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China scholars routinely cull information from *fangzhi* 方志 (or *difang zhi* 地方志; usually translated into English as “local gazetteers” or “local histories”) and for good reason: these texts often contain information that is unavailable elsewhere, making them one of the most important primary sources for the study of Chinese history. The types of information typically found in *fangzhi* varies greatly. This explains why individual chapters are arranged into subjects such as topography, schools, population, taxes, local products, biographies, literary works, and so on. These topic-specific chapters sometimes also include information on local flora and fauna. The title under review is an annotated translation and study of a sub-chapter on the avifauna of Hainan, which appeared originally in the early sixteenth century gazetteer *Qiongtai zhi* 瓊臺志 (lit., *Gazetteer on the Gemstone Terrace*).¹

Compiled by a Ming dynasty official and native of Hainan named Tang Zhou 唐冑 (1471-1539), the *Qiongtai zhi* dates from the Zhengde 正德 reign-period of the Ming (1506-1521; the preface is dated 1521). Chapter (*juan* 卷 9 of this work, “Local Products” (*tuchan* 土產), includes a long list of goods that are native to the island. Therein is also a catalog, with names and some notes and descriptions, of more than fifty birds. Roderich Ptak and Baozhu Hu’s annotated translation and commentary on this avian inventory is important for two reasons: first, although information on Hainan’s avian population most certainly appeared in earlier gazetteers, these chronicles are now lost. Thus, as evident from the title of Ptak/Hu’s book, Tang Zhou’s text is the earliest extant catalog on the birds of Hainan. Second, although Robert

¹ “Gemstone Terrace” is an old literary name for Hainan.
Swinhoe’s (1836-1877) article “On the Ornithology of Hainan,” published in 1870, is an important early account of the island’s bird community, it is not a systematic and detailed survey. Rather, it is randomly-arranged report on sightings made by Swinhoe while visiting Hainan in the spring of 1868. His notes are brief (when and where a bird specimen was shot and examined, and so on) and sometimes almost seem perfunctory. Moreover, although Swinhoe had earlier served as an interpreter in Hong Kong, he fails to provide the Chinese or local names for the birds he identifies. Thus, China scholars today consulting Swinhoe’s survey will find it to be of limited use.

The Ptak/Hu volume, however, is a most welcome addition to the ever-growing body of work on ornithological literature related to China in general, and to Hainan in particular. Entries for each of the fifty-two birds listed in the Qiongtai gazetteer are arranged as follows: (1) original Chinese text; (2) an English translation; and (3) a commentary. Although anyone interested in ornithology will probably enjoy browsing through this handsome volume, the primary target audience is sinologists. Of course, having the Chinese text and a reliable and readable English translation provides great convenience, even to scholars who can read the original work. But the precise identity of many plant, flower, animal, and bird names one often encounters in gazetteers and traditional Chinese literary and historical sources (especially poetry) can at times be quite elusive, which of course makes the execution of an accurate translation even more challenging. For instance, is a yan 燕 a swallow or a swift or a martin? What about the boge 鴿? Pigeon or dove? And check yingwu 鴉 in almost any Chinese-English dictionary it will probably say “parrot.” But the name yingwu with reference to Hainan indicates a red-breasted parakeet with green plumage (P. alexandri). Now, there are certainly some useful general reference sources available on avifauna in China one can consult to help identify a particular species. But annotated translations accompanied by informed, scholarly commentary, as we see in the Ptak/Hu volume—executed by sinologists who command expert knowledge in Chinese ornithology (Ptak is a world authority on the birds of China)—are rare indeed.

Readers will benefit most from the commentaries prepared by the translators. And, I am delighted to report that Ptak/Hu have prepared their notes the “old-fashioned way,” and by that I mean their annotations are the products of rigorous philological and sinological spadework. Anyone who has ever consulted a flora and/or fauna chapter in a Chinese local gazetteer

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2 Ptak/Hu, pp. 34-36.
knows that these texts are oftentimes nothing more than a list, sometimes with brief commentary or quoted literary source (it is also likely that the list was recycled, at least in part, from an earlier gazetteer). The Qiongtai zhi is a good example of this practice. Some entries only give a popular or local name (suning 俗名) for a particular bird; others cite a line or a passage from an ancient book that mentions that particular specimen; and still others may only give the name of a bird and nothing more.4 And, in the case of the Qiongtai zhi, even when the compiler does provide some commentary in the form of a literary or historical reference, the modern reader will be hard-pressed to understand it. As an example, consider the entry on boge 鵓鴿 in the Qiongtai zhi:

鵓鴿: 一曰舶鴿, 色興鴉皂, 銀灰次之. 鳴哨夜放者尤尚.

The Ptak/Hu translation reads:

“Translation: Another name [for this bird] is boge 舶鴿 (literally, boat pigeon). Its color is largely black, like that of a ya 鴉 (crow); the silver-grey ones come second.5 Releasing [a pigeon] with a whistle [tied to its body] during the night [can be] of great advantage.”6

I would guess that even a veteran sinologist would have difficulty understanding the ultimate line of Tang Zhou’s entry on the boge (note that Tang says nothing about how pigeons carrying whistles are “advantageous” during the nighttime hours), though he/she would probably suspect the presence of a historical allusion. And this is precisely the kind of circumstance when the sinological research is required. As it turns out, there is indeed an allusion at work here; specifically, to an event related to hostilities between the Song dynasty and a rival state in the northwest called the Xi Xia (1038-1227). The Xi Xia prepared some signal pigeons, hidden in boxes, which were allowed to fall into Song hands. When the boxes were opened by Song military forces, the birds flew off, allowing Xi Xia observers to know how far Song troops had advanced. This led to a decisive Xi Xia military victory over the Song.7

In addition to identification of historical allusions, in several entries Tang Zhou also quotes from literary sources. Lines from the prose and verse writings of Su Shi (or Su Dongpo; 1037-1101) appear often in the Qiongtai zhi, and this is because Su spent three years living on Hainan in political exile (1097-1100) and wrote often about what he observed there. These observations include avian sightings. One of the more fascinating birds that Su Shi spotted near Dan’er 儋耳 (on the northwest side of the island) is the

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4 For examples in the Ptak/Hu translation, see pp. 58, 74, and 82, respectively.
5 That is, ranks second to the black variety.
6 Ptak/Hu, p. 25.
7 Ptak/Hu, pp. 25-26; p. 26, n. 16 includes a reference in the Songshi 宋史 to “signal pigeons.”
exotic, penta-colored beauty *wuse que* 五色雀, which Ptak/Hu translate as the “fork-tailed sunbird.” In his entry on this bird Tang Zhou not only quotes a poem and prose preface by Su Shi, but also cites a passage from another Ming work on Hainan titled *Qiongtai waiji* (Unofficial Account of the Gemstone Terrace) (1488). Following their translation of this material, Ptak/Hu present a long and detailed commentary that addresses several language issues, including punctuation, line parsing, textual variations. The relationship between the *wuse que* and *fenghuang* 凤凰, or mythical Chinese “phoenix,” is also discussed, along with how the Hainan *wuse que* differs from a bird on Mount Luofu (Luofu shan 羅浮山; in Guangdong) called by the same name, how the “fork-tailed sunbird” was believed to predict weather changes, the various alternate names for the bird, and much more. At the conclusion of their entry on the *boge*, the translators make a strong case that the bird Su Shi once toasted with a cup of wine was probably a subspecies of what today is known as *yanwei taiyang niao* 燕尾太陽鳥, or “fork-tailed sunbird” (*A. c. christinae*).  

This and other lengthier commentaries prepared by Ptak/Hu are based on their consultation of numerous primary sources and secondary literature. Among the most useful primary sources, are local, regional, and provincial gazetteers (mainly from Guangdong and Hainan), which often include information on avifauna. The authors also profitably mine the dynastic histories, individual literary collections (*bieji* 別集), Song compendia such as the massive encyclopedia *Extensive Records of the Taiping Reign* (Taiping yulan 太平御覽), Fan Chengda’s 范成大 (1126-1193) rich miscellany *Treatises of the Supervisor and Guardian of the Cinnamon Sea* (Guihai yuheng zhi 桂海虞衡志), Zhou Qufei’s 周去非 (twelfth century) geographical treatise *Vicarious Replies from Beyond the Ranges* (Lingwai daida 嶺外代答), various collections of *biji*筆記 literature, Li Shizhen’s 李時珍 (1518-1593) invaluable *Compendium of Basic Pharmacopeia* (Bencao gangmu 本草綱目), and even some traditional paintings of birds. Equally impressive is the translators’ command of secondary literature concerning avifauna published both in Chinese and various Western languages. The hefty bibliography for secondary works (pp. 130-138) provides more than two hundred useful references to scholarship concerning the birds of south China.

For many reasons, accurate identification and translation of flora and fauna in ancient China is a tricky business. And, although we have bird lists in the gazetteers, there was no systematized taxonomy in China until the modern era (the bird list in the *Qiongtai zhi* seems very much to be a random arrangement). Moreover, modern taxonomy rarely allows us to link a traditional botanical or zoological term to a particular species. Oftentimes, we can only identify a genus or family. And yes, on many occasions, we have

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8 Ptak/Hu, 47.
no idea whatsoever about identity. Other challenges and issues that hinder identification include multiple and different local and regional names for the same bird (just one example is the yingwu, cited earlier), and the fact that many names are generic, and can refer to a large group of similar birds (for instance, the que 雀). Thus, a tremendous amount of detective work is necessary to identify flora and fauna in ancient China.

Beyond explication of terms and taxonomy and the identification of allusions, what else goes into a commentary is ultimately arbitrary. Moreover, a journal article-length commentary could probably be written on any of the birds on Tang Zhou’s list. In some cases, like the yingwu, a book-length monograph could certainly be executed. The Ptak/Hu approach in this volume is to focus on classification (taxonomy) and identification. In my view, the results are commendable.

Roderich Ptak and Baozhu Hu’s *The Earliest Extant Bird List of Hainan: An Annotated Translation of the Avian Section in Qiongtai zhi* makes a major contribution to the growing corpus of scholarly work in Chinese avifauna. Their English translations are superb; their scholarship is impeccable. Younger scholars in the field of Chinese studies, especially those interested in the material culture of the imperial period, could learn much from examining the philological approach Ptak/Hu employ in researching and writing their commentaries, and would do well to emulate their concern with precision and accuracy. Ultimately, the authors of this volume have demonstrated convincingly that “sinology done the old-fashioned way” still works well.