

***The Drunken Man's Talk: Tales from Medieval China*, compiled by Luo Ye, translated by Alister D. Inglis [book review]**

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Abstract:

Review of *The Drunken Man's Talk: Tales from Medieval China*. By Luo Ye. Translated by Alister D. Inglis. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015. Pp. xxiii + 214. \$50 (cloth); \$30 (paper).

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Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

Brief Reviews

The Drunken Man's Talk: Tales from Medieval China.
By LUO YE. Translated by ALISTER D. INGLIS. Seat-
tle: UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PRESS, 2015. Pp.
xxiii + 214. \$50 (cloth); \$30 (paper).

Since its discovery in Japan in the 1940s, Luo Ye's *The Drunken Man's Talk* (Zuiweng tanlu) has remained mostly unknown among English readers of Chinese literature. As acknowledged in the "Translator's Introduction," this eclectic collection of short stories compiled

during the Southern Song and Yuan dynasties (twelfth to thirteenth centuries) provides a rare chance to take a closer look at the medieval Chinese storytelling tradition (pp. xvi–xvii). Although there have been studies and translations of medieval Chinese stories, most of them are selective. Inglis’s translation of a complete collection gives readers a taste of medieval Chinese stories in their original “package.”

Pieces of evidence point to the hypothesis that *The Drunken Man’s Talk* is a sourcebook for storytellers. One of these is the division of the slim collection (about 146 entries in total) into twenty thematic categories, a characteristic that sets it apart from the genre of *biji* (miscellaneous writings, “notebooks”) popular during that time. While a scholar-official’s *biji* were commonly compiled for reading, the categories of Luo Ye’s collection might have enabled storytellers to quickly locate a source story for their performance. Most of the themes are related to romantic affairs, but a significant number of them are jokes. Another characteristic that suggests this collection is a sourcebook for storytellers is that its language facilitates storytelling. For example, whenever Luo Ye made modifications when copying a story from the earlier Tang dynasty anecdotal collection, *Record of the Northern Ward* (Beili zhi), the language of the story was adjusted toward being more suitable for oral storytelling.

Regarding the translation, the idiomatic and “old-fashioned” English contributes to an immersive reading experience. The gem of Inglis’s fine renditions is decidedly his translations of poems, which constitute almost a third of all the entries in the collection. Inglis’s polished poetic renditions not only capture the meanings of the poems and their literary tone, but also subtly convey their rhymes. This is best demonstrated in chapter 10 (pp. 65–70), which entirely consists of poems. However, a minor incongruity remains when reading the translation side by side with the original. Although the language of Luo Ye’s collection is classical Chinese, a language of the educated elite, the original Chinese text gives the impression that it is catering to the vernacular storytelling market. (This may or may not be connected to the fact that no biographical information can be found about Luo Ye in any extant record, indicating he might never have passed any literary exams.) The elegant English of Inglis’s translation, on the other hand, gives the slightly different impression that these stories were written in a highly refined language by a scholar-official who was well trained in literary writing.

Compared to the fine renditions of stories and poems, translations of the titles seem a little less polished and occasionally inaccurate. Taking the titles for chapters 9 and 10 as an example, the term *yanhua* (literally, “flowers in the mist”) as a literary metaphor is commonly used by Tang and Song writers to refer to courtesans or female entertainers. Inglis’s choice of using “ladies, women” for *yanhua* may lead readers to spend some time trying to make sense of why the poems

and stories in these sections are so concerned with situations unusual for ordinary women. For English readers who are not familiar with medieval Chinese conventions of depicting courtesans the loss of this connotation could result in a very different reading experience.

Lastly, I want to highlight Inglis’s notes accompanying the translation. Because of the poorly preserved original copy, and notwithstanding the aid from modern annotated Chinese editions, the translation of *The Drunken Man’s Talk* also presents thorny textual problems to be solved. Inglis’s notes, together with his introduction, not only facilitate reading the stories, but also provide a good starting point for further academic inquiries. There is one point regarding the textual history I would like to add: the existence of a possibly earlier collection with the same title, attributed to an author named Jin Yingzhi 金盈之 (fl. 1126). The relation between the two collections, which partly overlap, awaits further research. Brief introductions under some chapter titles in the notes section introduce important concepts or note the textual history of certain passages. Since these introductions offer decisive clues for the understanding of a stories, they would have deserved to be moved to the main text. Inglis’s rendition of *The Drunken Man’s Talk* is a pleasant and enlightening read and highly recommended to anyone interested in medieval Chinese short stories.

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