

○ **H. YONG AND J. PENG, *CHINESE LEXICOGRAPHY: A HISTORY FROM 1046 BC TO AD 1911***

(NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS. 2008. PP. XVII, 458)

The preface by J. H. Prynne of Gonville and Caius College at the University of Cambridge correctly describes the book as ‘a landmark work which has the great ambition of bringing into orderly review the successive stages of the making and using of dictionaries of all kinds in China, from the earliest beginnings to a point just short of the present day’.

The scope of the work is astounding. It is a synopticon in which about seven hundred works are mentioned, most of which are commented on in some detail. They include word dictionaries, encyclopedias, teaching primers, manuals of calligraphy and writing practice, rhyming dictionaries, text commentaries and indexes, dialect dictionaries, works concerned with pronunciation, technological handbooks and bilingual dictionaries and word lists.

As the only work of its kind in English, it will be of interest to scholars as an entry point into the Chinese language scholarship on this subject. By its nature it will be of most use to scholars who already have a good knowledge of Chinese language and history.

Prynne remarks optimistically in the preface, ‘it is written in an English style somewhat remarkable for native Chinese scholars... written in clear and readable English’. In fact the English style is the main problem, and a fairly serious one, with this work.

It is written in a form of Chinese-English translationese interlanguage which, while it has been patiently polished, still retains the idiom and phraseology of the Chinese original, cast in a baffling programme of verb tenses. In many cases the subjects or topics of sentences are introduced in such a way that the reader is forced to search back through the text to see whether the subject has in fact been introduced earlier.

Reading even a single page becomes an exercise in decoding. Many of the pages are comprehensible only after a patient process of careful scrutiny. This will probably prevent scholars from reading the whole book from beginning to end.

The apparatus and footnoting are also of a form unsuitable for an important reference book. A small number of references are given in parentheses within the text, but these are few and haphazard. For most statements we must rely on our own knowledge or guesswork if we want to follow anything up. Footnoting in a work like this should be fairly meticulous, in the style of the *Cambridge History of China*, or Needham’s books.

The work is most valuable for its indexes of book titles and Chinese names. There are English to Chinese and Chinese to English indexes of book titles giving page numbers to the text. However the practice of assigning each Chinese work an often startlingly anachronistic English title also slows the reader down. The *Er Ya*, most venerable of Chinese dictionaries, is called *The Ready Guide*, while *Xiao Er Ya* becomes *The Pocket Ready Guide*. *Shuowen jiezi*, the equally venerable Han dynasty production, is called *An Explanatory Dictionary of Chinese Characters*, and then becomes *EDCC* for the rest of the chapter. A *Jesuit wordlist for teaching Latin to Chinese students* is translated as *An Audio and Visual Guide for Foreign Scholars*, making us think of audiovisual language pedagogy in the twentieth century. As a landmark work like this may serve to fix English titles for common use, a lot of care, thought and consultation should go into their translating.

Exasperation builds as each chapter introduces a new group of works only by their translated English titles, but without their Chinese titles, occasioning constant trips to the indexes at the back to make sure what you are reading about. Exasperation further increases when Chinese and English titles are given in some sections, but only English titles in others. I think the best way in a synoptic work like this would be to use the Chinese language title every time.

The bibliography suffers from translation problems too. The titles of all Chinese reference works are given in English translation, but without the original Chinese titles, which are nowhere to be found. This is a serious shortcoming in a reference work. The correct practice is to give the title in Chinese, followed by a simple reference translation of the title.

Ten of the colour plates show pages of ancient printed books, manuscripts and stone rubbings which are fascinating, but there are no interpretative paragraphs to show where and when they were printed and where these treasures are now located.

If a better mode of translation can't be arrived at, it would be just as well to publish the work in Chinese. In its present form the book is useful only to the most dedicated of bilingual scholars who are able to disentangle the grammatical infelicities and idiomatic inappropriatenesses, as well as the vagaries of the apparatus. A valuable work like this should have been put in the hands of a competent translator of English-speaking background who is learned in Chinese philology, or else a bilingual editor should have been found.

The indexes are the most transparent and understandable part of the book, and philologists will want to have this book so that they can consult them. The index of personal names is useful. Forays into the accompanying texts are always fruitful and in-

teresting, because the work covers a wide range, and contains many fascinating bits of information. Special chapters are devoted to general discussion of aspects of lexicography, such as the development of character dictionaries, word dictionaries, and encyclopaedic dictionaries.

Dictionaries began with exegesis, as lists of obscure words were needed to read and understand classical books. Word lists were also needed to teach children Chinese script with its thousands of characters. Methods of listing by headwords, grouping by subject and listing by radical were developed. The arrival of Buddhist texts and the study of Sanskrit brought understanding of phonetic principles which led to the *fanqie* method of notating Chinese sounds. This led to dictionaries of rhymes, and then to dictionaries listed by initial consonants.

Buddhist study also led to the first bilingual Sanskrit dictionaries. The earliest Japanese Chinese dictionary appeared in 830 AD. Tangut, Mongolian, Turkish and Tibetan bilingual dictionaries are given brief mention, and also the dictionaries of the Jesuits and the Protestant missionaries.

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