Review


Procopius’ world — Byzantine history during the sixth century is written by Yanhong Cui, a young Byzantine scholar whose doctoral thesis examines Procopius of Caesarea’s The Wars of Justinian. As the title of the book suggests, the Cui mainly intends to present Byzantine history during the sixth century to the general public of China based on the works by Procopius: The Wars of Justinian, Secret History, and The Buildings of Justinian.

This book is from the World History Easily Read series, which includes The Stories of Akhnaton Pharaoh, The Stories of Roman Legions, Sumerian Culture, The Caliphate, Procopius’ World, and so on. And some works about modern history will also be published.¹ The purpose of the series is to spread historical knowledge among the general public in China. Chengdan Qian, editor of the series and a famous Chinese scholar, says in the preface of the series:

> It is important that the Chinese should learn more knowledge of world history so that they will take another step toward becoming a part of the living world. The problem is, however, that world history knowledge is still lacking for many Chinese people, in this regard there is much work required.”²

This series is an important part of that work, as Qian says, “It will encourage more people to know more world history”,³ which was written in plain language and based on primary historical sources.

¹ It includes Tokyo Trials, Blue Helmets, American Constitution, The Automobiles and Modern Society, and so on.
² Chengdan Qian, preface to Procopius’ world — Byzantine history during the 6th century, by Yanhong Cui (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2013), 1.
³ Qian, preface, 3.
Procopius’ World is a part of this series, thus the writing style of the book is a little different from most academic works. For example, there are various pictures in each chapter, which make the book more graphic. Some of the pictures are about the places of historic interest, some are about the antiques, and some are about computerized images of Byzantine soldiers and weapons. In the preface to the book, Cui briefly introduces Byzantine history: the origin of its name, its dynasties, its geography, its capital, changes of its territory, and its religion. Also, Cui describes the situation in China in the sixth century in order to give Chinese readers a point of reference.

The main body of the book consists of three parts, the first part introduces the famous persons of Byzantium in the sixth century, including four chapters on Procopius, Justinian, Belisarius, and Theodora. The second part deals with the events and contains two chapters named The Rebellion of Nika and The Plague. The third part moves further into the wars occurring in the sixth century, consisting of three chapters. They are about the wars against the Persians, Vandals, and Goths.

Considering the purpose of the book, Cui writes the first part mainly based on Secret History. As we know the very style of the book is loved by the masses, and was believed to be true. Cui, therefore, quotes it often and explains these references with light-hearted humor. As in the first part, when she introduces the marriage of Justinian, she says Theodora is not a noble, ‘She is just a lap dancer in the red-light districts of Constantinople, sometimes even performing pornographic shows, a little like an AV idol in modern time’. That is one important character of Cui’s book, the author introduces the individuals, the events and the wars in plain words, as most Chinese readers will not know who Theodora was or about her humble origin. But all of them know what red-light districts and AV idols are, so they could easily understand how unusual the empress was and why Procopius despised her marriage with Justinian in his Secret History.

Next, Cui introduces the great military achievements of Belisarius, and then she shows his unhappy family situation. As we know, the topic of family is more appealing to the general public; in the chapter covering the Nika revolt, she says the Blue and Green parties were ‘the Gangs of the capital’. Most words reveal the easy

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4 Yanhong Cui, Procopius’ world — Byzantine history during the 6th century (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2013), 48.
style and will be loved by its readers. At the same time, the book is based on a primary source.

Also, there is an academic-styled chapter in the book: chapter six, The Plague. Cui summarizes some ancient and modern scholars’ achievements in this chapter in order to find out the origin of the Plague, what kind of disease it might have been, and its effects. In What kind of disease was it, Cui describes the symptoms conveyed by the historical records, and then compares them with modern records of some symptoms, drawing the conclusion that “to be exact, it was Lenticulae”. The work of this chapter is heavy. For getting the exact conclusion, Cui not only needs to check the records about the Plague at different times, but also to investigate the symptoms from a medical standpoint, therefore it is an academic-styled chapter. At the end of the chapter, Cui says, “the Plague damaged some Byzantine progress in the sixth century: the golden age of Justinian was gone forever”, to sum up the influence of the Plague. In her opinion, it was one reason for the decline of Byzantium in the sixth century.

On the whole, this book introduces an important Byzantine time to the Chinese readers. It seems to be a popular literature, and also can be seen as a composition. As a part of the series, the book stands out as the efforts of a Chinese scholar who will devote herself to the spread of world history knowledge among the masses, and to solve the problem Chengdan Qian mentioned in the preface to the series.

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6 Cui, Procopius’ world, 130.
7 Cui, Procopius’ world, 136.