

H-France Review Vol. 8 (March 2008), No. 41

Victor Segalen, *Stèles* 古今碑錄. Translated, edited, and annotated by Timothy Billings and Christopher Bush. Foreword by Haun Saussy. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2007. Vol. 1, xxxiv + 415 pp. Introduction by Billings and Bush, facsimile of 1914 edition of *Stèles*, English translation of the *stèles*, brief summaries of each *stèle*, critical notes, and bibliography. \$80.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8195-6833-3. \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8195-6832-5.

Vol. 2, viii + 246 pp. Chinese sources and contexts for *Stèles*; unpublished *stèles*; critical notes, Chinese sources and contexts for unpublished *stèles*; Segalen's draft of "To the Scholars of the Extreme Occident"; dates of composition and revision of the *stèles*; and bibliography. Freely available on line at <http://www.steles.org>.

Review by Yvonne Y. Hsieh, University of Victoria, Canada.

A little-known French writer in his time, Victor Segalen (1878-1919) is now acknowledged as a major literary figure of the early twentieth century, particularly by postcolonial theorists and historians of cross-cultural encounters.[1] Among his literary works, the best known is the collection of prose poems, *Stèles*, written and published during his stay in China. The second (1914) edition of this work, printed in a distinctive Chinese format on precious Korean paper, has now become a prized collector's item.

There are three existing English translations of *Stèles* (a translation of twenty-seven of the sixty-four poems by Nathaniel Tarn; a complete translation by Michael Taylor; and another by Andrew Harvey and Iain Watson) and two critical editions of the work (one by Henry Bouillier; and the other by Christian Doumet).[2] Despite the existence of these translations and critical editions, Timothy Billings and Christopher Bush have made a major contribution towards Segalen studies with this new publication. As they explain in their introduction, their goal is not to compete with Doumet's *explications de texte* for each *stèle*, or with Bouillier's review of the evolution of Segalen's drafts in the process of revision. Rather, they have attempted to "supply a much-needed detailed treatment of Segalen's use of Chinese materials" (1:40).

Since Segalen had a habit of noting his Chinese sources on his manuscripts, most of these have been previously identified. Over the years, different critics have elucidated these Chinese references in a variety of publications (articles, books, critical editions), as well as in unpublished theses. The greatest merit of Billings's and Bush's new edition is to have assembled all these sources in one single book. And where previous researchers have given only partial quotations from the Chinese sources, they have provided full texts in the Chinese original, along with the French translations that Segalen would have read, and their own English translations of the French translations. In addition, they have tracked down elliptic references made by Segalen on his manuscripts, and discovered new Chinese sources not previously identified. In Volume 2 of their edition, they also quote from Segalen's correspondence and from his other works (*René Leys*; *Le Fils du Ciel*; *Peintures*; *Briques et tuiles*; etc.) passages which have some bearing on the *stèles*.

The English Translation of *Stèles*

Billings and Bush have provided an elegant translation of the *stèles*, very faithful to the original, and more literal than the three previous English translations. In general, they have scrupulously respected

the original rhythm of the poems, preserving even Segalen's punctuation, except in cases where his usage is too unconventional. However, almost all of Segalen's linguistic transgressions have been attenuated. The translators are aware of this problem, as midway into their 45-page introduction, they pose the question: "Should our translation sound like an originally English text or should it sound like a translation from French? This, of course, is not quite the right question, given that Segalen's French is in many ways trying to sound Chinese...the *stèles* are written in a nonstandard French whose variance is in large part determined by the emulation of an imagined Chinese—sometimes imagined so precisely that the bilingual reader recognizes the calques of Chinese vocabulary in Segalen's diction" (1:23). Despite this, the translators have not attempted to imitate Segalen's bold transgressions, beyond translating "Stèles orientées" and "Stèles occidentées" as "Oriented Stèles" and "Occidented Stèles" (normalized in previous translations as "Stelae Facing East/West" [Tarn]; "Steles Facing East/West" [Taylor]; and "Steles set East/West" [Harvey & Watson]). Victor P. Bol's work has done much to make us aware of the nuances of Segalen's language in *Stèles*, [3] and though it appears in Billings's and Bush's bibliography, they make no mention of his masterful analyses. One would wish for more attention, following Bol, to the poet's use of archaisms, pseudo-archaisms, substitutions of one grammatical category by another, neologisms, unusual alliances of words, omission of articles and pronouns, elliptical constructions, anacoluthons, suppression of subordinate indicators, disruption of normal syntax, and other linguistic oddities, all of which contribute to creating an impression of distance and alterity in Segalen's work.

To duplicate systematically Segalen's linguistics transgressions would, of course, be an impossible task. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Billings and Bush could have made a bigger effort in preserving, wherever feasible, Segalen's syntactic or lexical oddities. For instance, one sentence in "Vampire" jars with the rest of the poem (and the collection in general) through its colloquial tone, so different from the *wên*, the formal literary Chinese Segalen sought to imitate: "Ami, ami, j'ai couché ton corps dans un cercueil au beau vernis rouge *qui m'a coûté beaucoup d'argent*" (1:142). Billings and Bush have translated this as "Friend, friend, I have laid your body in a coffin of lovely red lacquer *that cost me much silver*" (1:143). In contrast, both Taylor and Harvey & Watson chose to preserve the colloquial favor of the expression "qui m'a coûté beaucoup d'argent" by translating it respectively as "which cost me plenty" and "which cost me my shirt."

Critical Notes on *Stèles*

Billings and Bush have not only rendered an immeasurable service to all Segalen scholars by placing at their disposal the most thorough review of his Chinese sources to date, they have in the process also identified a number of hidden interlingual wordplays. For instance, they point out that "tant de bouches en dissertent" in the stèle "Sans marque de règne" may refer to two Chinese expressions which associate mouths, widespread praise, and steles: kou bei zai dao 口碑載道 ("Mouths like a road full of steles"), and bei juan yu kou 碑鐫于口 ("Steles engraved on mouths") (1:296). "Poussant un cri de porc" in "Vision pieuse" may allude to a pun in which the Chinese name for Catholicism, Tian-zhu jiao 天主教 (The Heavenly Master Doctrine), was mockingly pronounced (in a different tone) as Tia-zhu jiao 天豬叫 (The Heavenly Pig Squeals) (1:312-13).

Although Billings and Bush modestly claim that their notes "seek not to answer ultimate interpretive questions about the poems," "but to provide the prerequisite material for future interpretations" (1:5), their findings invariably offer interesting insights and new interpretative possibilities. For instance, they note a difference between the Jesuit Léon Wieger's translation of the Chinese sentence (which was the source of the epigraph for the stèle "Départ"), and Segalen's own translation of this sentence. Where Wieger had rendered the Chinese source as "l'empereur fit une première expédition dans l'ouest, jusqu'au pays où les oiseaux bleus se reposent," Segalen's own translation was "L'empereur s'en alla jusqu'au pays de l'oiseau couleur de ciel et se reposa." The two different interpretations of the Chinese source are reflected in the deliberately ambiguous ending of "Départ," where it remains unclear whether Mou-wang succeeded in reuniting with his soul. "In the one version, [his] quest is forever open and unfinished; in the other, it comes finally to an end" (1:318). In "Hommage à la raison," Segalen truncated

the original Chinese text for his epigraph. Wieger had translated the two lines in the *Book of Liezi* in their entirety as "Dans ce pays, il n'y a aucun chef; tout y marche spontanément. Le peuple n'a ni désirs ni convoitises, mais son instinct naturel seulement." Segalen, however, cut out the positive conclusion to each phrase, reducing the epigraph to "Dans ce pays il n'y a pas de maître, le peuple n'a pas de passions." He thus, according to Billings and Bush, "alters the original sense of the classical text from the emperor's dream-vision in which the people of a utopia conduct themselves perfectly without leaders or laws (in praise of the Daoist idea of *wu wei* 無為 or nonaction) to the rather cynical depiction of the masses as gullible, sentimental, and unimaginative" (1:319).

Minor Errors

In a trilingual book where one of the three languages is moreover written in two different systems (Chinese characters and their transliteration in *pinyin*), the risk of typos is great. The fact that there are relatively few errors in this edition attests to the editorial care given to the production. The easiest typo to make is in the selection of the wrong Chinese character. (Since Chinese has so many homonyms, the computer software presents a long list of possible characters for every word spelled out in *pinyin*. One click on the wrong character results in a mistake.) I have noted a few of these typos: e.g. 務 instead of 無 (in the epigraph for "Homage to Reason" [1:268]), 性 instead of 姓 (in the phrase "*xing* 性 as the 'family name'" [1:351]).

I have only been able to spot two errors in Billings's and Bush's translations of all the published and unpublished *stèles*. The first occurs in "Les Trois hymnes primitives," where "je m'éveille et ne veux plus voir que la nuit" is rendered as "I awaken and no longer want to see only night" (1:80-81). The correct translation should have been "[I] waken, and desire to see nothing but night" (Taylor); or "[I] wake and want to see nothing but night" (Harvey and Watson). The other error, found in the translation of the unpublished *stèle* "Le Champ armé de lances," is due to the incorrect division of a sentence. "Sois double. Menant d'une main le timon de la charrue,--fiche en terre, à chaque retour du sillon,/ Les lances toujours prêtes, palisades frêles et terribles,--et sème, coupe et blute et te repose." is translated as "Be double. Leading with one hand the beam of the plow,--driving it into the earth, at each return of the furrow./ Lances always at the ready, frail and terrible fences,--and sow, cut and bolt, and rest." (2:176-77). It is not the beam of the plow that is driven into the earth, but the lances always at the ready. The Chinese source passage from Henri d'Ollone's *Les Derniers Barbares* makes this abundantly clear: "c'est un impressionnant spectacle que de voir dans les champs briller les lances que les laboureurs ont fichées en terre pendant qu'ils conduisent autour d'elles la charrue ou la herse" (2:206).

Minor Quibbles

Billings and Bush occasionally dwell on insignificant details while neglecting to provide more crucial information. For example, they note that Segalen incorrectly prints the name of the author of the stele of Nanjing (the principal source for the *stèle* "Hymne au Dragon couché") as Han Diyuan instead of Han Biyuan (1:357-58). This detail is of no consequence for the understanding of the poem. It would have been useful, however, to provide some information on the historical figure Zhuge Liang (in praise of whom the Nanjing stele was erected) and on his relation to the poem. The "Sleeping Dragon" (Zhuge Liang's cognomen) was coaxed out of hiding by Liu Bei, King of the state of Shu, to become his Prime Minister during the era of the Three Kingdoms (220-265). He was revered not only for his military genius, but also for his devotion to Liu Bei (hence the inclusion of this poem among the "Steles Facing West," where war and loyalty to one's sovereign are dominant themes). Even in volume 2, where Billings and Bush give the full text of the memorial hymn inscribed on the Nanjing stele in Chinese, as well as its French and English translations, little information is given on Zhuge Liang aside from his dates (181-234) and the fact that he "is a monumental Chinese hero who figures memorably in the classic historical novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 三國演義" (2:100).

Billings and Bush understandably (and wisely) chose to translate from the French translations (consulted by Segalen) rather than from the original Chinese texts. It takes a lifetime of study to be able to translate classical Chinese (especially from the pre-Han period) with any degree of competency.

However, where the French translation is only approximate, or includes extraneous commentaries by the translator, it would have been helpful to point this out.

The bibliography is lengthy, but Billings and Bush refer directly to only a fraction of the listed works in their introduction and critical notes. Perhaps in this case a system imitating the French practice of separating works into two categories—"ouvrages cités" and "ouvrages consultés"—would have been appropriate.

Because of the length and thoroughness of Billings's and Bush's excellent introduction, Haun Saussy's insightful reflections on *Stèles* might have been more strategically positioned as an afterword rather than as a twenty-page foreword.

Finally, Segalen's Chinese name, 謝閣蘭, could have appeared somewhere in the edition!

Conclusion

These minor quibbles are in no way meant to diminish the impressive achievement of Billings and Bush. While most researchers would still wish to experience the thrill of working directly with Segalen's manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale, these two critical volumes have in many respects removed that necessity. Billings and Bush obviously undertook this extremely time-consuming project as a labor of love, and this has resulted in an indispensable research tool, for which all present and future Segalen scholars ought to be grateful.

NOTES

[1] Charles Forsdick, *Victor Segalen and the Aesthetics of Diversity: Journeys between Cultures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Chris Bongie, *Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin de Siècle* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Edouard Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996); Edouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

[2] The translations are: Victor Segalen, *Stelae*. Translated from the French by Nathaniel Tarn (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Unicorn Press, 1969); Victor Segalen, *Stèles*. Trans. Michael Taylor (Santa Monica and San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1987); Victor Segalen, *Stèles*. Trans. Andrew Harvey and Iain Watson (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990). The critical editions are: Victor Segalen, *Stèles*. Critical edition with commentaries by Henry Bouillier and including unpublished texts (Paris: Mercure de France, 1982); and Victor Segalen, *Stèles*. Edited with notes by Christian Doumet (Paris: Le Livre de poche classique, 1999).

[3] Victor P. Bol, *Lecture de "Stèles" de Victor Segalen* (Paris: Minard, 1972).

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