

Wixted, John Timothy, Foreword to David R. Knechtges,
*The 'Han shu' Biography of Yang Xiong (53 B.C.-A.D.
18)* (Tempe: Center for Asian Studies, Arizona State
University, 1982), pp. iv-vii. [漢書, 楊雄]

FOREWORD

It is an honor for the Occasional Papers series of Arizona State University to issue this study by Professor David R. Knechtges of the University of Washington. The figure whose biography is translated and annotated in this volume is the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) polymath, Yang Xiong. Yang Xiong was not only the foremost litterateur of his day; he was a major figure in the intellectual history of Former Han times (206 B.C.-A.D. 8), whose writings deal with philosophy, history, politics, lexicography, philology, mathematics, music, and astronomy.

The official biography of Yang Xiong, translated and annotated in this study, was compiled by Ban Gu (A.D. 32-92); it comprises no less than two chapters of the latter's Han shu (History of the Former Han). As Professor Knechtges points out in his Introduction, the biography consists of two elements: lengthy excerpts from Yang Xiong's own "Autobiography" and added sections by Ban Gu. The autobiographical source offers potentially more reliable information about Yang Xiong than that originally found in dynastic history biographies. Moreover, as the quoted autobiographical introductions to poems by Yang Xiong included in the biography explain the circumstances of the poems' composition, often provide dates, and give an explanation of the author's purpose in writing them, they offer an invaluable perspective on Yang Xiong's writings.

The biography of Yang Xiong follows the format of biographies in the dynastic histories. It contains a genealogy of the Yang family; a summary-sketch of Yang's character and personality; the texts of seven of his rhapsodies (fu) and essays; the writer-subject's own outline of his cosmological work, the Taixuan (Grand Mystery); Yang's critical remarks on the rhapsody genre; chapter summaries by him of his philosophical work, Fa yan (Exemplary Sayings); and finally, an "Appraisal" of Yang Xiong by the Later Han historian, Ban Gu.

The major portion of Yang Xiong's biography is comprised of full-length citations of seven of his rhapsodies and essays; they include the following:

"Refuting Sorrow"

"Sweet Springs Palace Rhapsody"

"Hedong Rhapsody"

"Barricade Hunt Rhapsody"

"Tall Poplars Palace Rhapsody"

"Justification Against Ridicule"

"Justification Against Objection"

The three items which are not labelled rhapsodies nevertheless use many rhapsodic conventions.

In an earlier study, The Han Rhapsody: A Study of the 'Fu' of Yang Hsiung (53 B.C.-A.D. 18), Professor Knechtges outlined the early development of the rhapsody genre, pointing to the earlier dual influence of the Chuci (Songs of the South) and the school of Politicians. Rhapsodies of two sorts emerged: poems of frustration and epideictic (display) poems, both of which often contained indirect censure of the sovereign for whom they were written. The element of display became so dominant in many examples of the genre, however, that Yang Xiong became disillusioned with its potential for moral suasion and ceased writing such poems.

Two things distinguish Professor Knechtges' translation and annotation of the rhapsodies by Yang Xiong quoted in the biography presented here. One is the remarkable poeticity with which he has rendered Yang's writings. The other is the wealth of material he cites in the Notes which throws light not only on the poems and text of the biography but also on a host of issues concerning early Chinese society, thought, and literature.

The superb quality of the poem translations is owing in large measure to the long process of refinement they have undergone. Professor Knechtges translated the entire text of the biography as part of his 1968 doctoral dissertation for the University of Washington. His first published translation of "Refuting Sorrow" (the first item on the list above) appeared in a 1968 issue of Parerga,

which he authored, entitled "Two Studies on the Han Fu." Translations of five poems (the second through sixth items listed above) appeared in the outstanding study by Professor Knechtges noted earlier, The Han Rhapsody, published by Cambridge University Press in 1976. (His translation of the final item listed above appears here in print for the first time.)

The reader should know that the translations published in this volume are not simply reprints of the author's earlier translations. If one examines, as I have, Professor Knechtges' dissertation, his later published work, and finally this volume, he will appreciate the stages of improvement that his renderings have undergone, as they have become ever more accurate and poetical.

The other feature that distinguishes this work is the rich annotation which accompanies it. The Notes are a virtual gold mine of information for the student of Han history, early Chinese thought, and classical Chinese poetry. Much of this information was presented in much more abbreviated form, or omitted entirely, in the author's earlier published work. Professor Knechtges has made all of it more readily accessible to the reader via the important indexes he provides.

A measure of the range of material covered is suggested by a brief outline of the themes touched on in the seven rhapsodies and essays quoted in the biography. "Refuting Sorrow" is a poeticized criticism of the poet Qu Yuan (ca. 340-278 B.C.), which employs the meter and diction, including some of the lush plant vocabulary, of Qu's "Encountering Sorrow," in order to condemn the latter's suicide. "Sweet Springs Palace Rhapsody," written on the occasion of the celebration of imperial sacrifices to Heaven, includes extravagant and lavish description of a Han imperial palace. "Hedong Rhapsody" describes an interment sacrifice to Sovereign Earth performed in Hedong Commandery, where sacrifices to the chief earth deity were carried out. "Barricade Hunt Rhapsody" and "Tall Poplars Palace Rhapsody" describe an imperial hunt in the great Shanglin Park. "Justification Against Ridicule" was written in defense of the poet's decision to remain aloof from affairs at

court. And "Justification Against Objection" provides an interesting apologia for the abstruse language of the author's cosmological work, Grand Mystery.

The translation and notes for Yang Xiong's biography--notably the cited poems--can be savored independently in this volume. For further discussion of the poems, especially the rhetorical nature of their argument, the reader might wish to consult the author's study, The Han Rhapsody. This volume in the Arizona State University series complements Professor Knechtges' translation of early Chinese rhapsodies appearing in the wen xuan (Selections of Refined Literature), compiled by Xiao Tong (501-531); volume One of that multi-volume undertaking, subtitled Rhapsodies on Metropolises and Capitals, was published by Princeton University Press in 1982.

John Timothy Wixted
Arizona State University