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The Revealed and the Hidden: a Reading of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*

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Abstract

In many respects, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* consciously avoids traditional approaches to the compilation of literary history in order to emphasize its unique understanding of Chinese literature. The innovative approaches described by the editors have yielded practical results, particularly in the attempt to “avoid the division of the field into genres and to move toward a more integrated historical approach.” They chose a new approach to historical periodization, and the book “pays greater attention to the ways in which all received Chinese literary texts are filtered and reconstructed by later generations.” However, there are still some shortcomings, such as the neglect of certain literary genres, the perfunctory choice of the dividing moment between the two volumes, and the subjective nature of the historical reconstruction. Furthermore, two fundamental problems characterize the book’s discussion of literary history: the limitations of the editors’ and authors’ specialized research experience, and the work’s use of recent academic research. The editors also fail to adequately respect academic norms. Therefore, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* is an innovative and unique work of literary history that nonetheless contains major shortcomings, leaving much room for improvement.

Keywords

The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature – innovation – shortcomings

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Since the early days of the Republican period (1912–1949), roughly one thousand works have been published on the subject of Chinese literary history. Although their quality and the styles they used have varied greatly, it appears to the reader that there has been a significant amount of repetition. A close inspection of these literary histories shows that, from the design of the chapters and sections to the division of historical eras, and even the choices made as to which authors and works to include, they are all very much alike. While present-day interest in the writing of literary history has not diminished, it is genuinely rare to be able to think outside the square and innovate. *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* is nonetheless a work of literary history that is worthy of attention and discussion.

1 Perspectives, Approaches, and Contributions

The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature is clearly distinct from its counterparts produced in China. With fourteen chapters, it encapsulates the entire course of Chinese literature and its leading content, from its inception to 2008. It is truly a significant history of Chinese literature, comprehensive in its scope. The authors are all well-known contemporary sinologists in the West. They possess both an intimate knowledge of Chinese literary texts and a solid grounding in Western cultural and literary theory. As a result, their perspectives on Chinese literature are fresh and unique, and are arranged simply and logically. *The Cambridge History* has become an accessible introduction to the foundations of Chinese literature and the course of its development. A reading of the work can furnish Western readers uninitiated in Chinese literature with an overall understanding of the subject. This has undoubtedly played a major role in promoting the exchange of Chinese and Western literature.

Moreover, the book is distinctively innovative. In many respects, it consciously avoids traditional approaches to the compilation of literary history, and reveals a unique grasp of the attributes and accomplishments of Chinese literature. In the preface to the Chinese edition, the original editors state that “the perspectives presented in this book differ to some extent from mainstream thought on, and approaches to, literary history writing in present-day China.”¹ Broadly speaking, the prefaces to the Chinese and English editions list

1 Sun Kangyi [Kang-i Sun Chang] 孫康宜, “Zhongwen ban xuyan” 中文版序言, in vol. 1 of *Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxue shi* 劍橋中國文學史, ed. Sun Kangyi [Kang-i Sun Chang] 孫康宜 and Yuwen suo’an [Stephen Owen] 宇文所安, trans. Liu Qian 劉倩 et al. (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2013), 1.

three main innovations, as follows: first, the book attempts “as much as possible to avoid the division of the field into genres and to move toward a more integrated historical approach, creating a cultural history or a history of literary culture”;² second, via an approach in which dynasty-based periodization is not strictly adhered to, the book “approaches periodization differently by using a different method to track the outcomes and influences produced by ideas of various periods”;³ and third, it “pays greater attention to the ways in which all received Chinese literary texts are filtered and reconstructed by later generations.”⁴ Besides these innovations, the book also explores the impact of writing and printing methods and commercial publishing upon literary works, and discusses women’s writing and prosimetric and verse narrative (*shuo-chang wenxue* 說唱文學). In terms of content and editing, these focal points all set the book apart from literary histories previously published in China.

2 Results and Shortcomings

A reading of the book’s content, particularly that of volume II (with which I am most familiar), allows me to review the specific results of the innovative approaches as described by the editors.

The first is the avoidance of organizing materials by literary genre, and in its place, a “more integrated approach to cultural history.” Such a technique is capable of tying various key elements of history and culture to literature to produce integrated accounts, thereby highlighting the main literary concerns of a given era, and revealing previously overlooked phenomena in literary history. For instance, chapter 6 of volume I, on literary narratives in the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), is not arranged by traditional literary schools. Rather, it captures the theme of “China turning inward” as a result of the tensions between China’s north and south, the tight restrictions that Neo-Confucianism placed on literary output, as well as the impact of organizations and printing technology on literary styles, and so forth. Indeed, the chapter captures the leading aspects of culture and literature in the Southern Song dynasty, something which may be regarded as a success. Yet, in my opinion, the most outstanding writing is found in chapter 3 of volume II, “Early Qing to 1723,” in which the author surveys the late-Ming and early-Qing literary

2 Stephen Owen, “Preface,” in vol. I of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), xvi.

3 Sun Kangyi, “Zhongwen ban xuyan,” 3.

4 *Ibid.*, 3.

world as a whole, with the transition from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) to the Qing dynasty (1616–1911) forming the backdrop. Drawing upon the reflections of early Qing dynasty literati on the culture of the late Ming dynasty, while noting the influence of late-Ming culture on the early Qing, the chapter begins by connecting interrelated genres and styles, such as historical biography, epic poetry, women's literature, jottings (*biji* 筆記), novels, traditional opera, notes on poetry (*shihua* 詩話), and literary criticism, with the changing times. It closes with a discussion of two classic plays, *Changsheng dian* 長生殿 and *Taohua shan* 桃花扇. This chapter is informative and clearly articulated, blending historical narrative with literary research. However, precisely by highlighting certain aspects of literature, this style of writing also obstructs our view of some important literary phenomena. Although the compilers state clearly that “issues of genre do need to be addressed”⁵ while adopting a cultural history approach, the greatest flaw in the book overall is its disregard for literary genres. Literary genres form the most central element of premodern Chinese literature. Not only are they intimately connected to China's cultural and ritual traditions, they are, furthermore, key to the success of creative work. In short, a thorough exploration of the definitions and transformations of premodern Chinese literary genres is integral to any writing on Chinese literary history. Yet this book fails to mention many issues about literary genres that it should include. For instance, Section 4 of Chapter 4 of Volume 1, “After the rebellion (756–791),” narrates Du Fu's 杜甫 (712–770) creative process for his poetry in light of historical events, a thread that is relatively clear. And yet, it avoids a discussion of Du Fu's poetry as the epitome of different poetic genres. Not only does this make it difficult to evaluate Du Fu's poetic achievements in a fair and proper manner, but it means that there is no way to account for Du Fu's impact on mid-Tang poetry or even Song poetry. The chapter's author certainly has a thorough understanding of this, based on his depth of research into Du Fu. However, due to the constraints of the writing style, he has to forgo such content. While Western readers may be quite receptive to such content without an analysis and evaluation of Du Fu's poetic genres, their understanding of the poet is nonetheless truncated by this approach. From this perspective, the book's approach to cultural history may be said to be both advantageous and disadvantageous in equal measure.

The next point concerns the book's new approach to historical periodization. If there is sufficient justification for including early Chinese literature in the first chapter “Beginnings through Western Han,” it seems a perfunctory

5 Stephen Owen, “Preface,” xvii.

choice to mark the year 1375 as the dividing moment between the two volumes. In the introduction to volume II, the editors explain this choice as follows:

Using the year 1375 – rather than the standard date of 1368 (i.e. the first year of the Ming dynasty) – as the temporal division between the first and second volumes brings to light our unique approach to the question of periodization ... although the Ming dynasty was founded in 1368, in terms of literary history the year 1375 is by far the more important date to remember. By the year 1375, the important surviving intellectuals from the Yuan, such as Yang Weizhen 楊維禎, Ni Zan 倪瓚, and Liu Ji 劉基, had already died. More importantly, in 1374, Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋, the Hongwu 洪武 Emperor and founding father of the Ming, executed the great poet Gao Qi 高啟 and hence inaugurated a reign of terror for intellectuals. To a certain extent, the distinctive early Ming culture began with the advent of Zhu Yuanzhang's brutal political persecution, which would obliterate nearly an entire generation of poets brought up in the last years of Mongol rule.⁶

The division of the Yuan (1206–1368) and Ming literary periods based on the death of Gao Qi (1336–1374) is highly questionable, because he should be regarded as a poet of the Ming dynasty, both in terms of his writing and the evaluation of his works by later generations. Gao Qi lived for 32 years of the Yuan dynasty, and of course, produced a large amount of outstanding poetry during that time. However, after the beginning of the Ming dynasty, he embraced a thriving cultural atmosphere, writing such famous poems as *Deng Jinling Yuhuatai wang dajiang* 登金陵雨花台望大江 demonstrating a grand and bright style. In the first year of the Hongwu era (1368–1398), what the mainstream literary world held in high esteem differed from the delicate style of the Yuan poetry. Gao Qi's poetry was written in the Ming style rather than the former Yuan style. Wei Guan 魏觀 (1305–1374) and Wang Yi 王彝 (d. 1374), who died at the same time as Gao Qi, were in the same situation. As for Liu Ji 劉基 (1311–1375), although many of his poems were deep and moving, his overall esthetic ideal was still writing that was lucid yet powerful. In Volume I of the book, in an analysis of the Yuan poetry of Liu Ji, the writer cites the poet, who stated that “[p]rinciple [*li*] is the master in prose, and ether [*qi*] is to give it expression” as a means to obtain a discourse in which

6 Kang-i Sun Chang, “Introduction to Volume II,” in vol. II of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), xxiii.

“principle is lucid and the *qi* is powerful.”⁷ This is precisely what Liu Ji said, after the beginning of the Ming dynasty, in his “Su Pingzhong wenji xu,”⁸ which reflects his idea of writing during the early Ming dynasty. For this reason, the deaths of Gao Qi, Liu Ji, and others did not mark the end of Yuan literature, but reflected the shattering of grand, high-minded literary ideals of the early Ming dynasty. Apart from a small number of people from the community of writers who were killed at the start of the Ming dynasty, certain people of great fame remained active in literary circles of the era. Gao Qi and Yang Ji 楊基 (1326–1378), who died in the eleventh year of the Hongwu era, Zhang Yu 張羽 (1333–1385), who died in its eighteenth year, and Xu Ben 徐賁 (1335–1380), who died in the thirteenth year of that same era, were together known as the “Four Literary Giants of Suzhou” (*wuzhong sijie* 吳中四傑). Moreover, many of the “Ten Friends of the North Wall” (*beiguo shiyou* 北郭十友) were alive at that time. It must be said that the execution of Gao Qi was a setback for the literature of the Wu region (present-day Suzhou), but it should not be regarded as its endpoint. Closely connected to Liu Ji were such figures from the literary community of eastern Zhejiang as: Song Lian 宋濂 (1310–1381), who died in the fourteenth year of the Hongwu era; Dai Liang 戴良 (1317–1383), who died in its sixteenth year; Hu Han 胡翰 (1307–1381), who died in its fourteenth year; Su Boheng 蘇伯衡 (1329–1392), who died in its twenty-fifth year; Wu Chen 吳沉 (d. 1386), who died in its nineteenth year; and Tong Ji 童冀 (1324–1393), who died in the twenty-sixth year of the same era. Thus, to say that the deaths of Gao Qi and Liu Ji marked the “obliterat[ion] [of] nearly an entire generation of poets brought up in the last years of Mongo rule”⁹ clearly does not accord with the historical facts of the era. Judging from the actual situation at that time, 1368, the first year of the Hongwu era, is a more suitable point of departure than 1374, the seventh year of the Hongwu era in which Gao Qi died. This is the case regardless of the transition in the political arena from the Yuan dynasty to the Ming dynasty, or the replacement of the old with the new in literature. The vestiges of 1368 as a historical demarcation point are deeper and more evident, and although it would be insufficient as a dividing line between the first and second volumes in terms of cultural and literary accomplishment, it nonetheless outweighs the seventh year of the Hongwu era and the death of an individual poet. The problems of periodization in literary history are

7 Stephen H. West, “Literature from the late Jin to the early Ming: ca. 1230–ca. 1375,” in vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 611.

8 Liu Ji 劉基, *Liu Ji ji* 劉基集, pr. Lin Jiali 林家驪 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1999), 88.

9 Kang-i Sun Chang, “Introduction to Volume II,” xxiii.

quite complex, especially those involving various inter-dynastic writers and numerous and complicated literary disputes. These problems demand careful deliberation and must not be approached lightly.

A further point concerns how the book “pays greater attention to the ways in which all received Chinese literary texts are filtered and reconstructed by later generations.”¹⁰ This approach to interpreting and evaluating classical texts is indeed fresh and effective. To this end, in chapter 1 of volume 1 the author devotes a section to the “Han construction of Warring States textual lineages.” Via a study of Liu Xiang’s 劉向 (77–6 BCE) *Bie lu* 別錄, Liu Xin’s 劉歆 (d. 23) *Qi lüe* 七略, and Ban Gu’s 班固 (32–92) “*Yi wen zhi*” 藝文志, the author believes that scholars of the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–25 CE) recategorized various classical texts dating from before the Han dynasty, stating that: “The imperial catalogue was not a disinterested collection and description of all available materials, but rather reflects a selective and prescriptive vision of the textual heritage superimposed on a far more eclectic, less neatly divided universe of Warring States writing.”¹¹ He also notes that: “Working from vastly disparate materials, he [Liu Xiang] and his collaborators had to select, decipher, collate, and arrange their texts; in addition, they transcribed them in current script onto new sets of bamboo slips, producing a new body of standardized texts.”¹² Then, to affirm his own academic judgment, the author undertakes a comparative study combining early texts, dating from the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) and so forth, that have been unearthed in recent years, with extant texts arranged during the Han dynasty. Mainland Chinese academia also has a track record of painstaking research on how Han dynasty scholars arranged the classical texts by pre-Han writers. All of this research has been repeatedly scrutinized and discussed. Yet in terms of literary history writing, specific presentations on the subject have been relatively rare. Due to the limits imposed by the pre-Qin (before 221 BCE) and Han dynasty periodization of literary history, a majority of scholars treat texts arranged during the Han dynasty as the original version of the early texts, leading the reader to believe that these texts show the thought and writing styles of the pre-Qin period and ignoring the process of textual formation and the cumulative nature of textual content. A similar instance is found in section 2 of chapter 2 of volume II, “Fiction and the merchant elite,” which synthesizes commercial publishing,

10 Sun Kangyi, “Zhongwen ban xuyan,” 3.

11 Martin Kern, “Early Chinese literature, beginnings through Western Han,” in vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 61.

12 *Ibid.*, 62.

serialized fiction, and reviews of fiction, and introduces the open-ended textual features of the serialized adaptations and random transformations of Ming dynasty fiction. *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* synthesizes historical contexts with circumstances in the publishing industry and styles of critique to explore the mobility and openness underpinning the structure of fictional texts, positing that this is another type of text filtering and reconstruction. Not only does this style of writing, which is quite innovative, differ from narrative modes used in mainland China, it also conforms to actual late-Ming literary history and provides the reader with a credible explanation of historical events. However, this narrative mode reconstructed by later generations is built upon a foundation of conscientious and detailed readings of interrelated literature in the field, and of thorough research, without which a narrative may drift into uninterrogated subjective judgments. What is unfortunate is that some chapters and sections of the book do not escape this trap. To cite two examples, the editors consider that, with regard to the establishment of the *xiaopin* 小品 (short essays or sketches) genre: “The genre was established in retrospect, as part of the New Culture movement of the 1920s” and “... unlike late Ming poetry, the canon of *xiaopin* is, because it was formed late by a few highly influential readers, well established and agreed upon.”¹³ As it so happened, the *xiaopin* genre was already quite popular by the late Ming period. Not only did many literati excel at the genre, but a considerable number of block-prints were also made of selected *xiaopin* works, such as *Su Zhangong xiaopin* 蘇長公小品, *Yongchuang xiaopin* 湧幢小品, and *Wanxiangtang xiaopin* 晚香堂小品. *Cuiyuge pingxuan Huangming xiaopin shiliu jia* 翠娛閣評選皇明小品十六家, with comments by Lu Yunlong 陸雲龍 (1587–1666) and others, contains four prefaces on *xiaopin*. Preceding each of the sixteen selected *xiaopin* is an introduction to the characteristics of each piece, which provides discussion and understanding of the *xiaopin* genre.¹⁴ In his book *Wan Ming xiaopin yanjiu* 晚明小品研究, Professor Wu Chengxue 吳承學 focuses on “late-Ming views of *xiaopin*,” and believes that people of that era were already well aware of the definition and characteristics of the genre.¹⁵ Clearly, the characteristics and

13 Tina Lu, “The literary culture of the late Ming (1573–1644),” in vol. II of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 93.

14 See *Ming ren xiaopin shiliu jia* 明人小品十六家, ed. Lu Yunlong 陸雲龍 et al., pr. Jiang Jinde 蔣金德 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1996).

15 Wu Chengxue 吳承學, *Wan Ming xiaopin yanjiu* 晚明小品研究 (revised) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2017), 457–63.

the concept of the *xiaopin* genre were not “established in retrospect” by the New Culture movement, but rather rediscovered historical facts.

Concerning the definition of the concept of “late Ming,” the editors hold that: “There was generally no sense of an ending. Despite forebodings of a deepening crisis, the collapse of the Ming in 1644 caught many by surprise ... The label ‘late Ming’ (*Ming ji*, *Ming mo*, or *wan Ming*) was a Qing invention. ...”¹⁶ Such a judgment appears to be simplistic. It would be close to historical fact to say that most literati of that period had not realized that the final days of the dynasty were at hand, yet not all literati were under an illusion. In a letter to a friend, Zhong Xing 鍾惺 (1574–1624) wrote bitterly that “in these turbulent times, these days of decline, how can we fail to be forgiving toward our friends?”¹⁷ Zhong Xing clearly realized that he was in “these turbulent times, these days of decline” through his levelheadedness and acuity, and was no longer under any illusions about the ways of the world or public sentiment. Therefore, all he could do was be an upright, dispassionate person, writing profound and melancholic poetry. Similarly, we cannot say that “[t]he label ‘late Ming’ (*Ming ji*, *Ming mo*, or *wan Ming*) was a Qing invention.”¹⁸ Furthermore, a close reading of the texts from that period would reveal that Zhong Xing’s realization was not an isolated example.

Another point needs to be made here, and that concerns the rewriting of texts. The editors use northern plays (*zaju* 雜劇) of the Yuan dynasty as examples:

People usually think of *Hangong qiu* 漢宮秋 and *Wutong yu* 梧桐雨 as works from the Yuan dynasty. Rarely do people know that most of the final versions of these texts are not from the Yuan dynasty ... Who are the original authors in these cases? How great is the contribution from later rewriters? What of the intertextual relationships between different versions?¹⁹

Here, it is clearly an exaggeration to claim that “rarely do people know” that the works of Yuan *zaju* were later rewritten by others; it is virtually common

16 Wai-Yee Li, “Early Qing to 1723,” in vol. 11 of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 152.

17 Zhong Xing 鍾惺, “Yu Xiong Jifeng” 與熊極峰, in *Yinxiu xuanji* 隱秀軒集, pr. Li Xiangeng 李先耕 and Cui Chongqing 崔重慶 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1992), 483.

18 Wai-Yee Li, “Early Qing to 1723,” 152.

19 Sun Kangyi, “Zhongwen ban xuyan,” 4.

knowledge among all researchers of the plays of the Yuan and Ming dynasties. It nonetheless remains a very important issue to highlight, because when mainland Chinese scholars write about literary history, they often downplay its significance, and lack systematic research on intertextual relationships. Currently, the crux of the matter is that recognizing the issue does not mean addressing the issue. Objectively speaking, the reader may be relatively disappointed with *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*. In reference to Yuan *zaju*, volume 1 states that: “The full form of the Yuan northern play is found only in late Ming editions that have undergone considerable editing and ideological changes under the hands of editors. Since the main body of the northern play will be treated later, the reader is referred to that section for a fuller discussion of its formal features.”²⁰ Yet, when we reach the relevant chapter and section on the Ming dynasty, all we find is the following: “Only now, by examining the few editions that survive from earlier periods, have scholars determined the extent to which Zang [Maoxun] [臧懋循] freely rewrote and edited. ...”²¹ Then, the focus of the narrative turns to the block-printing process and the binding and layout for Zang’s (1550–1620) *Yuanqu xuan* 元曲選. There is no specific introduction to the stylistic features of the Yuan *zaju* and its creative status; nor is there a critical analysis of any *zaju* texts. Not all of the plays included in the *Yuankan zaju sanshi zhong* 元刊雜劇三十種 were straightforward, crudely-told stories. Take, for instance, four of the *zaju* by Guan Hanqing 關漢卿 (ca. 1234–ca. 1300). These include *Baiyue ting* 拜月亭, *Dandao hui* 單刀會, and *Tiao fengyue* 調風月, which are all relatively intact. Based on these, it is entirely possible to examine the structure, plot, and style of Guan’s *zaju*. It is a shame that such content is missing.²² The intention behind the discussion of rewritten texts should be to shed light on the original spirit and stylistic features of *zaju* in the Yuan dynasty. Owing to the different styles of writers at different times, content that should be emphasized is instead hidden from view. The section of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* covering the Yuan dynasty has its strengths. For instance, a special section introduces *cifu* 辭賦 of the Yuan dynasty, a compositional form that is overlooked in many literary histories. However, the content on *zaju*, a representative literary genre of the Yuan dynasty, is particularly poor, and is clearly one of the book’s shortcomings.

20 Stephen H. West, “Literature from the late Jin to the early Ming: ca. 1230–ca. 1375,” 626.

21 Tina Lu, “The literary culture of the late Ming (1573–1644),” 136.

22 See *Xin jiao Yuan kan zaju sanshi zhong* 新校元刊雜劇三十種, pr. Xu Qinjun 徐沁君 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980).

3 A Review of Existing Problems

In the preceding, I undertook a close reading of the innovative aspects of the book that its editors particularly emphasize. There are, moreover, two other fundamental issues of literary history writing to be addressed. These need to be restated here, because *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* displays obvious deficiencies with respect to both.

The first problem is that an editor of any literary history or literary history that reflects creativity needs to possess advanced, specialized research experience in leading intellectual concerns and the works of classical writers from the period or field being written about, and earn a wealth of research experience and well-developed academic insights. In this way, their writing may be characterized by precision and skill. To put it another way, an editor of literary history should first be an outstanding researcher in a particular field, and not merely be reliant upon trending concepts and approaches and pair them with existing academic achievements to then readily offer something new. The reason that a large number of works of literary history make for mediocre and tedious reading is precisely that the authors lack originality and experience in specialized research, which is the result of relying solely on relevant content pieced together in a makeshift fashion. The editors of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* are renowned scholars who possess specialized knowledge, and they are of course experienced in specific areas of research and can boast innovative academic achievements. However, literary history involves a relatively wide range of content. Even with time and energy, it is difficult for an individual scholar to verify all content and develop genuine research experience, and so they make occasional errors of judgment. For instance, on the connection between Yuan dynasty literature and Neo-Confucian principles, the editors make the following judgments: "In the Yuan, *Daoxue* had very little control over the literary scene,"²³ and,

the criticism of Song poetry as overly involved with "principle" instead of "emotion" or of using "prose to make poetry" turned the tide in the Yuan from a corporate sense of ethics that one finds in Song poetry and in Yuan prose to a new poetics of individualism that bespoke the soul of each person. As Yang Weizhen was to say at the end of the dynasty, "because each person has [individual] feeling, each person has [individual] poetry" (*ren ge you qing ze ren ge you shi*).²⁴

²³ Stephen H. West, "Literature from the late Jin to the early Ming: ca. 1230–ca. 1375," 585.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 585.

Nonetheless, for a reader lacking research experience in Yuan poetry, it may be difficult to judge whether or not this understanding is correct, especially when we consider that traditional studies always define the dominant conception of Yuan poetry as “following the example of the Tang to get the best of the antiquity” (*zong Tang degu* 宗唐得古). Thus, the view that “emotion” is preferable to “Neo-Confucian principle” is affirmed. Yet, a careful study of authors of the Yuan dynasty “pavillion style” (*taige ti* 台閣體), and particularly of the writers of the eastern Zhejiang school of poetry, would reveal the view that “[i]n the Yuan, *Daoxue* had very little control over the literary scene” to be indeed superficial. In his preface to *Huangyuan fengya* 皇元風雅, Ding Henian’s 丁鶴年 (1335–1424) Yuan poetry compilation, Dai Liang summarizes the core concept of Yuan poetry thus: “Its style no doubt imitates the exemplary works of the Han and Tang dynasties, but the thought and emotion behind it are derived from the Neo-Confucianists of the Song dynasty.”²⁵ Neo-Confucianism’s penetration of Yuan poetics has long gone beyond the level of moral preaching and formed a set of poetic concepts and poetic discourses. Such poetic discourses as “the right temperament,” “the realm of saints,” “gentlemanly conduct,” “a calm demeanor,” “a simple and unadorned style,” “leisurely fun,” and “gentleness and kindness” are in fact all based on Neo-Confucianism. Yang Weizhen (1296–1370) indeed emphasized emotion, but of a kind that incorporated rectitude. The broad patterns of Yuan dynasty poetics were centered on mountain forests (*shanlin*) and the pavillion (*taige*) whose esthetic forms are composed of natural leisure, and depression and anger, underpinned by the idea of “following the example of the Tang to get the best of the antiquity” and emotional rectitude. From this perspective, the author of this chapter of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* is not at the leading edge of research in the field of Yuan dynasty poetry. This intellectual lag is reflected not only in the overall understanding of Yuan poetry; it is also present in the details of each individual narrative. The section titled “Poetry to 1375” notes the following in regard to Yang Weizhen’s life: “Finally, in 1337, he was enlisted as part of the project to compile the histories of the Song, Liao, and Jin dynasties. When they were finished, he submitted a long memorial on the legitimate succession of dynasties. ...”²⁶ Because the editors have not supplied the source texts for this narrative, it is difficult to confirm whether this is a citation of another person’s view or the result of the writer’s own research. However, to say that Yang Weizhen “was enlisted as part of the project to compile the histories of the

25 Dai Liang 戴良, *Dai Liangji* 戴良集, pr. Li Jun 李軍 et al. (Changchun: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 2009), 349.

26 Stephen H. West, “Literature from the late Jin to the early Ming: ca. 1230–ca. 1375,” 605.

Song, Liao, and Jin dynasties” is completely without basis in fact. His disciple Bei Qiong 貝瓊 (1312–1379) stated clearly in the “Tieya xiansheng zhuan” 鐵雅先生傳:

In the early years of the Zhizheng 至正 era, the imperial court issued an edict appointing scholarly officials from all over the country to compile histories of the Liao, Song, and Jin dynasties, but Yang Weizhen did not have the opportunity to participate. Following the completion of these works of history, the question of legitimacy had still not been settled, and Yang wrote his essay “Zhengtong bian” 正統辯.²⁷

Bei Qiong’s account should be highly credible, given that he was a disciple of Yang’s. If the editors had undertaken a careful reading of Yang Weizhen’s collection of poems and essays and of relevant research material, they would not have committed such a glaring academic error. Moreover, the presence of such errors naturally diminishes the credibility of their literary historical narrative.

The same problem emerges in volume 11 of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*. In the “Introduction to Volume 11,” the compilers note the following with regard to regionalization:

The mid-Ming literary field was at first dominated by a group of writers (the so-called “Early Revivalists”) consisting of the “Seven Early Masters” and their associates in the north, but beginning in the early sixteenth century the literary center of China gradually shifted to the Jiangnan region in the south. According to some contemporary reports, this shift was precipitated by the Jiangnan region becoming an important economic and cultural center as early as the late fifteenth century.²⁸

The Jiangnan region had been China’s economic and literary hub ever since the Song dynasty moved its capital, so why the focus on the late fifteenth century? Even if considering the case from the perspective of the Ming dynasty literature, it would be difficult to draw such a conclusion. The Yuan dynasty relied on grain shipments from the Wu and Yue regions to supply the capital, and at the end of the Yuan dynasty, the shipment of grain was even used as part of an offer of amnesty to Zhang Shicheng 張士誠 (1321–1367). Ever since then, the prosperity of the cities of the Wu and Yue regions (approximating to present-day

27 Bei Qiong 貝瓊, *Bei Qiong ji* 貝瓊集, pr. Li Ming 李鳴 (Changchun: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 2010), 11.

28 Kang-i Sun Chang, “Introduction to Volume 11,” xxv.

Jiangsu and Zhejiang) has greatly surpassed that of the north. In reference to the early- and mid-Ming literary world, Hu Yinglin 胡應麟 (1551–1602) stated that in general, most of the important early Ming prose writers were from Zhejiang, while the majority of its famous poets were from Wuzhong. By the Hongzhi 弘治 (1487–1505) and Zhengde 正德 (1505–1521) eras, writers from the northwest had started to rise through the literary ranks, and by the Jiajing 嘉靖 (1522–1566) and Longqing 隆慶 (1567–1572) eras and thereafter, “the momentum swung back toward the south.”²⁹ This shift in the center of gravity in the literary sphere, from the south to the north and again back to the south, was a genuine pattern in the development of Ming dynasty literature, rather than the southward transposition that occurred only from the early sixteenth century. This approach whereby early Ming poetry is overlooked evidently stems from the editors’ lack of research experience with respect to literary works from the period. Not only do they lack thorough research experience with its major writers; but at the macro level, they also lack a grasp of overall trends in the literary world. They rely solely on impressions of the period in question, and make sweeping remarks: thus, the Ming was “one of the darkest periods for Chinese intellectuals,”³⁰ and

by his late teens Gao [Qi] was already famous as one of the “Four Literary Giants of Suzhou,” along with Zhang Yu, Yang Ji, and Xu Ben. These three were also among the greatest painters of the age. Later they were all included in the larger group called “Ten Friends of the North Wall,” of which Gao Qi was the unofficial leader.³¹

Those of us with an understanding of Suzhou literature during the transitional period between the Yuan and Ming would all surely be left dumbstruck by this account. The “Ten Friends of the North Wall” did not emerge until after the twentieth year of the Yuan dynasty’s Zhizheng era (1341–1370), by which time Gao Qi had already matured as a poet; the adversity suffered by the “Four Literary Giants of Suzhou” – Gao Qi, Yang Ji, Zhang Yu, and Xu Ben – was compared by later generations to that suffered by the “Four Paragons of the Early Tang” (*chu Tang sijie* 初唐四傑). Here, not only do the editors chronologically

29 Hu Yinglin 胡應麟, “Shi sou xu bian” 詩藪續編, in *Zhongguo shihua zhenben congshu* 中國詩話珍本叢書, ed. Cai Zhenchu 蔡鎮楚 (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 2004), 11: 528.

30 Kang-i Sun Chang, “Literature of the early Ming to the mid-Ming (1375–1572),” vol. 11 of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3.

31 *Ibid.*, 5.

reverse the “Ten Friends of the North Wall” and the “Four Literary Giants of Suzhou,” but they are unaware of the significance of the name “Four Literary Giants of Suzhou.” To judge the literary accomplishments of the early Ming period based on such a disconnect from the subject obviously makes it difficult to draw suitable conclusions. Of course, the chapter in question also has its strengths. For instance, its survey of the evolution of the early Ming cabinet style from the perspective of *cifu* composition has been barely touched upon in previous academic work. In this respect, the editors have certainly widened the scope of research. It shows how important a fresh reading experience and in-depth thematic research are to the writing of literary history.

The second problem concerns literary history’s timely adoption of cutting-edge academic results, because even if we understand the importance of thematic research in writing literary history, it does not help us resolve problems. Because scholars are faced with a large volume of authored works and complex literary questions, they are scarcely able to undertake comprehensive and in-depth thematic research into all objects of inquiry. Hence, it is inevitable that a scholar will draw from original and corroborated achievements from within the academic world. This is the experience, a deeply held conviction, of all writers of literary history. The editors of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* are of course no exception. They have drawn heavily on the research outcomes of contemporary figures, and at times they acknowledge this: such figures include Yang Lian 楊鐮, Yuan Shishuo 袁世碩, Yan Dichang 嚴迪昌, and He Zongmei 何宗美. As for borrowing from the outcomes from scholars from English-speaking countries, the editors are naturally more at ease. Yet there are also instances of the ineffective use of contemporary writers’ research outcomes affecting the accuracy of expression. For example, in “Remarks on poetry” in chapter 5 of volume 1, the author states: “The form had its origins in casual conversation about poetry, the kind that was natural in a setting where the writing of poetry was so central to the lives of the educated elite. Hence the ‘hua’ (‘talk, remarks’) in the form’s name.”³² It is clearly an error to understand the word *hua* 話 as meaning “talk, remarks.” In the Song dynasty context, *hua* meant “story,” and *shuo hua* 說話 meant “to tell a story.” This is clearly stated early in Cai Zhenchu’s 蔡鎮楚 work *Zhongguo shihua shi* 中國詩話史:

Within the scope of the concept of *shihua*, that is to say within the extended concept, there are two senses of the term: a narrow sense and a

32 Ronald Egan, “The Northern Song (1020–1126),” in vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 460.

broad sense. According to its content, *shihua* in the narrow sense relates to stories told through poems and songs; according to its genre, it relates to the essay style of poetry and song. It was pioneered by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 in his “Liu yi shi hua” 六一詩話, and took casual conversation as its creative goal. In the broad sense, *shihua* is a style of poetry review. Any writing that critiques poets, poems and songs, poetry schools, or narrates a poet’s discussions or behavior, may be referred to as *shihua*.³³

Based on Cai Zhenchu’s idea, *shihua* originally meant “stories,” while “remarks” is its extended meaning. In Song dynasty discourse, the *hua* in *shihua* meant “story,” and did not mean “talk, remarks” as described by the editors. This is not a recent finding in academia. Rather, it has long been commonly accepted knowledge. By paying a little more attention, it is possible to avoid committing such mistakes in academic research. *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* may be designed for the average Western reader, but it should also be more accurate in the way it conveys knowledge about Chinese literary history.

4 Understanding of Academic Norms

Finally, I would like to briefly discuss technical conventions. In the preface to the Chinese edition, the editors explain that:

In the process of writing each chapter, our writers have consulted a wide range of reference works in Chinese (as well as numerous other languages). The space required for listing all of the reference works consulted one by one in a “catalog” would be virtually endless. There would be no limit. Therefore, Cambridge University Press is fully supportive of our approach, which is to provide only a selective list of English-language references. However, while preparing the Chinese-language edition, the editors at Sanlian Shudian suggested we consider adding some of the more important Chinese research literature (including articles and monographs), for the benefit of Chinese readers.³⁴

Ultimately, however, the editors ignored this suggestion in order to “reflect the appearance of the original English-language edition.”³⁵ I will not discuss

33 Cai Zhenchu 蔡鎮楚, *Zhongguo shihua shi* 中國詩話史 (Changsha: Hunan wenyi chubanshe, 1994), 5.

34 Sun Kangyi, “Zhongwen ban xuyan,” 5.

35 *Ibid.*, 5.

here why the specific criteria for selecting English-language reference works are not provided, nor will I discuss why mainland Chinese readers would need the Chinese translation to maintain the appearance of the English edition. For now, I would simply like to follow the text and review the editors' approach to citing research literature. The book adopts two approaches in this respect. One is to identify the author of the citation, as in "Liu has a large body of poems 'cherishing the past' (*huaigu*) that, as Yang Lian says, 'allow him to savor again human life, and to probe the puzzle of human fate.'"³⁶ This style of citation fails to indicate a detailed source, but it can be followed by the reader, given that it dispenses with footnotes and endnotes. The other approach to citation seems rather strange, as in: "As one modern critic wrote, 'poetry became the calling card and the identification document of those who participated in nightly revels in gardens'"³⁷ and "Deng's own writing, most often in the form of responses to requests or products of incidental social exchange, ring[s] with what a modern critic has called 'a monotone with no alteration in style from one piece to the next.'"³⁸ Why was it not possible to include the name of the citation's author, respectfully and directly? If it was in order to save space, then a two- or three-word name is more concise than "a modern critic" or "a certain critic." If the editors felt that the scholar in question was not of sufficient standing to be included in the main body of literary history, then why bother to cite their academic views uncritically? It is expected of scholars that they will quote the opinions of their peers in an open and aboveboard fashion, and it is far more appropriate to do so than to make veiled references to them. Respect for intellectual property rights and adherence to academic norms should be common sense. If the scholars cited were still alive today and pursued this in earnest, then the mention of "works of Chinese scholarship to which the editors and authors of these chapters are deeply indebted"³⁹ could not be explained away by a gentlemanly gesture.

In view of the reading experience described in the preceding, I consider *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* to be an innovative and personalized work of literary history that nonetheless contains major shortcomings, leaving much room for improvement.

Translated by Damien Kinney

36 Stephen H. West, "Literature from the late Jin to the early Ming: ca. 1230–ca. 1375," 574.

37 *Ibid.*, 578.

38 *Ibid.*, 583.

39 Stephen Owen, "Preface," xviii.

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