation review, not a review of scholarship on Chinese humorous literature (which I would in any case be unqualified to write). The translation is excellent: accurate, fluent, and – most important! – often very amusing. Sometimes I think Smithrosser actually improves on the humour of the original: when (in *Miscellaneous Stories* no. 23) the Dragon King issues an edict that all water

creatures with a tail are to be beheaded, an alligator wonders why a frog is so upset, to which the frog replies (in Smithrosser's version), 'I'm terrified my past will come back to haunt me!' This seems to me to be a distinct improvement on (pseudo-)Su Shi's rather plodding 'I'm afraid that they'll pay too much attention to my time as a tadpole 但恐更理會科鬥時事.'

The translation of humour across languages and cultures is notoriously difficult, particularly in the case of puns and other plays on words. Smithrosser provides brief notes before or after some of the passages to explain the cultural or social background, and sometimes to bring out the point of the joke where it might be missed by the modern, especially non-Chinese, reader, as well as occasional footnotes (and sometimes endnotes also, which does get a bit confusing) to provide additional, though non-essential, information. Sometimes, as a result, one can get the joke or the point and see its historical interest without being much amused by it, but on the other hand, some of the jokes did make me laugh out loud, the ultimate accolade for such a translation.

Smithrosser shows a particular talent for humorous verse, which she uses to render rhythmic or actually 'poetic' diction in the anecdotes. Near the end of a rather long anecdote (*Miscellaneous Stories* no. 33) about a malefactor bargaining with an Oxhead demon to be let off the tortures of hell in exchange for some leopardskins, the malefactor tries to shrug off his obligations with the following doggerel quatrain (Smithrosser's literal translation, from the endnotes, in brackets; my asterisked note):

牛頭獄主要知聞，(Newsflash, Bullhead Section Head:

權在閻王不在君；The authority lies with King Yama, and not with you!

減刻官柴猶自可，By all means to reduce the amount of official firewood*

更求枉法豹皮褌。But you went too far by perverting the law for some leopard-skin loincloths.)

*For the cauldron in which the malefactor is to be boiled.

This is inventively rendered as a limerick:

The Netherworld's home to an Ox

Who's mistaken himself for the boss!

He's expunged my fate

For a wardrobe update,

But the king round here's Yama. His loss!

It's always possible, albeit seldom helpful, to nitpick translations, and personally I wouldn't translate 媼 or 嫗 in the vocative (which occur a few times) as 'old dear', but rather 'mistress' or 'goodwife', which maintain the archaistic tone. However, this is the sort of very minor point which is all that one can complain about in this fluent, skilful, and entertaining translation.

The Hsu-Tang Library of Classical Chinese Literature was launched by Oxford University Press in late 2023; so far five volumes, including this one, have appeared. The volumes consist of parallel texts, with the original Chinese on one side and the English translation on the other, like the long-established Loeb Library of Greek and Latin classical texts. As the collection expands, it should perform a very useful function in bringing a wider range of pre-modern Chinese literature within the reach of students or even of that chimerical being, the intelligent general reader.