
**Lothar von Falkenhausen**

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Of the “Thirteen Classics” (*Shisanjing 十三經*) canonized by the Confucian tradition during imperial times, the *Zhouli 周禮* ("Rituals of Zhou," also—perhaps more accurately—known as *Zhouguan 周官*, “Institutions of the Zhou”), is doubtless the most intractable. An idealized tableau of what its compilers during the fourth to third centuries BC imagined the administrative structure of the Zhou kingdom to have been at the time of its foundation in the eleventh century BC, the *Zhouli* is now generally regarded as historically unreliable; it contains no intellectual or philosophical argument and possesses no literary qualities to speak of. The main interest of the text lies in how intellectuals and politicians have repeatedly used it over the course of Chinese history as a blueprint for a perfect government. But its complex nomenclature of official titles would have become incomprehensible long ago were it not for the huge hermeneutical apparatus built up over centuries of philological study. In Sun Yirang’s *孫詒讓* (1848-1908) multi-volume *Zhoulì zhengyi 周禮正義* ("Rectified Meanings of the Zhouli"), this later commentary comes to about forty times the length of the original text.

Although the *Zhouli* was among the first Chinese texts to be rendered into a Western language in its entirety—Édouard Biot’s French translation, posthumously published in 1851, stands as one of the milestones in the history of Sinology—it is still, today, the only one of the Thirteen Classics to remain untranslated into English. In the book under review, Wenren Jun闻人軍 attempts to fill part of this lacuna by offering an English version of the *Kaogong ji 考工記*, an originally separate text that has been transmitted as part of the *Zhou li*.
The Kaogong ji (literally: “Notes for Examining the Artisans”; the author follows Joseph Needham in his somewhat problematic rendering as “Artificers’ Record”) was inserted into the Zhouli during the Han period (probably sometime during the first century BC) as a replacement for its lost sixth section, which purported to list the staff of the Zhou dynasty’s Ministry of Works. The text itself has been variously dated to the Late Warring States (c. 450-221 BC), Qin (221-206 BC), or early Western Han periods. It is considerably shorter than the other five sections of the Zhouli, amounting to less than one-eighth of the extant Zhouli text; of its originally 31 chapters—less than half the number of chapters comprising each of the other sections—six are lost except for their titles (‘Duanshi’ 段氏 [plough makers], ‘Weishi’ 韋氏 [tanners], ‘Qiushi’ 裘氏 [furriers], ‘Kuangren’ 筐人 [silk printers(?)], ‘Jieren’ 棳人 [comb makers], and ‘Diaoren’ 雕人 [carvers]). Aside from being incompletely preserved, the text is also marred by corruptions. For instance, two chapter titles were obviously inverted by mistake: ‘Zhongshi’ 鍾氏 (“Mr. Bell”) and ‘Fushi’ 鳧氏 (“Mr. Wild Duck”), which must originally have referred to the bell-makers and to artisans in charge of dyeing feathers, respectively; the texts following each of these two titles in the extant version of the Kaogong ji describes the tasks of the other. Elsewhere, as well, the text requires emendations in at least a dozen places to make any sense whatsoever.

Now an engineer working in Silicon Valley, but formerly a History of Science professor at Hangzhou University, Wenren Jun is the author of several monographs and articles on the Kaogong ji. He is thus extremely well qualified for tackling this difficult text. Based on his previous publications in Chinese, the book under review is a digest of a lifetime’s reflections. It contains a preface (pp. xvi-xix), an introduction to the text (pp. xx-xxviii), followed by the translation (pp. 1-119) and three appendixes: the (uncommented-on) Chinese text (pp. 120-126), a chronological table (p. 127), and a table of Shang to Qin weights and measures (pp. 128-131). There follow a glossary of Chinese characters (pp. 132-140), the notes to the preface, introduction, and translation (pp. 141-188), a bibliography (pp. 189-210), and an index (pp. 211-224). The English text is accompanied by numerous illustrations of the objects, techniques, and situations mentioned. It is obvious that the author has expended considerable effort.

Even so, the book is at best a limited success. The separation of the Chinese text from the translation, and of the translation from the notes, make the book more difficult to use than, with the benefits of modern typography, it needed to be. Ironically, Chinese characters are embedded in the text of the introduction, figure captions, and notes, but they are absent where they are most needed—next to the translated text, where their presence would make it more convenient for the reader to compare it with the original Chinese. When one does start making such comparisons,
one finds much to quibble with. Of course, as anyone who has ever done a translation knows, a translation is always an interpretation, and one must allow for some leeway in handling textual difficulties. In this case, however, the translator’s choices in renderings are often questionable.

Let us look at just one sentence at random. In the ‘Zhouren’ 隤人 section, which deals with the makers of chariot-poles, there is the following sentence: Zhou you san li: yi zhe wei mei ye, er zhe wei jiu ye, san zhe wei li ye 輸有三理：一者為嬍也，二者為久也，三者為利也. Unlike other phrases of the same length, which are often followed by page after page of commentary, Sun Yirang evidently considers this one straightforward and devotes only a few lines to it. Wenren translates it as follows (p. 26): “The three distinct requirements on which the axle is made are as follows: The number one is virtue (mei); the number two, strong and durable; the number three, to revolve freely.” Since Wenren is a non-native writer, it would be unfair to fault him for the shaky grammar of his rendering; but there are also, even in such a relatively minor sentence, issues of substance that invite comment. Wenren appends a footnote for the bracketed word mei 嫝 (p. 153) explaining that it is an archaic form of mei 美, and quoting Zheng Xuan’s 鄭玄 (127-200) commentary, which interprets it as “without a node or tubercle.” But this undermines Wenren’s own translation, suggesting that “virtue” here is an over-interpretation: what is meant is the beautiful visual appearance and quality of the wood. That this is the traditional understanding is confirmed by consulting Sun Yirang. Similarly problematic are Wenren’s renderings of “strong and durable” for jiu 久, where “durable” would be enough; and “to revolve freely” for li 利, which admittedly is here used slightly outside of its normal semantic range of “sharp; efficient”—but a glance at Sun Yirang will establish the intended meaning of “smooth yet tight-fitting.” One cannot help finding that Biot’s rendering—”Pour la confection des fusées, il y a trois principes. Il faut qu’elles soient de belle apparence; il faut qu’elles soient de longue durée; il faut qu’elles soient effilées”—is not merely far more elegant than Wenren’s, but also more accurate.

Further spot-checking confirms that the problems revealed with the translation of this seemingly innocuous sentence are pervasive. Strictly speaking, what Wenren provides is not a philologically-grounded translation, but a paraphrase informed by his own long experience with the text. In all fairness, philological details are far from being the author’s principal concern; his intention, as is programmatically apparent from the book’s title, is to make the Kaogong ji useable by readers unacquainted with classical Chinese as a source text for the history of science and technology in China. And it is certainly true that the Kaogong ji provides much interesting information in that regard.
However, what Wenren seemingly fails to realize is that the Kaogong ji is not, as a text, a technical manual; instead, it was apparently written for use by administrative supervisors of court artisans, deliberately reducing technical information to simple formulae for their benefit. In other words, the text represents handy second-hand knowledge that did not directly come from the artisans themselves. This probably explains why the technical information contained in the text is often vague, and matches but very incompletely the data one can extract from the material record of ancient China as revealed through recent archaeological discoveries. All the more urgently, therefore, distilling any science and technology-related evidence from such a text must come as a separate step following the establishment of its precise meaning. That step, unfortunately, largely gets skipped over in the book under review.

As noted, in order to make the Kaogong ji translatable, a number of emendations and transpositions must be made. Wenren indicates these by inserting small characters into the Chinese text, but does not mention them, let alone discuss them, in either the translation or the comments. For purposes of presentation, moreover, Wenren arbitrarily subdivides the text into 23 numbered chapters instead of the traditional 32 (introduction plus 31 offices), grouping together professions he considers related. This obviates the need to add numbers for the six above-mentioned lost sections, but it arguably obfuscates the extent to which the text is fragmentary and corrupted in its current state.

Another unfortunate aspect of the author’s approach is that it is ahistorical. As a case in point, the illustrations accompanying the translation are a wild mix, showing archaeological artifacts from Neolithic down to Qing times, pictures taken from later traditional works (even from Biot’s translation), reconstruction drawings, and scientific diagrams. This detracts from the fact that the text is itself an artifact of a particular time, and should be related, first and foremost, to the material culture of its own period. Wenren’s presentation, by contrast, feeds into the Orientalist fantasy of an eternally unchanging China that modern Sinology has worked so hard to overcome.

Given such weaknesses, the volume under review can only serve as a stand-in pending the publication of an up-to-standard scholarly translation of this important text. It may be recommended for preliminary reference, but the non-Sinologists for whom it is written should use it with the utmost caution.