Recent Publications on Shen Kuo’s *Mengxi bitan* (Brush Talks from Dream Brook)

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Shen Kuo 沈括, *Mengxi bitan baihua quan yi* 梦溪笔谈白话全译 (Brush talks from Dream Brook: Complete translation into modern Chinese), translated by Yan Jia 阎嘉 & Zhou Xiaofeng 周晓凤 (YZ), Chengdu: Ba Shu Shu She, 1995 (Zhongguo Xida gudian shiyong baike ming zhu 中 国 西 大 古 典 实 用 百 科 名 著; West China University Practical Encyclopedic Classics Series). 2, 10, 506 pp. No notes. Items that reflect “feudal superstition and mystical flavoring” are not translated.

Shen Kuo 沈括, *Wen bai duizhao Mengxi bitan quan yi* 文白对照梦溪笔谈全译 (Brush talks from Dream Brook: Complete translation into modern Chinese, with original text on facing pages), translated by Li Wenze 李文泽 and Wu Hongze 吴洪泽 (LW), Chengdu: Ba Shu Shu She, 1996. 13, 9, 452 pp. No notes.

Shen Kuo 沈括, *Mengxi bitan* 梦溪笔谈 (Brush talks from Dream Brook: Complete translation), translated into modern Chinese by Hu Daojing, Jin Liangnian 金良年, and Hu Xiaojing 胡小静 (HJH), Guiyang: Guizhou Renmin Chubanshe, 1998 (Zhongguo lidai mingzhu quanyi...
Shen Kuo’s (1131–1195) polymathic collection of jottings is attracting more attention lately. A generation ago, the only complete translation into a modern language of was that by the Kyoto History of Science Seminar into Japanese (Umehara 1978–1981). A decade and a half later, two translations into modern Chinese with the same publisher followed it a year apart, and in the next year, a German translation of selections that included almost half of the book. Since 1997, we have had a complete scholarly translation into modern Chinese and a couple of less scholarly ones, a complete translation into English, a reprint of the best edition of the text supplemented by
substantial new notes, a useful critical study of the text, a new full-length biography of Shen, and some reflective essays on him and his work.¹

I will evaluate nine of these tomes, and will then raise a question that seems to me worth asking: What is the point—if any—of completely translating the many books of miscellaneous jottings like Shen’s?

**Basic Scholarship**

There have been two centers of scholarship on Shen Kuo and *Mengxi bitan*. One is Jiangxi University in Hangzhou, Shen’s home town. It has produced a good deal of valuable research on the Song era (for its second half Hangzhou was the imperial capital). But the other center, Shanghai, housed the generalist scholar who put, and kept, Shen Kuo on the modern intellectual map. Hu Daojing (1913-2003) investigated every aspect of Shen’s career and diverse writings, persevering against great obstacles. He became a special target of brutality in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. When I visited him in 1981, his health was broken but his spirits were excellent. It was only his determination to continue his studies that kept him alive and fruitful to the age of 90.

Hu produced in 1956 an edition of *Mengxi bitan* buttressed with rich annotations, and in 1957 an excellent critical edition. Hu’s posthumous collected works (2011) reprint both of these and add his further notes on the text (edited by his disciple Jin Liangnian). These valuable notes supplement rather than replacing the earlier ones. It is well to keep in mind that they should be read in conjunction with the 1956 annotated version in volume 3 of the collection rather than the 1957 variorum version that accompanies the new notes in volume 4.

The notes published in 2011 do not take account of Wu Yining’s 1995 book, which covers different ground. Hu concentrated on information that helps readers understood Shen’s jottings. Wu, on the basis of almost equally broad reading in pre-modern sources, focuses on correcting small faults. He finds a good many. They have to do with personal names, native places of individuals, official titles, and other details. By his own count, he emends over 500 matters of fact in 310 of the 609 jottings. As he explains, the multiplicity of factual errors is not surprising, considering Shen’s isolation and lack of resources when he wrote the book; he spent much of his retirement under what amounts to house arrest. Wu also provides a bibliography of modern scholarship on Shen and his book: 15 books and nearly

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¹Particularly interesting essays are Fu 1999 and Egan 2014; see also Martzloff 1999.
200 essays published between 1926 and 1992. This volume, like Hu’s writings, will be necessary reading for anyone hoping to advance understanding of Mengxi bitan.

Volume 5 of Hu’s collected works gathers twenty-two of his diverse monographic articles on Shen. They cover half a century of his scholarship, from a 1956 introduction to Shen’s historical background to some unpublished comments on Zu Hui’s biography. A good number of these essays uncover lost fragments of Shen’s writings, for instance many poems not included in his literary collection Chang xing ji 長興集, and a most erudite separation of his contributions from those of Su Shi 蘇軾 in the medical compendium Su Shen liang fang 蘇沈良方. In 1979, when the Cultural Revolution could no longer prevent it, Hu published a thorough account of foreign scholarship on Mengxi bitan from 1843 to 1975.

**Accuracy of Translation into English**

One hopes for three things from translators, regardless of target language: that they understand what they read; that they find a form in the new language that expresses the content and something, at least, of the form, style, and tone of the original; and that they acknowledge the work of their predecessors, just as their successors are obliged to acknowledge theirs. Let us see what these have contributed.

It is impossible to completely separate the problem of accurate translation from that of English comprehension. The English of Wang and Zhao is better than most, but they are not fluent. Nor did they have the manuscript read critically by a native speaker. For instance, item 451 speaks of “the tree called Chinese ashes” and of what happens when someone is bitten by a certain spider “and gets wet with dews,” recommending that people be careful “when walking in thick growth of dewy grass.” WZ repeat these infelicities.

WZ do not cope very well with the book’s diversity of technical knowledge. Item 116 (LW 81) takes up a couple of changes in the Oblatory Epoch astronomical system’s civil calendar. This system made a number of needed changes in computation. Among them, it corrected its predecessor’s discrepancy of over 50 marks (i.e., hundredths) in the start of a day, and one of a month in the placement of the intercalary month. The text says: “奉元曆乃移其閏朔 … 閏十二月改爲閏正月 … 凡移五十餘刻.” HJH, YZ, and LW translate these three phrases into acceptable modern Chinese. But WZ fail to notify readers that a ke is not a quarter-hour as in modern Chinese, but a hundredth of a day (14.4 minutes in modern time). Their English “Thus the Gengyuan Calendar changed the intercalation period and the first day of the intercalary month in the lunar calendar … December in the old
calendar was changed into January in the new calendar … more than twelve hours were added …” fails to convey what this jotting says, obviously because the translators did not understand it—and they did not bother to consult any expert on Shen Kuo. I would English the same phrases as “The Oblatory Epoch system changed the locations of intercalary lunar months and the first days of lunar months. It changed the intercalary 12th month [of 1078] to the intercalary first month [of the next year] … After shifting [the times of solstices] more than 50 marks …”

An example of a different kind is item 44 (LW 25-26). In this famous jotting Shen discusses the behavior in a concave mirror of a moving object’s image: its inversion and its reversed direction. He likens this to the inverted image of a pagoda projected through “a small hole in a paper window 窗隙.” HJH’s faultless modern Chinese translation is 窗孔. The English translators in the same book ignore it, and give “the window lattice.” They thus agree with LW’s and YZ’s 窗格, “lattice,” which makes no sense at all; only a tiny hole would form an image. The result calls out for explanation, but WZ do not provide one. It is clear that the authors failed to consult the best modern Chinese version, and did not work out what the jotting as a whole means.

At other times when the baihua version is sound, the English translators ignore it and guess wildly. In item 145 (LW112-113, omitted in YZ), Shen unfolds a subtle theory of the value of divination. He takes up an obvious question: what good is divination if two people using the same technique reach different results? Different people have different futures, he reminds us. That it is possible to foretell the future has to do with the fact that “one’s heart-mind is basically divine (ren zhi xin ben shen 人之心本神).” But “because it is impossible for us to be free of burdens,” he tells us, we are often blocked from access to this inner divinity. Divination is a way round this obstacle by “entrusting (yu 寄) our inquiry to some ‘mindless’ process—that is, one that does not depend on our direct reflection. In other words, prognostication encompasses a variety of indirect means to introspection. It helps people think through their various futures. HJH, as usual, understand Shen’s point, translating yu as its modern counterpart (jituo 寄託), and LW are close with “borrow (jiejyong 借用).” But what WZ’s English offers is a wild guess, “instinctive prevision,” which makes the remainder of this jotting partly hackneyed and the rest incomprehensible. YZ’s self-censorship leads it to ignore jottings on divination, including this one.

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2 See item 68, p. 50, in table 2.1, in Sivin 2009. If Shen meant to express the shift in hours rather than marks, he would have said so.

3 At the same time, shen also refers to consciousness.

4 Shen presents a similar argument in item 144 (LW 112). For his views on divination and other sources of non-empirical knowledge, see Sivin 1995, 34-36.
Finally, WZ, when their English fails them, tend to make unfortunate guesses. In a famous jotting on arc-sagitta relations (301), they speak of a “right triangular,” and the “radiant length” of an arc. They also guess at official titles rather than checking earlier translations, another foolish habit. In item 22, for instance, they translate bige 秘閣 “the Secret Stack Room” instead of “the Imperial Archives,” and bianjiaoguan 編校官 “librarians” rather than “Editorial Assistants,” although the job of these functionaries is to make manuscript copies. Charles Hucker’s *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* has provided authoritative English equivalents for thirty years, but WZ ignore foreign reference works.

**Accuracy of Translation into Modern Chinese**

The 1998 translation by Hu Daojing and his collaborators is as accurate as we can hope for in our present state of knowledge. In a very few places it follows politically correct wording of the 1950s. For instance, in item 21 本胡法也 (this was originally a method of the northern barbarians) becomes 這本是少數民族的做法, which Wang and Zhao then over-translate into English as “This was originally popular among the ethnic minorities.” Yan and Zhou in 1995 (YZ, p. 249) and Li and Wu in 1996 (LW, pp. 11-12) avoid this euphemism.

On the whole, however, these two earlier vernacular translations are unsatisfactory. I have given other examples above. YZ’s voluntary self-censorship and its cumbersome format—the entire original text, followed by the entire baihua version, without cross-references—was likely responsible for the appearance of LW from the same publisher within a year. There is so little important difference in the wording of their modern versions that LW is more or less a revision of YZ, filling in the jottings that the latter ignored.

**Value of Biography**

Zu Hui’s life of Shen is more than twice the size of the last substantial biography of him, that by Zhang Jiaju 張家駒, written forty-two years earlier. Zu’s workmanlike account deals with Shen’s life, with his writings, and with his accomplishments, thought, and methods in science, technology, literature, and other departments of humanistic thought. It concludes with a critical evaluation of his place in the development of science, and of his relations with Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021-1086). The account of Shen’s accomplishments, like those by Zu’s predecessors, is severely positivistic. Zu sketches him as a scientist far ahead of his time, limited by his historical
setting, rather than as a complex man of the Northern Song era. Still, the account of Shen’s life draws on a rich scholarly literature, weaving it intelligently into a more complex, persuasive story than any previous publication. Let me give an example.

Wang Anshi was Shen’s mentor. Wang supported his meteoric rise in officialdom, introducing him to the emperor, who quickly came to value him for his intelligence and his ability to carry out hard assignments. In 1074, Wang left the premiership, but was called back ten months later. By the time he returned, his attitude toward his protégé had changed. In front of the emperor, Wang called Shen “an odious person (renren 人)’’ with “an evil, selfish mind.’’ Some scholars have simply ignored this dramatic shift; Zhang Jiaju explained it as due to the machinations of Lü Huiqing 呂惠卿, who was prime minister in Wang’s place during the hiatus.

Zu finds three reasons for Wang’s change of attitude, all of which make sense: disagreements on the New Policies, differences of opinion which Wang did not tolerate; Shen’s and Lü Huiqing’s “contradictions;” and Shen’s “weak (nuoruo 懦弱) character” (p. 453). The last point she explains by his lack of appetite for bureaucratic infighting, and his tendency to avoid conflict by compromise. Her point is well made; she gives examples of both traits. She does not remark that they would have been strengths in a statesman at a time when factions, coalitions, and individuals were not savagely at war with each other. She makes it plain that, despite Wang’s turning against him, Shen never abandoned his esteem for and gratitude toward his colleague. Indeed, Brush Talks from Dream Brook contains only fond memories of Wang.

Worth of Complete Translations

A great many of the Dream Brook jottings are about fine points of terminology, particularly that used in the imperial court. Shen wrote such notes for officials and antiquarians. Translating them is unlikely to say anything of interest to modern readers. Here is one of a good many examples in WZ’s translation (item 6): “East and west gongfeng 5 formerly referred to subordinate officers working with two central administrative organs known as Zhongshu 中書 and Menxia 門下 in the Tang Dynasty. After Yongwei period of the reign of Emperor Gaozong (650-55), most emperors had been living in the Daming Palace. New departments were established and their officials working there were called ‘east gongfeng’ while old departments remained intact and their officials were called ‘west gongfeng.’”

5 The Chinese actually reads dongxitou gongfeng guan. The translators inserted “working with … Tang Dynasty” for which there is no equivalent in the text.
translators do nothing to make this jotting comprehensible; in fact the information about the organs with which the subordinate officials worked, the translators’ own unlabeled addition, only adds to the confusion. And what is the point of refusing to translate gongfeng, or of interpolating Zhongshu and Menxia?

A favorite topic of jottings by Shen and other Song authors is poetry. Such items are on the whole untranslatable except by an imaginative poet with a very firm grip of both the original and the target language. This pithy anecdote (WZ 609) does not seem to be about anything recognizable as poetry:

Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) once wrote the following lines: “Only wine can destroy our life” and “Only wine can abolish everything.” Wang Anshi jokingly rewrote them into a four-line poem. “Wine./Wine./Only you can abolish everything./Only you can destroy our life.” The newly-composed poem does not take away any word from the original lines, but the poem reads like a new one created by Wang himself.

Poetry and court usages are only two of many categories of Jottings from Dream Brook that convey little or nothing today except to a few specialists. Of another kind (item 223) is a simple list of 31 prefectural-level and 127 district-level divisions abolished between 1068 and 1075.

A final example, only 17 characters long in the original (item 261):

Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072) once said “By watching what a man writes on a wall, we can know whether he writes well or not.”

Was Ouyang writing about content or calligraphy? Shen expected his readers to know why and how people write on walls, and what that has to do with the quality of their writing in general. Making that clear would have required adding a note for people who are not already well informed (including a good many professors of Chinese studies). WZ do not provide such notes.

Specialists tend quietly to impose a double bind. They demand that everything important be translated, but they also assert that readers who

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6 The translators did not notice the comments in both Hu 1956, 20, and Wu 1995, 5-6, to the effect that the date is wrong.
7 Han’s lines were from two separate poems, a point worth mentioning. See Mengxi bitan buzheng gao, pp. 946-947.70.
8 They do include a very few explanatory notes. Herrmann’s German translation of roughly half the book (1997) includes the first and third—but not the second—of these jottings, and provides an explanatory note for the first.
depend on translations rather than mastering the original cannot be expected to really understand ancient Chinese culture. That is their view of Chinese readers who can only read the vernacular, as well as of readers who rely on English.

It is sadly true that many translators do not begin by deciding who they want their audience to be, and planning specifically for it. The only justification for completely translating a book of this type is that it be meant for fellow specialists, and that accordingly it be fully annotated. That greatly limits the publishers who will consider it, and guarantees a price too high for ordinary buyers to afford.

I do not see the point of completely translating a miscellany like this into any language but modern Chinese. Books continue to be translated completely into European languages because it is a tribal custom, and publishers accept a certain number because libraries will buy a few copies even at exorbitant prices. There are sensible alternatives. Herrmann’s thoughtful German version (1997) is an example of translating jottings selected for their general interest. There will be ample interest in topical translations by people who understand their topics. Dagmar Schäfer, Sun Xiaochun, and I are preparing for publication a translation of Shen’s substantial essays on astronomical instruments. The remarkable study of Song Yingxing 宋應星 by Schäfer (2011) provides a model for further exploration of Shen Kuo and his remarkable career.

References


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