

SEBASTIAN EICHER, *Das Hou Han ji des Yuan Hong: Zur Historiographie der Späteren Han-Dynastie*. Studien zur Geistesgeschichte und Literatur in China, 22. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2018. viii, 214 pp. Literaturverzeichnis, Indizes. € 58 (HB). ISBN 978-3-447-10992-5

It fits well that four years after Hans van Ess's two-volume monograph comparing the *Shi ji* and the *Han shu*, another important book on Han historiography has appeared in the prestigious series "Lunwen." It was written under the supervision of Hans van Ess and Thomas Höllmann and is focussing on Yuan Hong's *Hou Han ji*, a chronicle of the Later Han dynasty (25–220). Compared with the altogether 830 pages of van Ess's work, Eicher's monograph, based on his Ph.D. thesis "Eine andere Geschichte aus bekannten Elementen? – Zur Historiographie des Yuan Hong" (Another History Made from Well-known Elements – On the Historiography of Yuan Hong), comes in a much more modest length.

Though neither the book title nor its author will be widely known among Sinologists (the same holds probably true for the *Banma yitong* by Ni Si (1174–1220) which was the point of departure for van Ess's *tour de force*),¹ already a first look

¹ Hans van Ess, *Politik und Geschichtsschreibung im alten China: Pan-ma i-t'ung* 班馬異同 (Wiesbaden 2014).

at the table of contents of Eicher's book rouses interest. Instead of beginning his study in the more usual way with a biography of the *Hou Han ji*'s author and proceeding with the contents of each of its chapters, the author devotes his attention wholly to the book itself and important aspects of Yuan Hong's (330–378) historiographical method.² Thus, Chapter 1 gives a synopsis of historiographical works related to the Later Han period, both the transmitted texts and those of which only some fragments have survived (pp. 9–36); Chapter 2 focuses on the various methods Yuan Hong used to convey his own perspective on the Later Han, though acting usually only as a compiler of extant materials and not as an author (pp. 37–63); Chaps. 3 to 7 deal with different topics which Eicher has selected in order to show how Yuan Hong's historical account differs from that of the *Hou Han shu* compiled by Fan Ye (398–445), and how both works used earlier sources, primarily the *Dongguan Han ji* (pp. 65–177); finally Chapter 8 deals with Yuan Hong's intent in writing his *Hou Han ji* as compared to Fan Ye's motivation in writing his *Hou Han shu* (pp. 179–192).

In what follows, I will at first try to highlight the contents of the five chapters that Eicher has devoted to comparing case studies drawn mostly between *Hou Han ji* and *Hou Han shu* (Chapters 3 to 7) and then take a closer look at the first, second, and last chapter.

Chapter 3 concerns the different views held by Yuan Hong and Fan Ye on the short interregnum that marks the beginning of the Later Han and the question of the legitimacy of Liu Xuan, the so-called Gengshi emperor (r. 23–25). By comparing the report in *Hou Han shu* with the related passages in *Hou Han ji*, Eicher concludes that the two accounts agree in many ways that Liu Xuan was not a worthy emperor. However, while Yuan Hong's record depicts Liu Xuan as an initially legitimate ruler who had received the mandate from heaven but made serious mistakes, Fan Ye seems to deny his legitimacy altogether, in conveying the impression that Liu Xuan could not even lose a mandate that was never bestowed on him by heaven (pp. 65–92).

Chapter 4 deals with Guangwu's decision to replace his former wife, Empress Guo, by the palace lady Yin, and her son as the new crown prince (the later Emperor Ming, r. 58–75), focussing on the question how the two historians evaluated this decision. According to Eicher, Fan Ye tried to justify this replacement by the fact that Guangwu's love for his former wife had faded and also because of her jealousy and bad temper, whereas Yuan Hong reports much more "soberly" of these developments and even seems to call into question why this decision was necessary, even if in the end the new crown prince turned out to be a good choice (pp. 93–108).

Chapter 5 is devoted to what Eicher calls "Dou Xian's Two Faces." Dou Xian (?–92) was a brother of the wife of Emperor Zhang (r. 75–88). Dou Xian more and more seized the reins of government, supported by the empress, and his power reached its climax during the reign of Emperor He (r. 88–106). His major success as a general was a military expedition against the Xiongnu in 90 AD in which they were devastatingly defeated so that the Han did not need to fear them as a menace to the empire's frontiers for a long time thereafter.

² Eicher's study is based on Wu Shuping's edition of the *Dongguan Han ji jiaozhu* (Zhengzhou 1987).

While the *Hou Han shu*, as Eicher argues, shows two different faces of Dou Xian, namely on one hand that of a devious plotter against the throne, and on the other hand that of an intelligent military officer, the portrait of Dou Xian in the *Hou Han ji* is largely negative, and its presentation of documents designed to show Dou Xian's treatment of the Xiongnu in a harsh light reveals, in Eicher's view, Yuan Hong's negative attitude towards Dou Xian. The most conspicuous – and very traditional – way of expressing this attitude is the recording of Dou Xian's career and activities in combination with extraordinary natural events such as the earthquake of the year 92 AD (pp. 109–126).

Chapter 6 reports on the increasing rivalries between what Eicher proposes to call the officials on one hand and the eunuchs on the other hand (in order to avoid the commonplace distinction between eunuchs and Confucians) and Emperor Huan's (r. 146–168) decision to prohibit any faction building at court, the so-called Proscription of Factions, in 166 AD. While the description of the circumstances of the proscription in both histories runs rather similarly, as Eicher observes, the two works differ in the way they describe the factors that had caused these developments. In Yuan Hong's account, the exemplary officials rose up in anger because of the eunuchs' hunger for power, heedless of the likely consequences that would follow their protests, while in the *Hou Han shu* the role of the officials was, as Eicher writes, more passive – they were victims rather than agents (pp. 127–148).

Chapter 7 finally deals with differences in the two historians' attitudes toward Cao Cao (155–220) and Emperor Xian (r. 189–220) during the Jian'an era (196–219). According to Eicher, Cao Cao, the central protagonist of the wars leading to the end of the Eastern Han and the establishment of the Three Kingdoms (220–280 AD), is less negatively portrayed in the *Hou Han ji* than in the *Hou Han shu*. In addition, Eicher writes, Yuan Hong's account devotes much more space than the *Hou Han shu* to reproduce Emperor Xian's edicts and other official documents, the reason being probably that among the texts that Yuan Hong's preface names as one of the sources of his own history was also a work with the title *Xiandi ji* (Annals of Emperor Xian) (p. 152, n. 11).³ According to Eicher, the relationship between Cao Cao and Emperor Xian in Yuan Hong's account is clearly represented as that between a subordinate and his ruler. A similar picture, he adds, is found in Chen Shou's (233–297) *Sanguo zhi*. A most interesting difference to the *Hou Han ji* (and also to the *Sanguo zhi*) is that in the *Hou Han shu* account each time Cao Cao moved into a higher position this was recorded as something he had achieved on his own initiative (*zi*) – instead of saying that it was the emperor who had promoted him (which would have been the usual formulation). The picture Fan Ye thus draws of Cao Cao is, according to Eicher, that of an usurper rather than that of a loyal subject (pp. 149–177).

While Eicher has a keen detective instinct when it comes to tracking the differences between Yuan Hong and Fan Ye in often seemingly tiny details, the question arises as

³ As Eicher adds in a footnote, the *Xiandi ji* was a work that “... in seiner Gestalt dem *Hou Han ji* nicht unähnlich war. Es erzählte in ähnlich langen Anekdoten vom Leben des Kaisers Xian” (... in its form [was] not much different from the *Hou Han ji*. It narrated in similarly long anecdotes the life of Emperor Xian, p. 152, fn. 11). The work must still have been existing when Pei Songzhi (372–451) wrote his commentary of the *Sanguo zhi*, because he quoted from it at length, and it was thus certainly among the sources that Yuan Hong and Fan Ye both had at their disposal.

to whether a non-knowledgeable but interested reader after reading these five chapters will have gained an overall impression of the positions and attitudes of these two historians. In one place Eicher denotes Yuan Hong's voice as "gemäßigt" (moderate) compared to Fan Ye's who lived almost one century after Yuan and also compared to Chen Shou's (in his *Sanguo zhi*) who lived one century before Yuan (p. 149). Eicher writes this, as we saw, with regard to Fan Ye's negative evaluation of Cao Cao (Chapter 7), whereas Yuan Hong described Cao Cao's encroachments upon imperial power as if they had been ordered by the emperor and thus tries to hide the weakness of Emperor Xian. Recall that in Chapter 3, Eicher has shown that Yuan Hong treated the Gengshi emperor as a legitimate ruler as long as he was the de facto emperor, whereas Fan Ye from the very beginning drew the picture of an unworthy candidate for the throne who had thus to be replaced by the later Guangwu emperor. Could Yuan Hong's attitude thus perhaps justly be compared with Sima Qian's decision to devote the ninth of the "Imperial Annals" in his *Shiji* to Empress Lü, whereas Ban Gu treated her merely as the mother of the (child) Emperor Hui in the corresponding chapter of the *Hanshu*?⁴ Unfortunately Eicher does not provide a separate chapter with a synopsis of the results of the five chapters featuring case examples, but confines himself to discussing some of these results in the chapter on the *Hou Han ji*'s general intent (chap. 8). But let us now take a closer look at Chapters 1 and 2.

As Eicher admits at the beginning of Chapter 1, the situation of sources related to the history of the Later Han is quite complex. Apart from the two transmitted works *Hou Han ji* and *Hou Han shu*, several works exist that also relate to the same time period, of which only fragments have survived in other works (mostly commentaries to later historiographical works and encyclopedias), the largest of them being the *Dongguan Han ji*. The works of eight authors which have come down to us only in fragments, collected in a work compiled by Zhou Tianyou under the title *Bajia Hou Han shu*, are shortly mentioned by Eicher (on pp. 10–11 as well as on p. 26, strangely among the heading of "still extant" works), but the reader looks in vain for a place in this chapter where those eight works which have explicitly been mentioned by Yuan Hong in his preface as the sources he had at his disposal for his own work – Xie Chang's *Hou Han shu*, Sima Biao's *Xu Han shu*, Hua Qiao's *Hou Han shu*, and Xie Chen's *Hou Han shu* – are discussed more in detail. Yuan Hong's listing of his sources is again separated from the rest of the passage Eicher quotes from Yuan Hong's preface, so that it is in fact a bit puzzling even for an attentive reader.⁵ Of more interest to Eicher in this context seems to be that these eight works are listed in the bibliographical chapter of the *Sui shu* where the *Hou Han ji* is classified among the books of the bibliographical genre *gushi* ("Alte Geschichtswerke," i.e., old histories) as contrasted with *zhengshi*, which Eicher renders as "Korrekte Geschichtswerke" (correct histories, pp. 9–10). Besides, Eicher lays much emphasis on justifying his decision to denote the *Hou Han ji* as an

⁴ For a comparison between the two historians' attitudes, see Schaab-Hanke, "Kaiserinnen auf dem Prüfstand: Die Regierung Lü Zhis und Wang Zhengjuns im Urteil zweier Historiker der Han-Zeit," in: *Frauenleben im traditionellen China: Grenzen und Möglichkeiten einer Rekonstruktion*, ed. Monika Übelhör (Wiesbaden 1999), pp. 1–36.

⁵ For a translation of the passage omitting Yuan Hong's explicit listing of his sources, see p. 16 (and again, with a slightly differing phrasing, p. 186); for the passage in which Yuan Hong lists the sources he had used, see p. 13.

“Annalen-Biographien-Werk” (a work containing annals and biographies, p. 11) by referring to textual categories in the *Zuozhuan* which David Schaberg has once called “formally isolated (non-narrative) entries” versus “full-scale anecdotes.”⁶ By applying these categories to the *Hou Han ji*, Eicher emphasizes the fictional, narrative character of the *Hou Han ji*, which culminates in a statement at the end of Chapter 8 where he writes that Yuan Hong went one step further with his *Hou Han ji* than the authors of Annal-Biographies before him so that his work came close to anecdote collections such as the *Shishuo xinyu*, with the difference that the *Hou Han ji* was not thematically but chronologically arranged (p. 192). But what about Xun Yue’s (148–209) *Qian Han ji* which Yuan Hong explicitly mentions as the *Hou Han ji*’s predecessor, together with the *Zuozhuan*? Should one not take the statement made by Liu Zhiji (661–721) in his *Shitong* quite seriously according to whom Yuan Hong had based his book on the genre (*ti*) of Xun Yue’s work?⁷ Eicher writes that Yuan Hong criticized Xun Yue and the other predecessors for not yet having completely understood the “Doctrine of Names” (p. 186), but in my view this does not mean that Xun Yue’s work did not have a very outstanding position for Yuan Hong.

Another problem concerns the question how confident we may be about the sources that Yuan Hong used for the compilation of his book. Eicher emphasizes several times that the *Dongguan Han ji* was the main source of both the *Hou Han ji* and the *Hou Han shu*, and he says that even when he used other works, Yuan Hong still based his own work mainly on the *Dongguan Han ji*, simply, as Eicher argues, because other works he might have used would also have been based on that work (p. 23). But even though Eicher seems to have been able to find such text parallels in the case examples he selected for his comparisons between *Hou Han ji* and *Hou Han shu* in the *Dongguan Han ji*, can we really know for sure on which sources either Yuan Hong or Fan Ye actually drew? And even when Eicher found that for most of the extant *Dongguan Han ji* fragments there is a counterpart in either *Hou Han shu* or *Hou Han ji* or in both of them (p. 25), it will not be easy to prove this for the whole of these two comprehensive works, simply because we do not know so much about the original *Dongguan Han ji* and also about other sources existing at that time which are now lost for long.

What makes things even more complex is the fact that the treatises on the Later Han of one of those authors whose works have only survived in fragments, namely those of Sima Biao (ca. 240–306), the author of the *Xu Han shu*, have been included in the now transmitted *Hou Han shu*, because Fan Ye did not live up to finalize the monographs (*zhi*) he had written himself.⁸ So one should be

⁶ David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography* (Cambridge, MA 2001), p. 175.

⁷ In his translation, Eicher renders *ti* 體 as “system,” but I think “genre” or “form” would be the right term in this context. See Eicher, p. 3.

⁸ Eicher mentions this shortly in his survey on the various works on the Later Han dynasty (p. 19), and he avoids basing any comparisons on the monographic chapters of the *Hou Han shu*, although this aspect would merit a closer investigation. Apart from B.J. Mansvelt Beck’s work *The Treatises of Later Han: Their Author, Sources, Contents and Place in Chinese Historiography* (Leiden et al. 1990), to which Eicher refers in this respect, see also the discussion of Sima Biao and the intention of his *Xu Han shu* in Martin Hanke’s *Geschichtsschreibung im Spannungsfeld zwischen Zentrale und Region am Beispiel der Jin-Zeit (265–420)* (Hamburg 2002), pp. 64f.

cautious when comparing the (earlier) *Xu Han shu* with the (later) *Hou Han shu* as to not base one's arguments on passages from one of the 30 monographic chapters of the *Hou Han shu*, because these could well be texts that Yuan Hong knew and on the basis of which he had composed his account as a response.

Perhaps the most intriguing chapter of Eicher's book is Chapter 2, titled "Wie man Geschichte schreibt" (How to Write History). As Eicher emphasizes, Yuan Hong's main effort was not to write texts of his own, but to arrange extant materials he had at his disposal and to present them in a way that readers would gain a certain picture of a person or an event – a picture that was intended by the historiographer and was often explicitly corroborated by his personal judgment. As to the degree to which a historian in general could exert influence, Eicher distinguishes four fields or aspects, based on the works by Paul Ricoeur, Paul Veyne, and others. Firstly, the aspect of delineation, which concerns the decision where to start and where to end one's historical account. As for the *Hou Han ji*, it was Yuan Hong's decision to start his account with the year 23 AD and to end it with the emperor's deferring of the power to Cao Pi in 220 AD. Secondly, the selection of events was, as Eicher writes, one of the major differences in the accounts of the *Hou Han ji* and the *Hou Han shu*; thirdly, the arrangement and narrative combination of the selected events into a historical account or historical fiction; and fourthly, the narrative forming and adaption of the selected and causatively connected events (pp. 40–58). All these aspects have been applied both by Yuan Hong and Fan Ye, as Eicher then illustrates by presenting the biography of Xun Shuang (128–190) as a case example.

While it is indeed fascinating to read in Chapter 2 about all the cutting and pasting tools that a historian from earlier times or even today can use to manipulate his material in order to convey a new image without creating many new passages, Eicher seems perhaps too confident that one can know for sure which texts Yuan Hong, Fan Ye and others really had at their disposal when writing their own historical accounts. For example, do we really know that the texts of the *Dongguan Han ji* had the same form back then as they have today in the reconstructed version? Since in my view there is so little we can know for sure, one should be very cautious when comparing the texts we have now at our disposal with each other, by using words such as "adding," "deleting," or "rewriting," as Eicher does quite often in the chapters presenting case examples.

Chapter 8, the final chapter of the book, is about the intention of the *Hou Han ji*. It is here that the reader expects that all the pains he or she had taken in Chapters 3 to 7 to follow Eicher's at times quite subtle conclusions will now lead into an overall picture of the ultimate ends of Yuan Hong's historiographic writing. The preface, according to Eicher, supposedly reveals Yuan Hong's adherence to the "doctrine of names" (*mingjiao*). What may sound as something new and hitherto unknown to some readers turns out to be a new designation of the old doctrine of naming things correctly, as Confucius is recorded to have instructed his students, thus following the old tradition of the scribes recording the *Chunqiu* annals. So in the end Yuan Hong's main intention in writing is very much rooted in the classical learning, as a successor to the early historians, as an exegete very much like Sima Tan, Sima Qian, Ban Gu, Xun Xu and all the others. This final conclusion, though in fact not surprising, may still be somewhat unsatisfying, because one might have

expected, in view of the political tumult in Yuan Hong's era, something a bit more pragmatic in Yuan Hong's writing.

The readers of this concluding chapter will probably fall into two groups. Members of the first group will likely find Eicher's account of Yuan Hong's approach compelling, accepting Yuan Hong's own bland statement that he will use past events to derive correct judgments about history – all the more so, since Eicher's account is written well. The other group, however, will probably be slightly puzzled why Eicher did so little to make clear that Yuan Hong in his approach only stands on the shoulders of earlier giants, confining himself to write sentences such as: “Mit seiner Suche nach Exempeln in historischen Aufzeichnungen reiht Yuan Hong sich in eine lange Tradition ein [...]. Das Verständnis der Geschichte als eine Sammlung von anwendbarem Wissen ist also bereits in der Zeit vor Yuan Hong ein gut nachweisbares Phänomen” (With his search for exempla in historical records Yuan Hong draws upon a long tradition [...]. The understanding of history as a collection of applicable knowledge is well attested in the time before Yuan Hong, p. 191).

This statement is, of course, common knowledge, and the reason why Eicher treats so curtly the long history of this trope before Yuan Hong is presumably due to the fact that in Eicher's close surroundings so much has already been written about the principles and ends of early historiography, especially relating to the *Shi ji* and the *Han shu*. However, at least terms such as the above mentioned “Namenlehre,” which Eicher identifies as being central in Yuan Hong's intention as a historian, should have been briefly traced by him to their early beginnings, to the rules ascribed to early scribes when they recorded the annals of Lu by the early exegetes when parsing the three *Annals* traditions (*Zuozhuan*, *Gongyang zhuan*, and *Guliang zhuan*).⁹

What is more, Eicher defends his decision not to include Yuan Hong's biography in his study already in his Introduction, on the grounds that not the author but his book was at the focus of the present study (p. 6). However, by his decision not to read Yuan Hong's historical judgements in the light of his biography but instead trace the more generic moralistic stance as the driving force behind Yuan Hong's historiographical writing, Eicher deprived himself of an important aspect, namely to examine more closely Yuan Hong's attitude towards Huan Wen (312–373) whom he, as well as the historian Xi Zuochi (ca. 347–373), served for several years.¹⁰

⁹ A still important monograph on the early tradition of *zheng ming* (rectification of names) that is absent in Eicher's analysis is, e.g., Robert H. Gassmann's *CHENG MING, Richtigstellung der Bezeichnungen: Zu den Quellen eines Philosophems im antiken China. Ein Beitrag zur Konfuzius-Forschung* (Bern et al. 1988). A further illuminating reading would have been Joachim Gentz's *Das Gongyang zhuan: Auslegung und Kanonisierung der Frühlings- und Herbstannalen* (Chunqiu) (Wiesbaden 2001). As for the *Zuozhuan*, I missed a reference to the new translation by Stephen Durrant, Wai-yee Li and David Schaberg, *Zuo Tradition: Zuozhuan: Commentary on the “Spring and Autumn Annals”* published in 2016, which in its introduction also highlights the *Chunqiu* scribes' recording rules.

¹⁰ On p. 180, Eicher writes: “Es ist beispielsweise nicht unwahrscheinlich, dass auch Yuan Hongs Vorgesetzter Huan Wen eine große Rolle spielte und zumindest einer der Adressaten war. Dies waren [sic] jedoch, wie wir gleich sehen werden, nicht sein Hauptanliegen.” (It is, for example, not unlikely that Yuan Hong's superior Huan Wen also played a grand role and was at least one of his addressees. This was, however, not his main motivation.) In a footnote (p. 180,

On a whole, this study is clearly and stringently formulated and strives to convey an admittedly quite complicated matter to a non-specialized but interested reader. It may thus be justly called a worthy successor work in the University of Munich series. Without any doubt, the conclusions Eicher draws from his analysis of the five case examples will suffice to convince even a non-specialist reader very strongly of one of his basic tenets, namely that Yuan Hong's *Hou Han ji* was indeed not simply some kind of short version of the *Hou Han shu*, as some scholars have treated it in the past and therefore neglected it (p. 3). Rather, as Eicher convincingly suggests, the *Hou Han ji* should be seen as an independent work whose author had his own moral stance and judgments, and which thus provides the researcher with what Eicher has called "den wertvollen zweiten Blick auf die Spätere Han-Zeit" (the valuable second view on Hou Han times, p. 193).

Let me add only one remark on a minor formal flaw: In general the present study underwent a careful reading and shows only few typos or misspellings. Only after the text was adapted to the final format of the series, there occurred, however, many wrong hyphenations, especially regarding *pinyin* transcriptions (such as Gen-gshi, Gu-angwu, Ji-ang). This is nothing serious, but could have easily been avoided in the final editing.

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n. 5) Eicher refers to Xi Zuochi, the author of the *Han Jin chungiu*. Xi is another historian who served under Huan Wen and intended to criticize Huan Wen for his pursuit of power (see Andrew Chittick's article "Dynastic Legitimacy during the Eastern Chin: Hsi Tso-ch'ih and the Problem of Huan Wen," *Asia Major* 11 [1998] 1, pp. 21–52). For Yuan Hong, Eicher could have referred to Martin Hanke's chapter "Yuan Hong und seine Chronik der Späteren Han" (see Hanke 2002, pp. 178–193), which elaborates the idea, based on an analysis of Yuan Hong's biography, that Yuan Hong had written his work with the primary aim to instruct and criticize Huan Wen.