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Two Thousand Zhuang Proverbs from China with Annotations and Chinese and English Translation. Edited and translated by Zhou Yanxian. International Folkloristics 11. New York: Peter Lang. 2017. Pp. 268.

Zhou Yanxian has given the world the first published collection of Zhuang proverbs in English. Zhou Yanxian's collection of 2,160 Proverbs prints each one with a translation into Mandarin Chinese (written in characters) and a translation into English. The Zhuang population is approximately 18 million. The author collected over 11,000 proverbs from many Zhuang varieties. She speaks of Zhuang as a "dialect" (p. xix), but this usage reflects a very different and broader meaning of the word "dialect" than is used by scholars in the West. The International Standards Organization section on languages recognizes 16 Zhuang languages, and one author divides Zhuang into 36 varieties. Most Zhuang languages are spoken within Guangxi province in southeastern China.

The proverbs are arranged into chapters under nine topical headings, such as Family, Labor, Politics. Within each chapter, the proverbs are arranged alphabetically based on the Zhuang proverbs spelled in roman letters. The chapter with the most proverbs is Labor, with 491. This emphasis on labor and hard work is reflected in the proverbs themselves, e.g. "Depend on yourself for food, depend on others and you will starve" (#1454). The chapter with the fewest proverbs is Customs, with only 41. These include affirmations of human relationships "The tree root is long, but human relationships are longer" (#2095), but also taboos, such as "If you see snakes mating, your hair will fall off" (#2094).

There are many, many books that are simply collections of translated proverbs, without showing the proverb in the original language. Such books may be entertaining, but they do not give scholars what we want. This book, however, is prepared with scholars in mind; others may fully enjoy it, but scholars will find

additional features that make the book useful for their study. Some of these features include thematic chapters, a twenty-page index, and a seven-page glossary of Zhuang words that are used in the English translations, such as *Daogong*, “an expert who performs religious rites of Daoism, a foreign religion that has been merged into Zhuang indigenous religions” (p. 222). Also, there are explanatory endnotes for 466 of the proverbs, many of these vital to an outsider trying to understand a proverb. For example, the proverb “A tongue is flat but words are round” (#329) is very helpfully explained “Being round is wisdom in Zhuang philosophy. The Zhuang believe a round circle has no short points so nobody will attack and break it... A man’s round words will not offend others, and people won’t find fault in his words or criticize him” (p. 232).

The majority of entries in the wonderful index are nouns, a few are adjectives (e.g. “young”), and a few are verbs (e.g. “transplant”, “die”). For laymen, the index will be useful in finding proverbs about certain topics, such as “tigers” or “match-makers”. For scholars, the index is more important, including for counting how often various words are used in proverbs. For example, the index allows a reader to see that “man”/“people” are the most common words, which is not a surprise in any proverb collection. The second most frequent word is “rice”. This very quickly shows the economic importance and cognitive salience of rice in the local economy. “Diligence” is used 60 times, a sign of the importance of this virtue in Zhuang culture. Also, in a society where intensive farming was the most important economic activity, this is reflected in the fact that there are 21 proverbs that mention “manure”, but only four that mention “hunt/hunter”. A couple of Zhuang words were used in proverb translations that should have been included in the glossary, such as *Chunfen* (#1582).

Defining “proverb” is notoriously difficult. Archer Taylor gave up trying and settled for something based on culturally influenced intuitions, “The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking... An incommunicable quality will tell us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not” (Taylor 1962:3). Wolfgang Mieder gave something more specific and testable, “A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views

in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation” (Mieder 1993: 5 & 24ff.). The fact that the criteria for being a proverb vary among various language communities has been noted by

erb among the Akan of Ghana unless it has a striking image.

Thinking as an English speaker, I would not think that some of the Zhuang entries are truly proverbs. The following seems to be simply a mnemonic for remembering the phases of the moon, not a proverb, “The moon looks like a thread in each month on the first and the second day, a comb on the seventh and eighth day, a copper dish on the fifteenth and sixteenth day, but nothing on the twenty-ninth and the thirtieth day” (#1978). A number of other Zhuang proverbs are descriptions of annual events, such as “Spring fish swim upstream, winter fish downstream” (#2047). There are also many proverbs about weather predictors, such as, “The morning red clouds promise a nonstop rain, the evening red clouds a sunny day” (#1940). This is parallel to the English weather saying, “Red sky at morning, sailors take warning. Red sky at night, sailors’ delight.” Is this truly a proverb by English standards? Alan Dundes was clear, “Are weather proverbs ‘proverbs’? I would say emphatically ‘No!’” (Dundes 1984: 45).

Though some outsiders would reject some of the sayings in this book as true proverbs, we should remember, “The native speaker is always right” (a proverb?). Though the categories of outsiders may differ, the author of the book, a member of the Zhuang community, chose to include all of these sayings in a book for which she uses the word “proverbs” in the title. Simply pondering the various kinds of sayings included within the class that is translated as “proverbs” in this book is a useful exercise.

Most Zhuang proverbs consist of two parts, sometimes parallel, sometimes contrasting, e.g. “A sharpened knife does not fear hard wood, a diligent man does not fear hardship” (#1103). A few consist of four parts, e.g. “Fish live in the deep river bends, crabs in the mud puddle, shrimp in the small trenches, and conchs on the beach” (#48). There are also other forms, such as imperatives, but even the imperatives can be parallel, “Blow off the bran to see rice, dry up the river to see stones” (#28). Among the structures of Zhuang proverbs, it is noteworthy that the book

contains no examples of wellerism proverbs or dialogue proverb, types of proverbs that are familiar west of China.

The author has not been afraid to include “counter proverbs”, proverbs that appear to contradict each other, but each is for use in the appropriate context (Doyle 2012: 32-40). The following counter proverbs are listed one after the other, “The human relationship is deeper than the ocean” (#1418) and “The human relationship is as thin as paper, one’s favor is as heavy as a mountain” (#1419).

Krikmann (2001) has shown that common domestic animals are more common in proverbs than rare, distant, or exotic species. This is certainly true for Zhuang proverbs, where the index shows the most common animals are (in descending order): fish (92), cattle/cow/ox(en) (76), horse (53), dog (51), birds (40), tiger (38), cat (24), pig (23), etc. Note that of the eight most frequently mentioned animals, six are domestic.

Some of the proverbs are drawn from “traditional stories which have been told by the Zhuang from generation to generation” (p. xix), each explained with notes. For example, there is a proverb, “A dog barks at the moon” (#349), helpfully explained in an endnote, “This proverb comes from a Zhuang tale about a dog barking at an eclipse of the moon. It implies things seldom seen are strange and is usually used to describe a man who has seen little or whose experience is limited” (p. 232). Another example is, “The frog comes last and keeps the seal” (#2130). “This proverb comes from a Zhuang tale about a frog that comes last in a race but becomes the power holder” (p. 347).

The author states that the Zhuang proverbs reflect their values, traditional views, thought and feelings (p. xvii, xviii). Certain ideas were repeated enough to suggest that they are important values among the Zhuang: respect to mother’s brother, the joys of singing, the evil of gambling, the importance of diligent work, frugality.

Having lived in Africa for a dozen years and having read many African proverbs, I expected to find proverbs that stress the importance of the collective and downplay the individual. For example, Moon classified 18% of the Ghanaian Builsa proverbs in his collection as supporting membership in the community as opposed to independence (Moon 2009:134). In contrast, the Zhuang proverbs show a different value, “Better to go on your

own than to wait for others" (#1939), which the endnote explains "It is hard to depend on others" (p. 243). Similarly, "Depend on yourself for food, depend on others and you will starve" (#1454). Immediately following this proverb are four more that begin with the same Zhuang word *Baengh* "depend", all urging self-reliance. The index lists 60 proverbs that use the word "diligence", urging people to exercise individual responsibility. This is evidence relevant to the ongoing debate about whether and how much proverbs reflect local values.

Translating proverbs for a collection is a difficult task. For each proverb, the author has given a translation in Mandarin Chinese, written in Chinese characters. This is followed by a translation into English. However, sometimes the translation into English is literal, other times it is an attempt to sound like an English proverb. Note the following terse English translations, "No sweat, no rice" (#1716), "No hardship, no sweetness" (#1717), "Less talk, more work" (#1894). For each of these, the Zhuang and Mandarin forms are much longer. When translating proverbs in a collection, the ideal is to provide both a literal translation as well as an idiomatic, but I realize that this is much more work.

When I read a collection of proverbs, I always look for sound-based art in the proverbs, such things as rhyme, alliteration, assonance. However, it is not as easy to study some kinds of sound-based art in this book because of the spelling system that is used, and the fact that the spelling system is not explained at all. Zhuang is a tonal language so the spelling system indicates the tones of Zhuang syllables by consonants at the end of syllables, *z, j, x, q, h* each serving to mark different tones on the preceding syllable rather than marking their expected consonant values. (Syllables without a syllable-final tone-marking consonant are understood to have "tone 1".) For example, in the following proverb, the syllable-final consonants that are underlined are tone letters: *Caem_x raem_xgyoet lien_h ngokngin_z* (#1095). These syllable-final consonants are not pronounced as consonants, but rather they indicate a tone for the preceding syllable.

Understanding that many syllable-final consonants indicate tones, we can understand that the following proverb, *Monzmonz miz loh lohloh miz dou* (#386), when written without the tones, is *Monmon mi lo lolo mi dou*. Seen without the tone letters high-

lights the repetition of the nasal consonants *m* and *n*, the repetition of *l*, and the repetition of the vowel *o*. But, if we look at only the tones of the syllables, we again find a type of sound-based art: *z, z, z, h, h, h, z*. This proverb shows signs of deliberate artistic crafting, with vowels, consonants, and tones.

Another example to illustrate sound-based art is #562, where the final four words all begin with liquid consonants: *duzdouq gaej riu rwz loz raez*. Note also that the final three syllables all have the same tone. These sorts of patterns are evidence that these proverbs have been crafted with an awareness of sound-based art.

Awareness of the tonal role of syllable-final consonants allows us to better understand the *-au* rhyme at the end of each line of the following couplet:

Duhdoem aeu gaenx cau
lwgcing aeu gaenx gyauq (#896)

Some proverbs have couplets that rhyme both the line-final vowels and tone:

Ruz ngeng raemx couh haeu
Va hai mbaj couh daeu (#1248).

Sometimes the book uses Zhuang terms for calendar periods which are in the glossary, “An ox fears Dongzhi, a dog fears Xiazhi” (#1903). Other times it uses the English names of months, “March 3 brings worries, July 14 brings happiness” (#1865). For other proverbs, there is a mix of Zhuang and English terms, “Plant ginger in February and taro in Qingming” (#1802). This lack of precision in words related to the calendar will not diminish most people’s joy and profit from reading this book, but it is a hindrance to a person who wants to understand details of these proverbs.

As always, in studying a collection of proverbs from another part of the world, we find some that seem familiar. For example, the Zhuang have a proverb, “A flower does not make a garden, a swallow does not bring spring” (#1425). The second half of the couplet matches what Paczolay (1997:49) has identified as the 4th most common proverb across the languages of Europe. Another Zhuang proverb that invites comparison with distant proverbs is “One hand cannot hold two fish” (#172) and its sister “A hand

can hardly catch two fish" (#573). Coming from a culture that is very involved with raising fish, it is easy to compare this with "One hand cannot hold two melons", a proverb found from Turkey eastward at least as far as Afghanistan. There are familiar Oriental ones, also, "One hand cannot make applause" (#302). However, to a Westerner, almost all of the proverbs are fascinatingly unfamiliar.

Reading the book carefully is hindered by the practice of using endnotes rather than footnotes. I found that reading this book carefully required me to keep a bookmark in the back where the endnotes are, then I had to flip back and forth 466 times. The use of footnotes on each page would have made this awkward practice unnecessary. I do not fault the author for this since such policies are set by publishers.

This collection of Zhuang proverbs is important not only because it is a first, but also because it is useful in multiple ways for studying Zhuang proverbs. The book will be of obvious interest to those who enjoy collections of translated proverbs from other cultures. It will also be important to any library that builds collections related to China or related to proverbs and associated folklore. Of course, there is an appropriate Zhuang proverb for this: "The poor cannot live without pigs, the scholar cannot live without books" (#1065).

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