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Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind (review)

Eugene Chen Eoyang

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Eugene Chen Eoyang (bio)

Yang Guobin (translator into English) and Zhou Zhenfu (translator into modern Chinese). [Liu Xie.] *Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2003. 799 pp. in 2 Vols. 110.00 RMB, ISBN 7-5600-2996-5.

The *Wenxing diaolong* is an incredible work: part literary theory, part literary criticism, part cosmological treatise, it is also perhaps the best guide I know on how to write well. The translator for such a work must be thoroughly familiar with the texts referred to and the terminology used, and must also have a command of language sufficient to do justice to the poetry in the treatise, because not only is the *Wenxing diaolong* a work about literature, it is also a literary work in its own right (which cannot be said for many texts on literary theory and criticism nowadays). In addition, the translator must be able to capture with fluency the particular Chinese flavor of the text—not to mention Liu Xie's unmistakably vigorous and imaginative style.

For more than a generation, Western students and scholars of Chinese literature have had to rely on Vincent Yu-chung Shih's bilingual translation of the **[End Page 587]** *Wenxin diaolong* (Columbia University Press, 1959). While extremely useful, this edition has been very much in need of revision, given the enormous progress made in Liu Xie studies in the last half-century. Shih's translation, while serviceable as a rough guide to the meaning of the original, was, however, leaden and paraphrastic rather than evocative and metaphorical.

This lacuna in Chinese aesthetics has now been admirably filled by this new bilingual edition, which is part of the Library of Chinese Classics series published by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, featuring an English translation by Yang Guobin and a translation into modern Chinese by Zhou Zhenfu.

To read the original in the light of the modern Chinese version and the English translation is an interesting exercise in genre study. The modern Chinese version is not a translation so much as it is a commentary, often quoting the original verbatim, and modernizing certain idioms and constructions no longer current. But the work of interpretation seems more evident in the English version, which harkens to different reference points, and employs a different palette of nuances. Where the original embodies concepts which may be understood by a native, if only by

familiarity, the modern Chinese version needs merely to quote the original rather than translate it, whereas the English must venture semantic equivalences, which cannot be the *ipsissima verba*. In this way, the modern Chinese may be less prone to "inaccuracies," but it does not fully address problematic phrases and passages as the English must.

I am filled with admiration for the achievement that the English translation represents. It is readable, clear, poetic where necessary, analytical where appropriate, and accessible to any attentive and intelligent lay reader. Yang's introduction (in English) is helpful and comprehensive: he is particularly adept at explaining certain key concepts in terms of commonalities (not identities) with notions found, for example, in Coleridge, Keats, Hopkins, and Eliot. This by itself is a considerable feat of accessible scholarship.

My only objection, inevitably, is with the title. There is no question about "the carving of the dragon"; it is the "literary mind" that bothers me. Although it has the sanction of Vincent Yu-chung Shih and James J. Y Liu, and despite the fact that it reads well in English, "Literary Mind" doesn't really capture the sense of *Wenxin*, which really means "manifestation of mind." The parallel with "carving the dragon" is extremely important: just as the dragon is brought out (in German this would be comparable to the multiple meanings of *ausdruck*), so literature brings out what is in the heart. I cannot claim to have found the perfect translation either, but there are times when I think that something like "Carving Dragons, Writing Out Our Feelings" (Yang uses "sentiments") would serve the original better. "Carving Dragons, Manifesting Meaning" is a more succinct rendering. I mention this because Yang graciously, but misleadingly, acknowledges my help with the title...

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