

PROCOPIAN STUDIES IN THE CHINESE-SPEAKING WORLD

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Abstract: This article deals with the study of Procopius of Caesarea in Chinese-speaking academia. The results of research on this late antique historian and his era, as well as the Chinese translation of his works, are included for discussion regarding their achievements and shortcomings. The article argues that, apart from Procopius' works, a variety of topics of the Empire under the reign of Justinian have drawn the attention of academics. It concludes that, despite much research having been conducted recently, the study of this sixth-century historian is still in the primitive stage at the other end of Eurasia.

Keywords: Procopius, *Wars*, Justinian, historiography, translation, Late Antiquity

The aim of this article is to offer an examination of Procopian scholarship in Chinese.¹ As one of the most well-known historians of the postclassical world, Procopius of Caesarea and his works have received much attention among European scholars for decades.² It is

¹ Throughout this article I follow the translation and texts of standard editions. I use pinyin romanisation to transliterate the reference into the English alphabet, and the English translations of these works' titles are provided in square brackets. Whenever the original authors' English translation of these works is available, I will adopt it rather than providing my own.

² For a survey of recent Procopian studies, see Greatrex (2014a) and (2014b). For researches conducted in other languages, see the discussion of the other papers in this volume.

important to know whether the Chinese-speaking community, which has its own long-standing tradition of history-writing over thousands of years at the other end of Eurasia,³ has ever completed any important study on this late antique historian and his works.

The scope of this article, however, should be addressed briefly before embarking on further introduction and analysis. To the best of the author's knowledge, nothing related to the study of Procopius has ever been published in Hong Kong, Taiwan,⁴ or by Chinese-speaking academics of other countries. Therefore, the discussion will be limited to Procopian studies in China, where numerous studies of the Byzantine Empire have been conducted in the past few years.⁵ The analysis of what follows will be divided into two sections. I will first offer a survey of important Chinese studies on Procopius and his age. Different strands of scholarship, therefore, will be drawn together. The second part serves as an introduction and evaluation of Chinese translations of Procopius' works. I will focus on different versions of both the *Wars* and the *Secret History* because the *Buildings*, a text that has received the least attention in the Chinese-speaking world, has never been translated.

1. Procopius as Historian

Procopius has undoubtedly attracted the attention of Chinese-speaking academics. As early as the 1980s, his works, particularly the *Wars* and the *Secret History*, were mentioned in several introductory works on European historiography.⁶ Some scholars criticised this sixth-century

³ See, for example, Hardy (1999), Wilkinson (2012) for the introduction of the *Shiji*, one of the foundational texts of Chinese historiography published in the first century BCE and other important texts.

⁴ Nothing related to Late Antiquity or the sixth-century Empire has ever been published in Taiwan; for relevant bibliography see Yang (1997) 322–5; id. (2004) 69–94; Wang (2004) 95–105.

⁵ See below for further discussion.

⁶ For a summary of Procopian studies in China, see Cui (2006) 5–8.

historian as an aristocratic nationalist who often showed his disdain towards the ‘barbarians’,⁷ while others praised Procopius for his vivid description of battle scenes⁸ and the reliability of *Wars*.⁹ Still others argued that as a secular Christian historian, Procopius’ theocentrism and emotion in the end prevented him from writing even greater works.¹⁰ The most noteworthy observation, however, is the emphasis on the didactic feature in Procopius’ works, an argument that would be developed by subsequent Chinese scholars.¹¹

Nevertheless, neither journal articles nor monographs on Procopius were published in the twentieth century. Whereas his accounts were cited frequently in *Early Byzantium and the Era of Justinian*, one of the earliest Chinese works on the postclassical world, Procopius’ life and works were merely mentioned briefly.¹² It was not until the first decade of the twentieth-first century that the first Chinese work on Procopius was published. As the first monograph on this late antique historian in Chinese-speaking academia,¹³ Yanhong Cui’s study warrants more attention.¹⁴ After providing a synthesis of the *Wars*, she divided the subject of Procopius’ work into numerous categories for further study.¹⁵ The most significant aspect of this work, however, is Cui’s brief study of Procopius’ historiography, in which the influence of certain towering Roman historians is demon-

⁷ Sheng (1982) 9–11.

⁸ Guo (1983) 68.

⁹ Zhu (1986) II.114.

¹⁰ Guo (1995) 167.

¹¹ See, for example, Cui (2006) 267, 269; Ji (2013) 146.

¹² Xu (1998) 134.

¹³ Another work of Yanhong Cui is a book aimed primarily at the general public: Cui (2013). Based mainly on the *Wars* and the *Secret History*, she proposed to provide an introduction to Justinian’s era. For a review of this work, see Zhang (2015) 31–3.

¹⁴ This monograph is based on Cui’s doctoral thesis: Cui (2003).

¹⁵ Not only important parts of Procopius’ *Wars*, particularly the military activities of the Empire and its neighbours, but also other non-military matters, such as natural and human-induced catastrophes, myths, and natural phenomena, were included.

strated. Like Polybius, this late antique author wrote a comprehensive history that incorporates not only the relations of different political entities but also various facets of the sixth-century Mediterranean world;¹⁶ as a historian who shared Livy's patriotism, Procopius' accounts embodied chauvinism and nationalism.¹⁷

As Zhiqiang Chen, a pioneering figure in the study of Byzantium in China, noted in his survey, Procopius' works recently started to receive more attention among Chinese-speaking researchers.¹⁸ Apart from Cui's monograph, a few articles on various aspects of Procopius were published. Through the analysis of Procopius' life and a close reading of the passages of both the *Wars* and the *Secret History*, Feng Ma argued that Procopius was a Christian who was fond of classicism and classical culture, rather than a pagan.¹⁹ In her article on Procopius' historiography and narrative, Yanhong Cui pointed out that both God and *Tyche* played important roles in Procopius' historical causation, and this late antique writer clearly inherited the literary tradition from classical Greece and Rome.²⁰ In addition, Yunqing Wang offered the first thorough study of Procopius' *Buildings* in his thesis.²¹ As for the Empire in the sixth century, Feng Ma analysed the military strategies in the era of Justinian,²² whereas Zhaoying Shao focused on the life of Belisarius, one of the central figures of Procopius' works.²³ Whether the results of these doctoral studies will be published in the near future, however, remains unclear.

¹⁶ Cui (2006) 136. The relation between Procopius and other Greek historians has long been recognized: see Cameron (1985) 33–46.

¹⁷ Cui (2006) 137.

¹⁸ Chen (2013) 24. This work summarised the recent development of Byzantine studies in China.

¹⁹ Ma (2013b) 209–10; he seems, however, to have been unaware of the groundbreaking study of Anthony Kaldellis.

²⁰ Cui (2006) 140–3. Again, the survey of Anthony Kaldellis seems to have been neglected: Kaldellis (2004) 165–222.

²¹ Wang (2011).

²² Ma (2013a).

²³ Shao (2014).

For the majority of Chinese historians, Procopius' work serves as an excellent database from which valuable information can be extracted for the study of the post-classical world. Although his accounts covered events from Anastasius to Justinian, the era of Justinian clearly received most, if not all, of the attention in China.²⁴ These studies are mainly concerned with the political, military and social history of the Empire.²⁵ Procopius' accounts remain undoubtedly one of the most frequently quoted primary sources in numerous studies on the late antique army and fortifications.²⁶ Meanwhile, as the most prominent figures of Justinian's regime, both Belisarius and the Empress Theodora became the focus of several research projects as well.²⁷ Finally, important catastrophes, such as the earthquakes that shook Antioch and other cities,²⁸ and the so-called

²⁴ Much less has been done to study the Mediterranean world in the era of Anastasius I and Justin I.

²⁵ Of course it does not mean that all these Chinese academics neglected the details related to the Empire's economic activities in Procopius' texts. For example, as a well-known anecdote in the *Secret History*, the smuggling of silkworm eggs by priests in the reign of Justinian and related discussions can be noted in some works: Xu (1995) 33–4; X. S. Zhang (2003) 54–82; id. (2005) 27–45.

²⁶ In the West, the *Wars* became one of the main primary sources in Xiusong Ma's research on the Romans' campaigns in both Italy and North Africa in the reign of Justinian: X. S. Ma and Fan (2014) 111–3; see also X. S. Ma (2015) 27–38. The research of the Roman East is limited to Dara and related topics. Zhaoying Shao investigated the construction and function of this frontier citadel: Shao (2013) 123–8; while the Empire's military history, including the role played by fortifications, has been examined by Feng Ma and Jialing Xu: Ma and Xu (2014) 168–73. Meanwhile, the issue regarding the presence of the 'barbarians' in the Roman army was addressed: Ma (2012) 10–15. While the Sasanian coins found in China and silver/gold vessels became the focus of numerous studies, rather limited research has been done to study Romano-Persian relations in Late Antiquity, not to mention the Persian wars in the sixth century.

²⁷ For example, Zhaoying Shao examined the factors that would possibly lead to Belisarius' promotion in the early sixth century: Shao (2016) 8–14.

²⁸ Peng Wu investigated the significant damages caused by earthquakes on Antioch by using contemporary literary sources: Wu

Justinianic Plague,²⁹ were studied as well. In short, many scholars in China clearly have been aware of the importance of Procopius, and the era of Justinian has attracted considerable attention. The majority of these projects, however, were merely empirical inquiries,³⁰ and neither the literary nor the contextual aspect of Procopius' accounts has ever received the attention it deserves. It is also unfortunate that these projects sometimes fail to take into account the arguments of recent research.

2. Translations of Procopius' Works

The second part of this article deals with Chinese translations of Procopius' works. As one of the most studied late antique texts in China, the *Wars* has been the subject of several annotated translations. The earliest project, though partial, was initiated more than half a century ago. Based on the Russian translation of Procopius,³¹ Miaoyin Cu—a well-known translator in China—completed the draft of her translation of the *Gothic Wars* (only Books 5–6 of the Loeb Classical Library edition of Procopius) in the middle of the twentieth century. However, possibly as the result of the political and social turmoil in China's politics and society in

(2009) 116–23; while the government's strategies in tackling with the destruction caused by these disasters were discussed by Rongrong Liu: Liu (2014) 146–57.

²⁹ Having compared the *Wars* to the reports of Thucydides, Zhiqiang Chen's research demonstrated the distinctiveness and independence of Procopius' accounts: Chen (2006a) 120–4. For the repercussions caused by this bubonic plague on the Empire's society, economy and even spiritual life, see Chen (2006b) 45–52; id. (2008) 77–85; and Liu and Dong (2013) 158–9. These academics, however, often fail to include the results of some recent research. For the study of the Justinianic Plague and its political and social significance, see Stathakopoulos (2004) and Meier (2003) 373–87.

³⁰ Based on the information extracted from the *Secret History*, Zhiqiang Chen studied the Empire's official posts: Chen (2003) 21–53.

³¹ For the Russian translation of Procopius' *Gothic Wars*, see Kondratyev (1950).

the subsequent decades, this version was never published.³² The year 2010 witnessed the publication of two different versions of Procopius' *Wars*. Having consulted both the Loeb edition and the Russian translation of Procopius, Yizhu Wang, a senior translator,³³ provided the first comprehensive translation of Procopius' works in which both the *Wars* and the *Secret History* were included. Based on the Loeb edition, another translation of the *Wars* was completed by Yanhong Cui in the same year.³⁴

These translations not only make Procopius' texts much more accessible in Chinese-speaking communities, but also, in the long run, could facilitate the development of relevant studies in the near future. In addition, numerous short notes and brief introductions added by these translators³⁵ will undoubtedly enhance the reader's understanding of Procopius and the Mediterranean world in Late Antiquity.³⁶ Several shortcomings, however, should be pointed out. It is a great pity that neither detailed maps nor indices were provided in these works.³⁷ This problem is further aggravated by the lack of a standard system for the transliteration

³² Wang and Cui (2010) 1.

³³ Wang and Cui (2010).

³⁴ This project originated from Yanhong Cui's doctoral thesis on Procopius' *Wars*, in which extensive parts of Procopius' works were translated: Cui (2010) 555.

³⁵ See, for example, Cui (2010) 79, 84 for notes related to chariot-racing and Ctesiphon respectively. It should be noted that in other cases the author fails to provide any information on the sites outside of the Graeco-Roman world, such as Adarbiganon (Proc. *Wars* 2.24.1–2) and Belapaton (Proc. *Wars* 8.10.9).

³⁶ Certain details of this works' introduction, however, remain unfounded. For example, the author believed that Procopius read many Eastern languages: Cui (2010) 2; but cf. Cameron (1985) 221–2. On Procopius' access to oral and written sources, see Börm (2007) 53–7. Also, she seems to have confused Procopius of Caesarea with Procopius of Gaza, suggesting that his letters and prose were important sources in the study of Justinian's era: Cui (2010) 5.

³⁷ In Yanhong Cui's translation, only a map with Rome's topographical details was attached; no map was attached in the version of Yizhu Wang and Miaoyin Cui.

of European names in Chinese. In Yizhu Wang and Miaoyin Cui's version, all the personal and place names are transliterated (from English) (e.g., Yu-Shih-Ding-Ni-An for Justinian), whereas certain standardised names (e.g., Cha-Shi-Ding-Ni for Justinian) were preferred in the work of Yanhong Cui. Because Procopius provides detailed accounts of events across the Mediterranean world, this makes it difficult for those less familiar with late antique history to locate the places and people mentioned in these works.

The accuracy of these latest Chinese translation will now be assessed. The translation of Yizhu Wang and Miaoyin Cui is one of the closest translations of Procopius' works so far—though such a faithful literal translation inevitably generates redundant phrases and clumsy sentences. The attached chronological tables of the *Wars*,³⁸ though not without errors,³⁹ could serve as an excellent reference for readers interested in the interaction between the Empire and its neighbours. Yanhong Cui's translation, however, is far from perfect. For example, in 540 Khusro I, the Shahanshah of the Sasanian Empire, watched the chariot race in the hippodrome of Apamea. The word 'hippodrome', however, was rendered in Chinese as 'a Colosseum' or 'a circus'.⁴⁰ In other cases the translator seems to have paid no heed to the significance, context, and details of Procopius' accounts. At the end of the fifth century, the deposed Kavad I was detained in the Castle of Oblivion, one of the best known royal prisons of the Sasanids⁴¹ in a coup d'état orchestrated by Persian aristocrats. Instead of translating this passage as 'being impris-

³⁸ Wang and Cui (2010) 51–62.

³⁹ For example, in the *Wars* Procopius reported that the siege of Amida lasted for eighty days (Proc. *Wars* 1.7.29) rather than eighteen days: Wang and Cui (2010) 51.

⁴⁰ Cui (2010) 79. The literal meaning of this word in Chinese is 'a venue for gladiator combats'.

⁴¹ As a venue where distinguished magnates were imprisoned, the Castle of Oblivion was mentioned in many contemporary texts; for further information see Kettenhofen (1988) 100; Traina and Ciancaglini (2002) 399–422.

oned in a prison called Castle of Oblivion',⁴² she regarded the treatment of Kavad I as a type of punishment 'being cloistered to oblivion'. Another example comes from the translation of Khusro I's campaign in 540. While Procopius reported that local people urged the Great King not to execute the Persian soldier who had raped a citizen's daughter (Proc. *Wars* 2.11.36-8), in Yanhong Cui's translation, it was the Persian soldiers who asked the shah to release their comrade.⁴³

It is worth noting that sometimes Yanhong Cui even seems to have omitted the details of Procopius' accounts. Having conquered Amida, Kavad I enslaved the survivors and 'directed them to choose out for himself all the notables among them' (αὐτῷ ἐξελέσθαι ἅπαντας αὐτῶν τοὺς δοκίμους ἐπέστελλεν: Proc. *Wars* 1.7.32). This sentence, however, was rendered as 'Kavad I enslaved all the survivors, and even the nobles were not spared' in Cui's version. In the end these Romans, according to Procopius, were treated by the shah 'with a generosity befitting a king' (ἐς τούτους δὲ τοὺς αἰχμαλώτους φιλανθρωπία ἐχρήσατο βασιλεῖ προπούση, 1.7.34), but the Great King's 'kingly character' was once again replaced by 'friendly attitude' by the translator.⁴⁴

The translations of the *Secret History*, Procopius' diatribe against the regime of Justinian, deserve to be noted as well. Having consulted the English translations published by Harvard University Press (the Loeb edition) and the University of Michigan Press,⁴⁵ Shuping Wu and Lirong Lu brought out an annotated translation⁴⁶ of the *Secret History*, together with a lengthy introduction,⁴⁷ in 2010. Compared to the version of Yizhu Wang and Miaoyin Cui, their trans-

⁴² Cui (2010) 8.

⁴³ Cui (2010) 80.

⁴⁴ Cui (2010) 14.

⁴⁵ This English version was translated by Richard Atwater.

⁴⁶ Like other Chinese translations mentioned above, numerous notes with political, social, and geographical information were added.

⁴⁷ The introduction is written by Zhiqiang Chen and Lirong Lu: Lu and Wu (2010) 4–29.

lation proves to be fairly readable, and a full bibliography at the end of this work⁴⁸ could serve as an excellent starting-point for further studies.

The translators' quotation of the English translation published by the University of Michigan Press, especially the titles of the Empire's officials, however, can be confusing. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this point. The Palatine guards were rendered in English as 'Scholars', whereas in Dewing's version, they were called the *Scholarii*;⁴⁹ in another case the words 'Domestics' and 'Protectors', rather than *Domestici* and *Protectores* (late antique guards' units), were quoted.⁵⁰ In addition, a few errors in the text's annotations can be spotted. For instance, what the Sassanids captured in the middle of the sixth century was Petra, a stronghold in Lazica,⁵¹ rather than the well-known city 'Petra' in modern-day Jordan. Also, Ctesiphon, the capital of the Persian Empire, is located on the Tigris rather than the Euphrates, while both Nisibis and Antioch are located in today's Turkey rather than Syria and Lebanon, respectively.⁵²

Conclusion

The twenty-first century has witnessed the translation of Procopius' works and the publication of a few pioneering studies on this classicising historian. In spite of a few shortcomings, the availability of different Chinese versions of the *Wars* and the *Secret History* will surely facilitate the study both of this historian and relevant topics. However, some innovative observations of these academics deserve to

⁴⁸ Lu and Wu (2010) 149–61.

⁴⁹ Cf. Cui (2010) 535.

⁵⁰ *Scholarii*: Proc. *Anecd.* 24.15; the *Domestici* and *Protectores*: Proc. *Anecd.* 24.24. For the quotation of these words, see Lu and Wu (2010) 117–18.

⁵¹ For the Sasanids' capture of this place, see Proc. *Wars* 2.17.26–8.

⁵² These places were mentioned in Procopius' description of Khusro I's campaign in the 540s in the *Secret History*, Proc. *Anecd.* 2.26. For the notes, see Lu and Wu (2010) 9.

be summarised. Apart from highlighting Procopius' didactic aims,⁵³ they also argue that this sixth-century historian shared the heritage of some significant earlier Latin authors.

Nonetheless, these connections have never been discussed in depth, nor did these academics provide any examples to support these arguments. Moreover, in many cases, these Chinese-speaking academics failed to take into account important works on the sixth-century Empire, and the majority of these observations add almost nothing new to the existing scholarship on Procopius. As for methodology, these scholars usually based their arguments on the reading and analysis of Procopius and other important literary sources. But the results of recent archaeological excavations at certain important Roman cities such as Dara and Antioch have been largely neglected, let alone the documentary sources in the sixth-century Mediterranean world. The study of Procopius among Chinese-speaking academics is still in its initial stages, and more nuanced studies are needed.

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⁵³ See above, p. 17.3.

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