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# FAN YE AND THE *HOU HANSHU*

## Introduction

BÉATRICE L'HARIDON and HANS VAN ESS

This special section on Fan Ye's *Hou Hanshu* is the result of a workshop held in Paris in 2017, organized by Béatrice L'Haridon, Université Paris Diderot, and Anne Cheng, Collège de France. The idea to focus on the *historiography* of the *Hou Hanshu*, and not the *history* of the Later Han, came up in an informal conversation on the relative lack of research about this *chef d'oeuvre* of medieval Chinese scholarship. Interest in Chinese early historiography has been gathering momentum for a while, but its main focus has been on Sima Qian's *Shiji* and Ban Gu's *Hanshu* and by and large neglected Fan Ye's *Hou Hanshu*. Traditional Chinese scholarship has included Fan Ye's *Hou Hanshu* in the canon of the "Three Histories" (*san shi* 三史, with the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu*) and as such, of course, it belongs to the foundational works of Chinese historiographical writing. And yet, despite the path-breaking analyses conducted by Hans Bielenstein between the fifties and the seventies of the last century, we started with the simple insight that, reminding us of the movie "The Third Man" by Carol Reed, the *Hou Hanshu* still seems an important player whose most interesting characteristics remain in the dark.

The three pillars just mentioned which have become models for early official historiography in China are characterized by a subtle intertwining of careful organization and compilation of various documents on the one hand, and of a highly personal endeavor, which included familial transmission and the sense of a sacred duty, on the other: But while Sima Qian and Ban Gu were at least partly following their fathers' path, Fan Ye discovered his vocation quite late in life. Although as a literatus born into a powerful family active during the reign of the Southern dynasty of Liu-Song 劉宋 (420–479) he could become a close advisor to emperor Wen 文 (r. 424–453), twice he became also involved in political turmoil, the second one of which proved to be fatal to him. According to his incredibly incriminating biography<sup>1</sup> in Shen Yue's 沈約 *Songshu* 宋書, Fan Ye was completely devoid of morality: greedy and easily resentful, lacking any respect for his superiors and parents, but having a loving relationship with his sisters and concubines. He finally fomented a *coup d'état* against emperor Wen in order to replace him by his brother, prince Liu Yikang 劉義康 (409–451). Desperately trying to find a motivation for this move, Shen Yue devotes the major part of the biography to psychological considerations and reconstitutions of discussions between Fan Ye and Kong Xixian 孔熙先 (ca. 410–446), considered as the other instigator of the *coup*. Left with such a dubious biographical account, we are facing the problem of its reliability. Fortunately, in

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<sup>1</sup> See Sebastian Eicher, "Fan Ye's Biography in the *Song shu*: Form, Content, and Impact," *Early Medieval China* 22 (2016), pp. 45–64.

addition to the biography a famous “Letter from Prison to my Nephews” (“Yuzhong yu zhu shengzhi shu” 獄中與諸甥侄書) by Fan Ye has been passed down to us.<sup>2</sup>

Fan Ye most probably received a high-level education in classical and historiographical texts, although his familial status seems to have been somewhat complex as he was only the son of a low-ranking concubine. As a child he was raised by an uncle. His grandfather, Fan Ning 范寧 (339–401), was a specialist of the *Chunqiu Guliang zhuan* 春秋穀梁傳 while his father, Fan Tai 范泰 (355–428), a powerful minister of the Liu-Song dynasty which he helped to set up, wrote biographies of recluses, among other works now lost. However, according to his “Letter from Prison,” Fan Ye’s endeavor for historiography was nonetheless much circumstantial: He discovered his own vocation as a historian when his political career was suddenly put to an end in 432 by a conflict with Liu Yikang, the brother of the emperor, who had been his protector until Fan Ye was accused of improper behavior during the funeral rites of Liu Yikang’s mother. Forced into exile, Fan Ye devoted his time to writing his *Hou Hanshu*, the achievement of which he described in proud words. So, as his two predecessors, Fan Ye began writing his *Hou Hanshu* not by imperial order, but as a private endeavor. The work was originally intended to consist of one hundred chapters, the same number as the *Hanshu*, structured in ten “Basic Annals” (*benji* 本紀), eighty “Traditions/Biographies” (*liezhuan* 列傳) and ten “Monographs” (*zhi* 志). As is well known, he was unable to write the monographs before his untimely death. Later editors supplemented the *Hou Hanshu* with monographs that had previously been written by Sima Biao.

From a historiographical point of view, Fan Ye’s work presents many original aspects: It was written centuries after the events that are reported actually took place. Thus it does not display the degree of involvement of a history describing a contemporaneous situation such as the *Shiji* at least partly does, or as the *Hanshu* that deals with the history of a fairly recent past. At least as far as the reign of the first three or four emperors of the Later Han period is concerned it tells the story of a period of unity, but then it deals with the decline of a dynasty. Fan Ye’s own times were characterized by division and conflicts; although some may have considered the reign of emperor Wen of the Liu-Song dynasty as brilliant, it actually was a period of conflicts, external as well as internal, conflicts that ultimately caused Fan Ye’s exile and death. The *Hou Hanshu* relies on a number of previously existing histories, and apparently not on imperial archives. Moreover, it offers an unprecedented development of what we may call the “historiographical paratext.” Fan Ye was most proud about his Introductions (*xu* 序), Disquisitions (*lun* 論) and Eulogies (*zan* 贊). They make up a much greater share of the *Hou Hanshu* than the comments on history written by his predecessors.

In order to give an overall idea of the different perspectives we explored in our workshop, we may briefly recall that the present collection of articles was preceded by two steps. Some of these earlier perspectives were impossible to include in this special section of *Monumenta Serica*. On the occasion of the 2016 Conference of the European Association of Chinese Studies in Saint Petersburg we first gathered for a panel entitled “Looking for the ‘Third History’: Compilation and Innovation in

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<sup>2</sup> The letter was later considered as the historian’s autobiography and is recorded at the end of current editions of the *Hou Hanshu*. See the translation by Ronald C., Egan, “The Prose Style of Fan Yeh,” *HJAS* 39 (1979) 2, pp. 339–401.

Fan Ye's *Hou Hanshu*." In order to probe the innovative aspects of the *Hou Hanshu*, the panel brought together specialists of Chinese historiography who approached the text from diverse points of view with a focus on such questions as compilative writing, spatial representations, legitimacy, and moral values. Through these different lenses, we aimed at getting a better understanding of the historiographical methods adopted by Fan Ye, the ideas and ambition that guided him when he composed a new text out of existing works. Our main approach was not to just read the *Hou Hanshu* as a source for the history of the Eastern Han period but to value it as a piece of writing with a whole range of specific issues.

By a detailed analysis of the textual history of the biographical chapter on filial men, the "Liu, Zhao, Chunyu, Jiang, Zhou, Zhao liezhuan" 劉趙淳于江劉周趙列傳, Sebastian Eicher (Institute of Sinology, LMU München) suggested that Fan Ye's compilation techniques should best be understood as a process of rewriting, heavily relying on such previously compiled historical works as the *Dongguan Hanji* 東觀漢紀 (Annals of the Eastern Watchtower) or the so-called , the *Bajia Hou Hanshu* 八家後漢書 (Eight authors of Books on the Later Han).<sup>3</sup>

Béatrice L'Haridon (Université Paris Diderot) studied the purpose of Fan Ye's writing of Disquisitions and Eulogies through the analysis of a few specific examples (especially the "Rulin liezhuan" 儒林列傳 and the "Kuli liezhuan" 酷吏列傳). She came to the conclusion that it may have been Fan Ye's greatest contribution to the development of Chinese historical writing that he spent so much of his energy to elaborate his historical comments that his efforts led to the emergence of a mature literary genre. The main reason why Disquisitions and Eulogies were so important to Fan Ye's eyes is that they encapsulate his fundamental vision of writing, which should be generated by the internal dynamics of reality and the personal reaction to them. For this purpose, Fan Ye tries to give a new answer to the old question of the distinction between good and bad, and tends to embrace historical complexity by developing a paradoxical expression.

Alexis Lycas (Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin) studied the representation of the Southern Man people in the *Hou Hanshu* through a comparison with unearthed documents from the Middle Yangzi region. Departing from clichés of officials educating barbarians, he suggested that the Man did not pose an ethnic "problem," but rather a political and fiscal one. He showed that most Man rebellions occurred not only because of the gradual imperial colonization of the Middle Yangzi, but also because the officials holding office in this area continuously questioned the Man's fiscal status.

Michael Nylan (University of California at Berkeley) focused on Fan Ye's "Letter from Prison to My Nephews," proposing to understand his historiography through this letter and comparing it with the "Letter to Ren An" ascribed to Sima Qian and other prison writers. Finally she highlighted the quite unusual tone of Fan Ye's Letter, which stresses not ideas or hard-won truths but hard-won styles.

Hans van Ess (Institute of Sinology, LMU München) discussed the collective biographies of the *Hou Hanshu* and their counterparts in previous dynastic histories

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<sup>3</sup> Sebastian Eicher's paper has been published under the title "Early Representations of Filial Piety in Dynastic Historiography: Textual History and Content of *Hou Han shu* Chapter 39," *Journal of Chinese History* 3 (2019), pp. 1–33.

and inquired into potential reasons for the changes that were made by Fan Ye, namely the omission as well as the addition of some groups: As the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu*, the last part of the biographical section of the *Hou Hanshu* is composed of various chapters that are arranged according to thematic considerations. Yet, the reader acquainted with previous histories will realize with some surprise that this section looks markedly different from its predecessors. It would seem that the rationale behind the arrangement of these chapters is a decrease in attachment to the state.

The following year, in September 2017, we met again, this time in Paris, in order to further develop and discuss our previous work. Several institutions generously helped to organize this workshop, the Institut Universitaire de France (IUF), the Collège de France and the East Asian Civilizations Research Centre (CRCAO). We were glad to have Michael Loewe and Daniel Morgan joining us. We decided to publish the contributions to this workshop and we thank *Monumenta Serica* for giving us this precious occasion to present our work to a larger audience. We also would like to gratefully thank Rafe de Crespigny for accepting our invitation to contribute his article on women during the Eastern Han dynasty. Both Michael Loewe and Rafe de Crespigny decided to write on hitherto neglected historical topics dealt with in the *Hou Hanshu* rather than writing on Fan Ye's historiography.

During the workshop, we continued to pay particular attention to the characteristics that are peculiar to the *Hou Hanshu* when compared with the earlier two official histories and also to later histories, namely its chronological distance to the historical period it narrates, but this time we paid more attention to the troubling question of imperial power. Written during a long period of political division of China more than two hundred years after the fall of the Han dynasty, the *Hou Hanshu* also reflects how a medieval historiographer dealt with an era which was haunted by similar problems as his own age. Hence, the decline of the dynasty still seems to be the main topic, and it more particularly seems to be the subject that preoccupied the historiographer's mind.

The first article presented here, written by Michael Loewe, advances many good reasons in favor of the idea that imperial power during the Eastern Han was much more limited than the narrative of a seemingly brilliant dynasty may suggest, and that its decline began in fact at the very beginning of the 2nd century. During major parts of the Eastern Han dynasty, the emperor could not be considered as the pivot of the imperial system. As previous scholarship has shown, the influence at court of the Empress dowager and regents from her family, or at a more local level of the land holders and local strong men played a much more dominant role than imperial power.

Taking into consideration the unprecedented importance Fan Ye's *Hou Hanshu* assigned to women of different social echelons, Rafe de Crespigny offers an original reflection about the condition of women under the Eastern Han dynasty. He reflects both the social and familial perspective, but takes also a physical and medical perspective into account. While the representation of women has particularly been subject to historiographical distortion, by making use of their representation in the *Hou Hanshu* we may still be able to arrive at some interesting conclusions about the role they played in society.

Daniel Morgan's article, which starts with the record of a solar eclipse that took place in the year 201 in Fan Ye's "Basic Annals" that surprisingly is not accompa-

nied by any historiographical comment, reflects on the sources and the reliability of the notations of solar eclipses in the *Hou Hanshu* in general. He concludes that, by omitting the already existing omenological interpretations of the solar eclipses that are otherwise recorded in a quite complete and reliable way, Fan Ye beyond his sources goes back to the historiographical methods applied in both Sima Qian's and Ban Gu's "Basic Annals."

Sebastian Eicher puts forward the highly interesting case of historiographical issues raised by the case of the Gengshi emperor who seized power after Wang Mang's fall and acted as a sovereign for two years during which the future founder of the Eastern Han dynasty, Liu Xiu, still remained his subject. Through a comparison between fragments of the *Dongguan Hanji* and Fan Ye's *Hou Hanshu*, Eicher demonstrates that, although the legitimacy of the Gengshi emperor was still debated in Fan Ye's time, he nonetheless chose to follow the viewpoint developed already in the *Dongguan Hanji*.

Hans van Ess takes a fresh look at literary works in the descriptions of the lives of three famous protagonists in that field, namely Zhang Heng, Ma Rong, and Cai Yong. Out of thematic reasons, Fan Ye chose to arrange their biographies in a row, thus leaving aside chronological considerations that otherwise usually guide the sequence of chapters in the *Hou Hanshu*. He clearly wanted to provide his reader with a bigger picture of how literati dealt with the dangers of the life of an official in an age of decline.

Béatrice L'Haridon provides an analysis of the complex issue of political critique in an authoritarian and declining political order, by discussing the peer judgments on members of the proscribed "party" in the *Hou Hanshu*. The heroic narrative developed in the "Danggu liezhuan" (Biographical Chapter on the Proscribed Party) is seen in the light of Fan Ye's careful presentation of contemporary critical voices and his own subtle judgment on the dangers of self-righteousness and moral rigidity.

Alexis Lycas develops a careful reading of the *Hou Hanshu* accounts on the Man populations and of related manuscripts and urges the reader to consider the specificity of the issue of the "Other" in medieval historiography, which is mainly informed by administrative and social preoccupations. By providing the "biographies" of benevolent officials, Fan Ye highlights the local officials' responsibility to secure peace between Han authorities and the "hill people" and among them.

Expanding our horizon the two following articles go beyond the limits of the *Hou Hanshu* in order to arrive at a better understanding of the place of Fan Ye's historiography. Stephen Durrant, taking as his point of departure two important texts, namely Ban Biao's "Lüe lun" 略論 and the Bibliographical chapter of the *Suishu* ("Jingji zhi" 經籍志), which to some extent constitute "Histories of historical writing," gives us a challenging reflection on the place that the *Hou Hanshu* occupies within a broader framework of ancient Chinese historiography, especially with regard to the compilation process and the use of official sources. Although mainly a compilation of earlier sources, the *Hou Hanshu* was successful enough to almost entirely erase all his predecessors.

Michael Nylan proposes a multi-layered approach to the task of writing history, beginning with Liu Zhiji's *Shitong* which leads us immediately into the heart of the matter. She singles out Liu Zhiji's discussion of Fan Ye, which occupies an important place in his overall reflection about past histories, and about how history

should be written. The reflection goes on with the interesting case of Fan Ye's discussion of Ban Gu as found in Ban Gu's biography in the *Hou Hanshu*. These explicit and implicit links between the three historians are of contemporary relevance.

We hope that thanks to these multifaceted and complementary approaches to Fan Ye's *Hou Hanshu* the reader will be introduced to the polyphony of this historiographical masterpiece whose author was eager to intertwine the words of sources, historical actors, writers, people in the streets, and of the historian himself. We also hope to have given some insights into the richness of Fan Ye's work which clearly deserves more attention than Western sinology has as yet afforded to it. We also hope, through the various detailed studies on how history was written in this particular medieval Chinese text, to have contributed to a better understanding of Chinese historiography as a whole and of its evolution. Fan Ye obviously further developed some historiographical tools which had been invented by his predecessors Sima Qian and Ban Gu.

It would still be essential to place Fan Ye not only in the context of the history of official Chinese historiography, but to also pay attention to the broader field of other types of works that led to the growth of the genre in China such as "miscellaneous notes" (*zaji* 雜記), "biographies of immortals" (*liexian zhuan* 列仙傳), local monographs, or others. Moreover, despite the fact that his *Preface on the Principles of History Writing* (*Xuli* 序例) was largely lost, we know that Fan Ye was very attentive as far as the accuracy of writing and choice of terms were concerned, and it would be worthwhile to devote a more thorough study to his writing style. These two perspectives would in fact show how Fan Ye's work fits into the larger scheme of the blossoming of literature during the Six Dynasties.