

Donald B. Wagner, *A Classical Chinese Reader: The Han Shu Biography of Huo Guang*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998. 135 pp. + 65 pp. of texts. ISBN 0-7007-0960-6.

Among China specialists, those interested only in utterly contemporary topics may, perhaps, never have to concern themselves with Classical Chinese. The rest of us do, and it is a rare non-native speaker who does not recall early days of slaving over text and dictionaries, trying to make sense of passages that only occasionally followed the grammar patterns we had learned, and taking an hour or more to read a single sentence. Many of us have heard more or less demoralising statements about how long it takes to learn Classical, and those who have not been fortunate to study at the feet of an expert have essentially had to teach themselves. A textbook of this type, then, is long overdue, and that it does the job so thoroughly makes it doubly welcome.

The principle of the book is that of the best post-beginner Chinese language classes: you take a manageable text—in this case the *Han Shu Biography of Huo Guang*—then you provide vocabularies, explain the context, and teach your students how to use the reference tools, so that next time they can do it by themselves. Of course, this is not as easy as it sounds, for even in a relatively straightforward text, definitions prove elusive, and philological and historical problems abound. Consequently, Wagner provides over a hundred pages of glosses and notes (mostly translated from the standard Chinese and Japanese dictionaries) for 292 lines of text; an indication of the amount of work required to start reading such 'real texts'. Students, probably coming fresh from Dawson or Shadick, will be grateful to be spared some dictionary work at this stage, and those studying alone will be especially glad of the notes and advice, while teachers will find their preparation load much reduced.

The introduction is invaluable, amounting to a miniature research guide. It gives good advice on background reading and, most importantly, provides detailed descriptions of reference tools (including glossaries of material objects and systems of translating official titles) and 'how to use them', for instance, to find names. Of particular value are three pages on the available dictionaries, making clear the shortcomings in research tools for the English-reading student, while giving a wealth of tips and hints on how to use Karlgren, Morohashi, and the 'fanqie' system.

The text itself is well chosen. The coherent narrative should help sustain student interest, but also includes an official document and the chapter-end commentary, giving exposure to some different styles. One can choose from punctuated (Zhonghua) or unpunctuated editions, though the glosses and notes refer to the punctuated version. Unfortunately, the facsimile reproduction of the texts suffers from a lack of clarity, although the practice at deciphering badly reproduced characters will almost certainly come in handy later! Students wishing to test their abilities after finishing *Huo Guang* can complete the 'juan' by reading Jin Midi's (unglossed) biography.

Wagner is a democratic teacher: a fellow-traveller not an infallible erudite. Throughout the book he is scrupulously honest about the difficulties and slowness of learning Classical, commenting on p. 53 that 'My students and I find [the official document] much more difficult than the rest of the biography'. This may be disheartening in one sense, but if, as he notes, contemporary native speakers had trouble with the Classical equivalent of legalese, then perhaps there is hope for the rest of us.

Wagner thus helps to demystify the study of Classical (and thus, indirectly, of China as well) by making it clear that it is possible to reach an understanding of the texts, even if you are not fortunate enough to have a master to work with. By pointing out the limitations of the reference works—even the *Hanyu*

da cidian does not contain every compound—he promotes the idea that there cannot be one definitive understanding of the text, and by inviting comparison of widely different interpretations of *Huo Guang*, he suggests that understanding the words of a text is only the beginning of making meaning out of it.

This textbook also reaffirms, indirectly, our need for more and better reference tools. Wagner complains quite properly about the shortcomings of *Mathews'* and the *New practica* dictionaries, but as he has found, students will continue to want a Classical English dictionary, so we need a better one. An equal need though, is for more textbooks like this one. Now that we have *A Classical Chinese Reader*, please could we have some similar works dealing with different genres?

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