



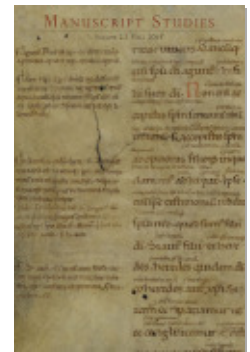
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*Catalogue of Yao Manuscripts* by Bent Lerbæk Pedersen  
(review)

Adam Smith

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tion to scholarship on the *Liber Floridus*, on medieval compilation, and on encyclopedism. The *Liber Floridus* is indeed “the most typical example of Romanesque encyclopedism” (185), and *The Making and Meaning of the Liber Floridus* will now become the starting point for all new work on Lambert’s book.

Bent Lerbæk Pedersen. *Catalogue of Yao Manuscripts*. Catalogue of Oriental Manuscripts, Xylographs etc. in Danish Collections 10.3. Copenhagen: NIAS Press—Det Kongelige Bibliotek, 2016. Xii + 126 pp., 48 illustrations. £100. ISBN: 978-8-776941-84-0.

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THIS ILLUSTRATED CATALOGUE OF the collection of thirty-seven Yao texts in the Royal Library, Copenhagen, will interest not only those who specialize in Yao studies. Anyone curious about manuscript cultures and how they support religious practice and other social priorities will find the material in this collection fascinating. The examples of student exercises and primers, and of manuscript copies of printed books, provide insights into how a manuscript culture sustained itself until very recently on the linguistically and ethnically diverse periphery of the print-dominated Chinese world.

The texts are in an accessible script and language: an unelaborate variety of written Chinese, written in plain though sometimes idiosyncratic hands. This is not to deny that the texts present many challenges of reading and interpretation that require an expertise in Yao studies. However, by providing many photographs of select manuscript pages, Pedersen’s catalogue offers a point of entry to the culture of these documents to many interested observers.

“Yao (瑶)” is a traditional Chinese-language ethnic classification, still in use officially today, applied to a population of about three million distributed

in southern China and in adjacent areas of northern Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. The same term refers also to a sub-family of Hmong-Mien languages spoken by some of the groups classified as Yao. Traditionally for the Yao, acquiring literacy has meant acquiring literacy in Chinese, specifically in the written form sometimes loosely referred to as “classical Chinese.” This is in contrast to some other groups of the Chinese south, most importantly the Yi (彝), or Lolo, who developed and sustained over many centuries a writing system that is both distinct from Chinese and unrelated to the Indian-derived phonetic systems of Southeast Asia.

Varieties of classical Chinese provided a near-universal written model for literature and administration in China, independently of linguistic variation within spoken varieties of Chinese. Classical Chinese retained this role until new written standards based on more up-to-date Chinese vernaculars were adopted by policy in the twentieth century. At various times, versions of the classical written standards have been in use for administrative, literary, and religious purposes in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. There is nothing exceptional, then, about the Yao adopting a written language, and aspects of literate culture, that derive from their Han Chinese neighbors.

The “Yao manuscripts” published in the book under review are thus “Chinese” in the sense that they are all legible as Chinese texts, and in many cases are versions of well-known texts composed in a Chinese cultural context. Among the pages reproduced in the book, I saw no sign of the systematic representation of any non-Chinese language. The texts are “Yao” in the sense that they are likely to have been possessed and used by Yao individuals, and in some cases copied or composed by Yao transcribers or authors. Unfortunately, beyond the fact of a 1970 purchase in northern Thailand, the history and geography of their ownership prior to acquisition by the Royal Library seems to be unknown. Nevertheless, the content of many of the texts and the physical format of the manuscript books is comparable to those in previously catalogued European collections, most notably that of the Bavarian State Library, where some twenty-seven hundred Yao manuscripts are held, and to books studied while still in the possession of Yao individuals. Höllman and Friedrich’s *Botschaften an die Götter* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999) provides photographs of fifty of the best-preserved and most visually appealing manuscripts in the Bavarian collection.

The provenance of the Copenhagen manuscripts is given in all cases as either “from a private owner in Parkiew, Northern Thailand,” or “from a private owner in Parle Yao, Northern Thailand.” I was unable to identify either of these locations with any confidence. Here, and in other places, there is the sense that the cataloguer has had to work with some very sketchy records of the original acquisition. The cataloguer reproduces the summary descriptions from the original accession notes without explicitly repudiating them, although it is clear that many bear little relationship to either his own characterizations or what is visible in the manuscript photographs. Item 6, clearly a collection of Chinese proverbs, was acquired with the description “Geography,” and item 21, a selection of classical Chinese poetry, was described as “Blessings on e.g. a wedding.” Either the descriptions had become associated with the wrong texts, or they were worse than guesswork in the first place.

The catalogue proposes that the paper for the manuscript documents may have been of Thai manufacture. However, several of the documents (items 15 and 23) refer to the Qing provincial administrative hierarchy. Those authors, whatever their actual location, clearly thought of themselves as living within the ambit of the Qing regime.

Because the particulars of historical Yao ownership of these books are not available, it is not obvious whether they represented at one time the library of a single individual or the possessions of many. Certainly, many hands are responsible for the texts, and in some cases we see multiple hands interacting on the page, adding material to a text initiated by another, or teacher-student exchanges involving corrections, models, and appraisal. Where dates are visible on the books, the catalogue reproduces them, and these fall from the end of the eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth.

The catalogue provides one full-page black-and-white image for each text, sometimes more, and sometimes color photographs. These provide a tantalizing glimpse into the manuscripts, their physical form and state of preservation, and the cognitive world of their users. In these respects they convey far more than the indispensable but rigid apparatus of the catalogue proper. They also allow the reader to see beyond the limited information about contents and function reported in the usually laconic “notes” field, or

in the transcribed (but not punctuated or translated) incipits, which typically give little away.

A photograph from the middle of the ninety-six-page item 15 shows a pro forma contract for the purchase of a grave plot, in which Daoist deities—Celestial Master Zhang (張天師), White Crane Immortal Master (白鶴仙師), and others—are called as witnesses to the transaction, so that “after burial, the plot will serve as a dwelling place for the spirits, not to be removed for a thousand years, not to be displaced for ten-thousand seasons.” The use of placeholders for dates, geographic locations, and the boundaries of the graveyard imply that it functioned not as the final contract, but as a model for documents of the type. Or perhaps the contract was to be read aloud, as Pedersen’s classification, “Handbook of prayers,” suggests.

Besides these religious or ceremonial texts that belong to a tradition sometimes referred to as “Yao Daoism,” much of the collection is made up of writings connected with literacy acquisition: worked exercises, primers, and proverb collections. Item 10 shows the painstaking copying of four-character phrases by a student, and the no less painstaking corrections made by a teacher. Items 6 and 12 are two copies of the same compendium of well-known phrases from classical and popular literature. Numbingly familiar canonical sayings of Confucius (“When one’s parents are alive one should not travel far, and if one travels the destination must be clear”) rub shoulders with variations on more recent aphorisms (“When one’s household is poor, one resents that the night is short; when lonely, that it is too long”). Items 27 and 28 are manuscript copies of a well-known printed text of a similarly popular didactic nature, the rhyming and metrical *Expanded Sagely Phrases from Ancient Times* (*Zengguang xishi xianwen*, 增廣昔時賢文: “Painting a tiger, one paints the skin, since painting the bones is hard. / Knowing a person, one knows the face, but not the heart. / Money and wealth are like a pile of manure. / Humanity and righteousness are worth a thousand pieces of gold.”).

The presence in the collection of these manuscript copies reflects the high cost of obtaining printed editions produced in metropolitan Chinese areas. The only printed text in the collection is a version of a commonplace

Chinese literacy primer, the *Explanations on the Meaning of the Three-Syllable Classic* (Item 30, *San zi jing jiangyi*, 三字經講義). Hand copying also enabled the circulation of texts whose printing had been proscribed, as is the case with the *New Edition of the Lawyer's Thunder to Scare Heaven* (Item 31, *Xinke falü jingtian lei*, 新刻法律驚天雷), a manual for success in legal cases, which was banned in the eighteenth century for its disruptive social effects.

It is clear from the images in Pedersen's catalogue that many of the manuscripts were already in a very fragile state when they were acquired, and that many cannot be repeatedly handled without further deterioration. Open-access digitization would liberate their fascinating contents to a broad readership.

*Analysis of Ancient and Medieval Texts and Manuscripts: Digital Approaches*. T. L. Andrews and C. Macé, eds. Turnhout: Brepols, 2014. 338 pp., 27 b/w illustrations, 51 color illustrations, 26 b/w tables. €97. ISBN: 978-2-503-55268-2.

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**I**N 2010, STANFORD UNIVERSITY Library estimated that less than 5 percent of ancient and medieval documents and manuscripts had been made available online. In 2017, that number is probably still below 10 percent. The vast majority of digitized manuscripts and documents await transcription; many classical and medieval texts are available online only in outdated or unreliable editions. It is still not clear whether emerging specifications—for example, the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Annotation Data Model or the International Image Interoperability Framework—will deliver on their promise that cultural heritage data sets can be released from institutional “silos,” aggregated, shared, linked, and opened to new forms of