



BRILL



brill.com/joch

# On a Far-Off Journey – a Commentary on the “History of Literary Culture” Approach in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*

*Xu Yan* 徐豔

Professor, Chinese Classics Research Institute,  
Fudan University, Shanghai, China  
[xyan@fudan.edu.cn](mailto:xyan@fudan.edu.cn)

Received 15 November 2023 | Accepted 6 December 2023 |  
Published online 16 April 2024

## Abstract

*The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* is based on a “history of literary culture” approach that differs clearly from the standard literary-historical narrative favored by most Chinese scholars. The conventional approach to literary history tends to focus on the most engaging elements of a literary canon, while the history of literary culture model attempts to study literary texts in conjunction with their historical contexts. Based on historical documentation, this approach seeks to rehabilitate literary works that have been misinterpreted over time. With this approach, both texts and contexts are at the heart of literary history. If literary texts are restored to the context of their literary production, we are asked to reconsider the following three important research questions. Where did the texts originate? Why were they selected as part of the literary canon? What are their special characteristics and how are they related to other texts? Answers to these questions make literary research more varied and three-dimensional. In terms of theory, the contributors to *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* clearly aspire towards historicism. In their own writing, however, they seem willing to compromise and follow “a middle way” between conventional and alternative narratives of Chinese literary history.

## Keywords

*The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* – history of literary culture – standard narrative

To write about literary history is to go on a far-off journey – not only to a different time in history, but also to a different literary-historical narrative space (*xushi kongjian* 敘事空間).<sup>1</sup> *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* (hereafter *Cambridge History*) successfully departs from traditional standard narratives (*biaozhun xushi* 標準敘事) and takes the reader on a far-off journey beyond conventional accounts of Chinese literary history.<sup>2</sup> This is an exciting development for literary historians that have long been searching for new approaches to Chinese literature. In terms of content, the *Cambridge History* mostly deals with matters well known to scholars of Chinese literary history. With new narrative perspectives, methods, and arguments, however, the book manages to take its readers on a far-off journey in familiar surroundings. This mixture of familiarity and novelty is sure to attract many readers but also to cause controversies.

While the *Cambridge History* was mainly written for an English-speaking audience, the Chinese version published in June 2013 sparked a heated debate amongst Chinese scholars as well. Over twenty review articles have appeared since, and master's students have selected the book as a topic for their graduation thesis. Scholars have launched animated discussions about various aspects of the *Cambridge History*, including the book's concept of “history of literary culture” (*wenxue wenhua shi* 文學文化史), its style, weaknesses, and method of historical periodization. The way the book discusses classics like *Shijing* 詩經 and *Chuci* 楚辭, Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) northern drama (*zaju* 雜劇), current research on the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), and the time period between 1941 and 1949, has also received special attention from Chinese experts.

- 
- 1 This article forms part of the National Social Science Fund of China project “Cao Zhi zuopin zhi jingdianhua yanjiu yu wenji xin jiaojian” 曹植作品之經典化研究與文集新校箋 (21BZW085) as well as the Ministry of Education Supported Project of Key Research Institutes of Humanities and Social Sciences “Zhonggu shige shi kaiduan zhi chongxing: Han-Wei shige jingdianhua yanjiu” 中古詩歌史開端之重省：漢魏詩歌經典化研究 (22JJD750020).
  - 2 Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, eds., *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Let us now compare the reactions the book elicited from its English-speaking readers.<sup>3</sup> Most commentators consider the book extremely valuable for its target audience but agree that non-expert English-speaking readers might find it inconvenient to use. Reviewing the *Cambridge History*, William Nienhauser suggests that it is unclear for which type of reader the book was actually intended. Pointing towards the book's considerable length, hefty price tag, and challenging subject matter – such as the introduction to inscriptions in chapter one – he questions its appeal for general readers. Nienhauser also criticizes the lack of detailed plot summaries and problems with the index.<sup>4</sup> Similar sentiments are also expressed in book reviews by Robert Hegel and Maram Epstein.<sup>5</sup>

Especially noteworthy for Chinese scholars is the fact that most English-speaking reviewers approve the book's history of literary culture approach – an approach to literary history already widely used in western academic circles. Giovanni Vitiello, Professor for Chinese literature at the University of Naples, names three publications on the history of Chinese literature in western languages that preceded the *Cambridge History* with their focus on literary culture.<sup>6</sup> These forerunners include Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft's *A Guide to Chinese Literature*, the first volume of William Nienhauser's *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, as well as Victor Mair's *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*.<sup>7</sup> This shows that a focus on literary culture has been an important trend in Chinese literary history research in western countries for the past twenty to thirty years. Nienhauser further reminds his readers that James J. Y. Liu (Liu Ruoyu 劉若愚, 1926–1986) already called for a similar approach to literary history in the 1970s. David Knechtges and Stephen Owen

3 Since the rules governing book reviews in English-speaking academic circles differ from those in the Chinese-speaking world, it would be futile to compare the actual number of book reviews published in the two languages.

4 William H. Nienhauser, Jr., review of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, by Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, eds., *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 74, no. 1 (2011): 157–59.

5 Robert E. Hegel, review of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, by Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, eds., *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 34 (2012): 162–75; Maram Epstein, review of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, by Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, eds., *CHOICE Current Reviews for Academic Libraries* 49, no. 4 (2011): 671–72.

6 Giovanni Vitiello, review of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, by Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, eds., *China Review International* 20, no. 1–2 (2013): 54–60.

7 Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft, *A Guide to Chinese Literature* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1997); William H. Nienhauser Jr., ed. and comp., *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Victor H. Mair, ed., *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

also voice similar ideas in a *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* article in 1979.<sup>8</sup> In an interview, Ronald Egan confirms that this concept of literary history has already become widely accepted in the western academic world.

This shows that in western academic circles the idea of literary history as “history of literary culture” has gained popularity over the past twenty to thirty years. It is therefore no coincidence that the *Cambridge History* is based on the concept of “history of literary culture.” This understanding of Chinese literary history nevertheless “differs from the mainstream ideas and methods used by literary historians from mainland China.”<sup>9</sup>

Chinese scholars have continuously searched for new ways to write about literary history and are therefore especially sensitive to novel ideas. Beginning in the 1980s, China has experienced a trend that asks scholars to “rewrite literary history” (*chongxie wenxueshi* 重寫文學史). During the 1990s, two important publications on Chinese literary history and the heated discussions they caused reflected this ongoing trend – *Zhongguo wenxueshi* 中國文學史 and its revised editions by Zhang Peiheng 章培恒 (1934–2011) and Luo Yuming 駱玉明 as well as a second book with the same title *Zhongguo wenxueshi* 中國文學史 by Yuan Xingpei 袁行霈. The *Cambridge History* applies a concept of literary history that differs from the current mainstream approach in China. Even though the book was mainly written for an English-speaking audience “entirely unfamiliar with Chinese literature,” it has nevertheless generated great interest amongst Chinese scholars as well.<sup>10</sup>

Discussions about the *Cambridge History* cover a wide range of issues, but the different concepts of literary history lie at the heart of the debate. This author will not evaluate the book in its entirety but instead attempt to uncover new research ideas that have the potential to advance the study of Chinese literary history. This article does not examine the theoretical origins of the “history of literary culture” approach, even though it was clearly influenced by structuralism and postmodern ideas.<sup>11</sup> According to Stephen Owen, the

8 David R. Knechtges and Stephen Owen, “General Principles for a History of Chinese Literature,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 1 (1979): 49–53.

9 Sun Kangyi [Kang-i Sun Chang] 孫康宜, “Zhongwen ban xuyan” 中文版序言, in vol. 1 of *Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi* 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.

10 Ai Langnuo [Ronald Egan] 艾朗諾, Li Jin 季進 and Yu Xiayun 余夏雲, “Qian Zhongshu, *Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi* yu haiwai hanxue yanjiu” 錢鍾書, 《劍橋中國文學史》與海外漢學研究, *Shanghai wenhua* 上海文化, no. 6 (2016): 116.

11 For a discussion of the theoretical background of the *Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, see Zhang Dinghao 張定浩, “Jiegou zhuyi de zhaoshu – du *Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi* shangjuan” 解構主義的招數—讀《劍橋中國文學史》上卷, *Wenxue bao*

book's concept of literary history was first created by a combination of "historicist research and critique" and "new theoretical developments in literary studies."<sup>12</sup> Such considerations, however, only form the theoretical underpinnings of the book without directly influencing its practical appeal. We should consider instead how well the contributors to the *Cambridge History* managed to combine theory and history in their writing. It is at this intersection between theory and implementation that the creativity of individual literary historians is on display. This author will refrain from discussing any of the book's weaknesses that are not directly related to the "history of literary culture" approach.<sup>13</sup> Instead, this author hopes to clarify which aspects of the concept may prove useful for further research on Chinese literary history.

Two chapters of the *Cambridge History* seem especially well suited for our analysis: chapter three "From the Eastern Jin through the early Tang (317–649)" by Xiaofei Tian 田曉菲 and chapter four "The cultural Tang (650–1020)" by Stephen Owen. According to Ronald Egan, many contributors wrote their chapters with "readers entirely unfamiliar with Chinese literature" in mind.<sup>14</sup> He argues that they "understand their chapters as general presentations rather than rational research."<sup>15</sup> During the writing process, Egan felt obliged to "tone down his personal opinions and not make his own viewpoints known too forcefully."<sup>16</sup> The authors of chapters three and four, on the other hand, allow

---

文學報, September 19, 2013. Also compare Xu Wenxiang 徐文翔, "Linian' haishi 'zhao-shu'? – ye tan Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi de jiegou zhuyi wenxueshi guan" "理念" 還是 "招數" ? —也談《劍橋中國文學史》的解構主義文學史觀, *Zhongguo tushu pinglun* 中國圖書評論, no. 2 (2014): 43–47; Deng Jinming 鄧金明, "Xin wenhuashi' shiye xia de wenxue yanjiu" "新文化史" 視野下的文學研究, *Guizhou shehui kexue* 貴州社會科學, no. 1 (2008): 36–42.

12 Yuwen Suo'an [Stephen Owen] 宇文所安, "Shizhong youshi (shang)-cong bianji jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi tanqi" 史中有史(上)—從編輯劍橋中國文學史談起, *Dushu* 讀書, no. 5 (2008): 22.

13 Several scholars have already pointed out a number of flaws. See for instance: Jiang Yin 蔣寅, "Yi ge Zhongguo xuezhe yanzhong de Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi" 一個中國學者眼中的《劍橋中國文學史》, *Shoudu shifan daxue xuebao* (zhexue shehui kexueban) 首都師範大學學報(哲學社會科學版), no. 2 (2014): 94–98; Chen Wenxin 陳文新, "Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi shangdui" 《劍橋中國文學史》商兌, *Wenyi yanjiu* 文藝研究, no. 1 (2014): 159–70; Wang Pengcheng 王鵬程, "Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi cuowu juyi" 《劍橋中國文學史》錯誤舉隅, *Zhongguo tushu pinglun* 中國圖書評論, no. 5 (2016): 37–42; Hou Min 侯敏, "Yuwai wenxueshi guan xia de Zhongguo wenxue – ye tan Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi" 域外文學史觀下的中國文學—也談《劍橋中國文學史》, *Zhongguo shige yanjiu dongtai* 中國詩歌研究動態, no. 2 (2014): 387–93.

14 Ai Langnuo, Li Jin and Yu Xiayun, "Qian Zhongshu, Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi yu haiwai hanxue yanjiu," 116.

15 Ibid., 116.

16 Ibid., 116.

their personal styles to shine through more clearly. Read in conjunction with other works by the same authors, we see clearly how the idea of “history of literary culture” finds expression in their texts. This article will mainly focus on chapters three and four of the *Cambridge History* and attempt to answer the questions raised above.

## 1 “History of Literary Culture” as an Integrated Approach

According to its editors, the *Cambridge History* was designed as a “history of literary culture.” But what exactly is a “history of literary culture”? Since there are countless definitions of culture, it is difficult to grasp the concept based on its literal meaning alone. If we take the editors’ explanations into consideration, however, we come to understand literary culture as culture focused on literature – or context focused on text. The *Cambridge History* emphasizes both the integrated nature (*zhengtixing* 整體性) as well as the historicity of the concept. The integrated nature constitutes one of the most important aspects of the concept and encourages the book’s contributors to employ narrative strategies that transcend standard accounts of literary history. In her preface to the Chinese language version of the *Cambridge History*, Kang-i Sun Chang 孫康宜 explains the book’s approach to literary history in the following manner: “the book avoids, as much as possible, the mechanical division of the field into different genres and moves instead towards a more integrated approach of cultural history – a history of literary culture.”<sup>17</sup> The integrated nature of the history of literary culture approach is presented as a core feature. By highlighting the editors’ desire to avoid the “mechanical division” of literary history into “different genres,” Kang-i Sun Chang manages to differentiate the *Cambridge History* from other publications in the field – such as the *Columbia History of Chinese Literature*.<sup>18</sup> For a fuller picture of the approach advocated here, it is instructive to observe how the contributors implemented the editors’ vision in their individual chapters. Many tried to avoid “mechanical divisions” on different levels and successfully created a multi-level, integrated approach to literary history. In terms of research method, an integrated approach may improve upon standard narratives and help bring literary historical accounts closer to historical realities.

To understand more clearly how this integrated approach to literary history was implemented in the *Cambridge History*, we will examine how the

17 Sun Kangyi, “Zhongwen ban xuyan,” 2.

18 Victor H. Mair, ed., *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*.

contributors handled their task on different levels. For the moment, we will use chapter three by Xiaofei Tian as an example.

Let us first consider Tian's discussion of individual writers. Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (ca. 365–427), for instance, is commonly considered “a poet of fields and gardens” (*tianyuan shiren* 田園詩人). Xiaofei Tian, on the other hand, concludes the following: “If so, this is no innocent poetry extolling pastoral pleasures or the harmony between nature and man.”<sup>19</sup> She adds that “his poems are in many ways a defense of private values against public values, the personal fulfillment and happiness of an individual against the claims of public life.”<sup>20</sup> Tian's evaluation is diametrically opposed to the conventional narrative of Tao Yuanming's work as an example of innocent poetry extolling pastoral pleasures or the harmony between nature and man. For our purposes it suffices to note the marked difference between these points of view, without further assessing their respective merits. Conventional literary-historical accounts evaluate Tao Yuanming on the basis of select elements of his poetry that either his contemporaries or later generations especially appreciated. The alternative approach of the *Cambridge History*, on the other hand, aims to synthesize Tao Yuanming's entire body of work and take all historical documentation available to date into consideration. The conventional approach attempts to answer the question about which elements of Tao's poetry are worthy of praise. The alternative approach seeks to ascertain what the original version of Tao Yuanming's poetry looked like. By ascertaining the original version of the text in question, the history of literary culture approach aims to uncover and avoid all forms of literary reconstruction by later generations of scholars. This method reflects the earnest desire to understand historical realities, a motivation that is also shown in Xiaofei Tian's work. The writers she discusses in detail in chapter three are largely the same writers that also appear in conventional accounts of Chinese literary history. Her way of introducing these writers, however, clearly differs from the standard account and reflects her special approach to literary-historical research.

Let us now consider the question of literary style. The *Cambridge History* largely employs the same methods for discussing individual writers as literary styles of different historical periods. Just as we are asked not to reduce the image of Tao Yuanming to that of “a poet of fields and gardens,” we are now reminded that the literature of the Eastern Jin (317–420) period was not limited to “poetry of arcane discourse” (*xuanyan shi* 玄言詩). “Of the large poetic

19 Xiaofei Tian, “From the Eastern Jin through the early Tang (317–649),” in vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, 221.

20 *Ibid.*, 221.

output of the Eastern Jin, only a fraction is extant, but even such a small number of poems show a variety of topics going far beyond the usual perception of Eastern Jin poetry as being all about arcane discourse."<sup>21</sup> On this question, Xiaofei Tian again contributes her own point of view. For fear of running counter to historical realities, she refuses to rely on a small sample of literary works alone to evaluate the general state of literature during the Eastern Jin. She states, "Eastern Jin elite women were generally well educated, and a number of them left literary collections, which, however, sadly met with the fate of Eastern Jin literature in general, with only a fraction surviving,"<sup>22</sup> and she adds, "Poems such as these, with their archaic meter and pompous phrasing, were out of favor in the later times and were largely preserved in *Wenguan cilin* 文館詞林, a seventh-century anthology. Thanks to this anthology, we are able to see a rather different picture of Jin poetry."<sup>23</sup>

To give a complete historical account, chapter three also introduces writers and literary works that have so far received little scholarly attention. This is a strategy often applied by historicists since a comprehensive historical account reduces the risk of accidentally mistaking individual examples for the complete picture. This is especially important if individual examples are selected on the basis of criteria agreed upon only by later generations. In this context, let us once again consider the way individual writers are discussed in chapter three. As soon as writers are no longer reduced to a canonized image of themselves, they naturally display more characteristics that are typical for the general literary landscape of their time. Conventional narratives, on the other hand, mostly focus on writers' personal talents and idiosyncrasies that elevate them above the literary standards of their time. Detailed knowledge about literary style and individual authors reinforces our understanding of literary history and moves it closer towards historical facts.

The history of literary culture approach in the *Cambridge History* attempts to restore classical writers to their historical contexts and uncover early versions of important historical texts that have since been adapted and combined. In the same vein, the history of literary culture approach also seeks to consolidate literary history that has been split into narratives of different literary genres. Xiaofei Tian's description of the literary history of the Eastern Jin is divided into several parts with subheadings that include: "social uses of literature"; "accounts"; and "introspective landscape: poetry and prose." These subheadings reflect characteristics of Eastern Jin literature that emerge

---

21 Ibid., 217.

22 Ibid., 208–9.

23 Ibid., 209.



after integrating the different literary genres of that period. As Xiaofei Tian attempts to understand the common features of these literary genres across genre boundaries, the interconnected nature of texts and contexts inevitably begin to play a more prominent role. The common characteristics that different literary genres display in combination with their historical contexts are exactly the type of literary features the contributors to the *Cambridge History* are interested in studying.

Xiaofei Tian describes the special characteristics of literature in the Liang dynasty (502–557) in the following manner: “It was characterized by an unusually robust cultural spirit, a keen awareness of the literary past, and a conscious desire to sort out and make sense of the received textual tradition and to be innovative. This period witnessed the redistribution of cultural capital in society and the rise of a new cultural elite. Both bear directly on the literary production of the Liang and had a lasting impact on the sociopolitical structure of premodern Chinese society.”<sup>24</sup> This depiction is based on Tian’s monograph *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502–557)* and typical of the author’s ability to synthesize contents on various levels, such as the creation of different literary genres, the interaction between text and context, as well as the work of individual writers.<sup>25</sup>

Let us consider the following analogy. If the standard narrative shows a certain vertical dynamic, the most engaging parts of the works of classical authors will eventually float to the very surface. In the history of literary culture approach, on the other hand, literary works are allowed to sediment and sink to the bottom where they once again return to their original cultural context. The most significant historicist aspiration of the history of literary culture approach is to reunite texts with their context and to let the complete historical context serve as a reference for the historical authenticity of the texts in question. This method provides a maximum of historical space to salvage literary works that have been misinterpreted by later generations. In this sense, both the contexts of texts and the texts themselves are at the heart of literary history.

Chapter four “The Cultural Tang (650–1020)” by Stephen Owen also displays the integrated nature that is typical for the history of literary culture approach. The chapter’s subheadings mostly refer to various time periods instead of the names of individual writers. Owen combines a variety of elements to tell a common narrative of the time period in question. If such

24 Ibid., 249.

25 Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502–557)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

narratives are then combined in a chronological order, the story of the “history of literary culture” eventually emerges. Owen focuses on the alienation between writers and the bureaucratic system, the power of the imperial court, and societal norms as important threads of development in this history of literary culture. After discussing the age of Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. 690–705) and the publication of Liu Zhiji’s 劉知幾 (661–721) *Shitong* 史通 in the first part of chapter four, Owen concludes: “This moment, when a true vocation and its bureaucratic institutionalization were so clearly at odds, suggests the future of literature in the empire.”<sup>26</sup> Owen observes that during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756), there was “a shift away from the court to the larger community of the elite” in various genres.<sup>27</sup> After the An Lushan Rebellion 安史之亂 (755–763), “a major change was happening, in which the writer or intellectual might be seen as inherently alienated from the polity and the elite community as a whole.”<sup>28</sup> During the mid-Tang (766–835) “we are in an age of authors who achieved excellence by distinction from the social norm rather than within it.”<sup>29</sup> This is exactly what it means to integrate multicultural elements to capture trends of development in the history of literary culture.

## 2 The Status of Literature in the “History of Literary Culture”

The history of literary culture approach in the *Cambridge History* attempts to separate and reassemble the various layers that comprise the standard narrative. In terms of methodology, this approach is quite instructive and manages to attain a level of historical accuracy that surpasses conventional narratives of literary history. Faced with this new approach to writing literary history, we may ask ourselves whether it will not weaken the central role of literature itself. On this point, Giovanni Vitiello’s book review is particularly relevant. He concludes that the history of literary culture approach “does not, of course, reduce the importance of issues typically dealt with in literary historiography.”<sup>30</sup> He holds that “quite to the contrary, the centrality of such issues is made more apparent by placing them in the specific cultural contexts in which they first

26 Stephen Owen, “The Cultural Tang (650–1020),” in vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, 304.

27 *Ibid.*, 314.

28 *Ibid.*, 330.

29 *Ibid.*, 340.

30 Giovanni Vitiello, review of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, by Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, eds., *China Review International* 20, no. 1–2 (2013): 56.

emerged.”<sup>31</sup> This author agrees with Vitiello’s point of view and believes that the history of literary culture perspective does not weaken literary research but instead creates more space for textual research. In addition, this new perspective paves the way towards a more three-dimensional and varied approach to literary history.

The history of literary culture approach in the *Cambridge History* attempts to place texts in the historical context of their literary production and creates a number of new research questions. Existing methods of textual research that are used to write standard accounts of literary history – to analyze the origins of texts, their selection, and special characteristics, as well as their relationships to other texts – are all reexamined.

The history of literary culture approach, on the other hand, places a different level of trust on documents as a form of historical evidence. In contrast to more traditional methods of research, the history of literary culture approach acknowledges the flawed nature of historical documents and takes into consideration that they might have been intentionally selected and revised. This model of literary history seeks to reassemble fragmented historical realities by careful comparison of various historical documents. On a fundamental level, this approach challenges the level of comparative certainty with which conventional literary-historical narratives are normally expressed. While the standard approach to literary history mostly deals with extant historical sources, the history of literary culture approach intentionally leaves room for documents that have been lost to us. “Even though we have no influence on the question whether documents survive or get lost, we should still be aware of what we have lost.”<sup>32</sup> We should therefore guard carefully against conclusions that are based on incomplete historical evidence. This new way of handling historical documents is designed to remedy inaccuracies in the standard narrative and to give us a better understanding of the texts under consideration. When Stephen Owen discusses the question of how to create a “comparatively good narrative,” he stresses the need to study texts in their context.<sup>33</sup> The idea of context may include the historical context of literary production, different historical versions of one and the same text, as well as different evaluations of the literary value of a text over time.

31 Ibid., 56.

32 Yuwen Suo’an [Stephen Owen] 宇文所安, “Shizhong youshi (xia)-cong bianji jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi tanqi” 史中有史（下）—從編輯劍橋中國文學史談起, *Dushu* 讀書, no. 6 (2008): 100.

33 Yuwen Suo’an, “Shizhong youshi (shang)-cong bianji jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi tanqi”, 25.

The *Cambridge History* tries to study texts by connecting them to different types of contexts – a clear deviation from the research methods used to create conventional accounts of literary history. This method often pays attention to particular texts, certain aspects of classical texts, or special textual functions that have so far remained unexamined. To a certain extent, this article has already dealt with similar issues above. It remains to point out that special features of a text will appear in a new light if both text and context are studied in a comprehensive manner. Let us consider an example from chapter four in the *Cambridge History*. The chapter begins in the year 710 with an imperial transition of power that causes the old community of court officials to disperse and the center of literary production to shift from within the imperial court to the outside. A thorough introduction to the complete historical context favors us with a new understanding of classical poets such as Wang Wei 王維 (ca. 701–761), Meng Haoran 孟浩然 (689–740), or Li Bai 李白 (701–762). Wang Wei “represented the culture of the capital,”<sup>34</sup> but he rejected “public life with an austere simplicity that was related to his Buddhist faith.”<sup>35</sup> Meng Haoran on the other hand came from outside of the capital, and “became known as an eccentric personality, a free spirit who cared only for drinking and poetry.”<sup>36</sup> In contrast, “Li Bai had a theatrical flair; he invented himself, and through his poetry advertised himself as an eccentric, a drinker, and a Daoist initiate.”<sup>37</sup> Owen’s analysis of the historical cultural context gives us a new understanding of influential poets and their literary work. Drawing inspiration from a new understanding of cultural contexts, Owen often discovers new perspectives on intertextual relations. Xiaofei Tian frequently reexamines texts that have been considered antagonistic or fundamentally different over time and – based on the study of context – manages to show that they are in fact interconnected.

Discussing the familiar idea of an antagonistic relationship between the north and the south, Tian concludes that that: “such images, which have become standard in the Chinese cultural imagination, were cultural constructs that reduce the great complexities of the real north and south to simplified pictures that served political and cultural purposes.”<sup>38</sup> According to her understanding of the Northern and Southern Literature (*nanbei wenxue* 南北文學), southern writers constructed the north in “frontier poetry” (*biansai shi* 邊塞詩) and so-called “northern folk songs” (*beifang minge* 北方民歌). They employed

34 Stephen Owen, “The Cultural Tang (650–1020),” 305.

35 *Ibid.*, 305.

36 *Ibid.*, 306.

37 *Ibid.*, 307.

38 Xiaofei Tian, “From the Eastern Jin through the early Tang (317–649),” 266.

a “stylized macho language and dramatized description of the bitter cold.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, “As the southern court literature exerted a large influence on the northern writers in the sixth century, northern poets eventually adopted the diction and imagery of the north in their own ‘frontier poetry.’”<sup>40</sup> In this cultural context, northern and southern writers all participated inadvertently in the construction of a multicultural environment based on constant exchange between the two sides. This shows that if we study texts in their original cultural contexts, we can break down rigid dividing lines that have been drawn over time. If successful, an entirely different picture of literary history emerges, allowing both cooperation and interconnectedness.

In comparison to standard accounts of literary history, the history of literary culture approach deals with a broader range of topics and devotes less space to the discussion of literary texts themselves. Contributors to the *Cambridge History* nevertheless made efforts to strike an acceptable balance. In chapter three, for instance, Xiaofei Tian’s discussion of Xiao Gang’s 蕭綱 (503–551) poem “Qiu wan” 秋晚 contains a careful examination of the following two lines: “Tangled clouds, glowing red, are made circular by the limpid water; tiny leaves, outlined by a lamp in the air.”<sup>41</sup> Even during her careful reading of the text, Tian does not fail to consider the general context and concludes that Xiao Gang’s couplet “intimates a peculiar vision of the world and a peculiar way in which poetry is made to work.”<sup>42</sup> In comparison to her chapter in the *Cambridge History*, Tian mostly discusses individual literary texts in more detail in her own monographs where space is less restricted.<sup>43</sup>

### 3 Questions and Thoughts

The *Cambridge History* narrative approach frequently differs from or contradicts more conventional narratives of Chinese literary history. The book scrutinizes many elements of the standard narrative, advocates new research methods, offers unique conclusions, and manages to expand our research horizon beyond conventional notions of literary history. Despite these efforts to advance our understanding of literary history, this author still feels the need to address a number of questions.

39 Ibid., 267.

40 Ibid., 267.

41 Ibid., 263.

42 Ibid., 263.

43 Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star*; Xiaofei Tian, *Yuanming and Manuscript Culture: The Record of a Dusty Table* (Seattle: University of Washington Press: 2005).

Informed by the ideas of historicism, the contributors to the *Cambridge History* consistently seek to rectify any undue distortions of literary history and bring the reader closer to historical realities. This novel approach constitutes an important improvement to existing weaknesses with conventional literary-historical accounts. Contributors, however, either consciously or unconsciously employ an incongruous model of time that combines both historical and current perspectives at will. In chapter four, under the subheading "After the rebellion (756–791)," Stephen Owen dedicates a comparatively large portion of text to introducing Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770). Owen points out, however, that: "Indeed, after his death Du Fu seems to have been largely unknown or ignored for about two decades, when his work was championed by Han Yu 韓愈, Bai Juyi 白居易, and Yuan Zhen 元稹,"<sup>44</sup> further stating "The then more celebrated poets of that era came to be known as the *dali shi caizi* 大曆十才子."<sup>45</sup> Compared to his description of Du Fu, Owen dedicates less text to the *dali shi caizi*. He notes that he prioritizes Du Fu because "readers of later ages were far more likely to read Du Fu [...] than the poetry or prose of those writers most famous in this period between 756 and 792."<sup>46</sup> Here, he bases his judgment on standards of literary criticism that were only decided upon by later generations. Why does he not rely on standards of evaluation that were valid during the Tang dynasty instead? In an article about his experience as one of the editors of the *Cambridge History*, Owen offers the following explanation. "If a literary history is written in an overly novel and radical fashion, it will prove ineffective since it does not conform to the audience's own reading experience of the literary works in question. Some books on literary history therefore follow a middle way that provides new insights in certain areas, while mostly reproducing standard narratives in others."<sup>47</sup> We can assume that Owen himself attempted to follow "a middle way" in chapter four. To narrate the history of literature during the An Lushan Rebellion without reference to Du Fu might well be considered "overly novel and radical." This kind of compromise, however, contradicts to a certain extent the overall goal of the *Cambridge History* to bring literary history closer to its historical context. To offer a detailed discussion of a writer that did not exert any major influence on his contemporaries makes it harder to portray the cultural context of that time period in an accurate manner.

44 Stephen Owen, "The Cultural Tang (650–1020)," 324.

45 Ibid., 324.

46 Ibid., 330.

47 Yuwen Suo'an, "Shizhong youshi (xia)-cong bianji jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi tanqi," 97.

Chapter two “From the Eastern Han through the Western Jin (25–317)” by David R. Knechtges contains a subheading in part four on “Western Jin Literature” that reads: “Liu Kun, Lu Chen, and the Transition to the Eastern Jin.” The idea of a “transition to the Eastern Jin,” however, makes the reader feel doubtful. Discussing the question of periodization in literary history in an earlier article, Stephen Owen remarked humorously that: “scholars open their eyes wide and try to find anything in the early Tang that foreshadows the literary achievements of the High Tang,”<sup>48</sup> but, “the early Tang is of course ignorant of being the ‘early’ Tang.”<sup>49</sup> If this is true then how can the Western Jin be cognizant of the fact that it will “transition to the Eastern Jin”? According to the points of view presented in chapter two, the Western Jin was only aware of its own decline. Knechtges seems to have inadvertently viewed the matter from an *ex post facto* perspective. When “early literary phenomena are considered forerunners of literary phenomena of other time periods,”<sup>50</sup> we are liable to “commit an anachronism.”<sup>51</sup>

In theory, the contributors to the *Cambridge History* intended to restore texts to their historical contexts, guard against distortions of literary history, and attempt to avoid any form of anachronisms. To fully implement these ideas in writing, however, proved far from easy.

Some contributors showed a tendency to radically depart from conventional narratives despite their original intention to merely offer corrections and improve upon the analysis. The second part of chapter three may serve as an example. Discussing the “Yongming (483–493) generation,” Xiaofei Tian states: “The new prosody was very significant in the development of classical Chinese poetry, but in literary-historical terms, even more important was the princely agency in carrying out cultural projects: it anticipated the state-sponsored cultural work in later times as a way of asserting imperial cultural authority.”<sup>52</sup> She characterizes Qi (479–502) literature by the following two phenomena: “princely sponsorship of literary activities and a group of writers who not only shared close friendship and wrote poetry together, but also consciously embraced the same literary values.”<sup>53</sup> This suggests that, according to Tian, new cultural groups and activities instead of new literary styles can also be the focus of literary history. Actually, the major advantage

48 Yuwen Suo'an [Stephen Owen] 宇文所安, “Huluo de wenxueshi” 瓠落的文學史, *Zhongguo xueshu* 中國學術, no. 1–3 (2000): 251–52.

49 *Ibid.*, 251–52.

50 *Ibid.*, 251–52.

51 *Ibid.*, 251–52.

52 Xiaofei Tian, “From the Eastern Jin through the early Tang (317–649),” 246.

53 *Ibid.*, 244.

of history of literary culture research is the integrated nature in which both texts and contexts are examined together. Once we try to ascertain whether texts or contexts should be given more weight, we might go too far and create the impression of neglecting textual research. It is also worth pointing out that the literary phenomena Xiaofei Tian uses to characterize Qi literature can also be applied to literature from the Liang dynasty. Tian's description of Liang literature, however, focuses on another aspect: "It was characterized by an unusually robust cultural spirit, a keen awareness of the literary past, and a conscious desire to sort out and make sense of the received textual tradition and to be innovative."<sup>54</sup> This summary clearly shows the advantages of an integrated approach to literary history. Since Xiaofei Tian's discussion of the special characteristics of Qi and Liang literature is based on different aspects of literary history, however, readers cannot easily discern the historical continuity between the two closely related time periods.

Stephen Owen often separates theoretical considerations about literary history from its practical application, which seems to be a wise decision. In his article "Huluo de wenxueshi" 瓠落的文學史, Owen argues that: "it is important to separate our ideas about literary history from the question of how to put them in writing. Once we realize that there is a marked difference between our theoretical ideas and the literary histories we often encounter in academic literature, we need to look for methods to rewrite literary history instead of adapting our understanding to the methods of writing we have grown accustomed to."<sup>55</sup> The reason behind this separation of theory from practice is the desire to apply new theoretical ideas to rewrite literary history. Eight years later, in an article entitled "Shi zhong you shi" 史中有史, Owen reiterates that "the only way to truly solve this problem is theoretical."<sup>56</sup> Here, Owen's assessment is based on the various risks authors face when they write about literary history. On the one hand, authors are in danger of simply repeating platitudes; on the other hand they might also create an "overly novel and radical" account of literary history.<sup>57</sup> Owen clearly realizes that in their writing, most scholars cannot easily keep up with new theoretical ideas about literary history. The history of literary culture approach has already become widely accepted amongst American scholars and all contributors to the *Cambridge History* were able to draw on their own extensive research for their chapters. The *Cambridge*

54 Ibid., 249.

55 Yuwen Suo'an, "Huluo de wenxueshi," 237.

56 Yuwen Suo'an, "Shizhong youshi (xia)-cong bianji jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi tanqi," 97.

57 Ibid., 97.



*History* nevertheless constitutes the first attempt to write a complete history of Chinese literature that implements this theoretical approach.

In China, the standard narrative remains the most common approach to Chinese literary history. Ongoing reflections on how to rewrite Chinese literary history, however, have gone beyond the narrow confines of standard narratives and managed to make them less uniform in nature. Some of the viewpoints in the *Cambridge History* are in fact similar to ideas that have also been expressed by Chinese scholars. *Zhongguo wenxueshi xinzhū* 中國文學史新著 by Zhang Peiheng and Luo Yuming, for instance, reflects the editors' refusal to follow strict dynastic periodization and focuses on historical continuities across time periods. In chapter four of the *Cambridge History*, Owen presents the alienation between writers and the bureaucratic system, the power of the imperial court, and societal norms as important threads of development in the history of literary culture. Zhang and Luo also consider these societal phenomena as important threads of development in Chinese literary history. *Zhongguo wenxueshi xinzhū* takes the Jian'an 建安 (196–220) period of the Eastern Han (25–220) until the beginning of the An Lushan Rebellion in the mid-Tang as a single period of development. The book concludes that the "weakening of autocratic rule" also "weakened the sense of being dependent on imperial power amongst scholars (especially amongst scholar officials)."<sup>58</sup> Xiaofei Tian's rejection of the idea of the "three literary factions" (*wentan sanpai* 文壇三派) of Liang literature may serve as another example. Cao Xu 曹旭 and Zhu Lixin 朱立新 also point out that Pei Ziyi 裴子野 (469–430) was "probably a 'fan' of palace style poetry (*gongti shi* 宮體詩) and a peripheral author of palace style poetry himself."<sup>59</sup> The main reason for this convergence is that, despite their different narrative perspectives, both the standard and history of literary culture approach to literary history are based on ideas of historicism. Historicism acts like a yardstick that continuously adjusts for theoretical errors and eventually points towards a common view of historical realities.

New theories continue to emerge, and our research horizons will expand further under the influence of new theoretical knowledge. Even though it is obvious that many theories will only prove partly correct, this should not prevent us from using the reasonable components of any given theory. The innovative way in which the *Cambridge History* manages to combine theory and history is significant and constitutes a "leap from Newtonian physics to

58 Zhang Peiheng 章培恒 and Luo Yuming 駱玉明, eds., *Zhongguo wenxueshi xinzhū* 中國文學史新著 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2011), 1: 232.

59 Cao Xu 曹旭 and Zhu Lixin 朱立新, "Gongti shi de dingyi yu Pei Ziyi de shenmei" 宮體詩的定義與裴子野的審美, *Wenxue pinglun* 文學評論, no. 1 (2010): 33.

quantum physics.”<sup>60</sup> It should therefore not come as a surprise that the book received considerable attention in Chinese academic circles. To actually “leap” during the course of research and writing, however, proves far more difficult than anticipated in theory. Many scholars will still have to work on answering the many new questions the history of literary culture approach has raised.

*Translated by Anja Bihler*

### Works Cited

- Ai Langnuo [Ronald Egan] 艾朗諾, Li Jin 季進 and Yu Xiayun 余夏雲. “Qian Zhongshu, *Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi yu haiwai hanxue yanjiu*” 錢鍾書, 《劍橋中國文學史》與海外漢學研究. *Shanghai wenhua* 上海文化, no. 6 (2016): 112–19.
- Cao, Xu 曹旭 and Zhu Lixin 朱立新. “Gongti shi de dingyi yu Pei Ziyi de shenmei” 宮體詩的定義與裴子野的審美. *Wenxue pinglun* 文學評論, no. 1 (2010): 33–39.
- Chen, Wenxin 陳文新. “*Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi shangdui*” 《劍橋中國文學史》商兌. *Wenyi yanjiu* 文藝研究, no. 1 (2014): 159–70.
- Deng, Jinming 鄧金明. “‘Xin wenhuashi’ shiye xia de wenxue yanjiu” “新文化史” 視野下的文學研究. *Guizhou shehui kexue* 貴州社會科學, no. 1 (2008): 36–42.
- Epstein, Maram. Review of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, edited by Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen. *CHOICE Current Reviews for Academic Libraries* 49, no. 4 (2011): 671–72.
- Hegel, Robert E. Review of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, edited by Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen. *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 34 (2012): 162–75.
- Hou, Min 侯敏. “Yuwai wenxueshi guan xia de Zhongguo wenxue – ye tan *Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi*” 域外文學史觀下的中國文學—也談《劍橋中國文學史》. *Zhongguo shige yanjiu dongtai* 中國詩歌研究動態, no. 2 (2014): 387–93.
- Idema, Wilt, and Lloyd Haft. *A Guide to Chinese Literature*. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1997.
- Jiang, Yin 蔣寅. “Yi ge Zhongguo xuezhe yanzhong de *Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi*” 一個中國學者眼中的《劍橋中國文學史》. *Shoudu shifan daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexueban)* 首都師範大學學報 (哲學社會科學版), no. 2 (2014): 94–98.
- Knechtges, David R., and Stephen Owen. “General Principles for a History of Chinese Literature.” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 1 (1979): 49–53.
- Mair, Victor H. ed. *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

60 Yuwen Suo'an, “Huluo de wenxueshi,” 237–38.

- Nienhauser, William H. Jr. Review of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, edited by Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 74, no. 1 (2011): 157–59.
- Nienhauser, William H. Jr. ed. and comp. *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.
- Owen, Stephen. “The Cultural Tang (650–1020).” In vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, edited by Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, 286–380. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Sun, Kangyi [Kang-i Sun Chang] 孫康宜. “Zhongwen ban xuyan” 中文版序言. In vol. 1 of *Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi* 劍橋中國文學史, edited by Sun Kangyi [Kang-i Sun Chang] 孫康宜 and Yuwen suo'an [Stephen Owen] 宇文所安, translated by Liu Qian 劉倩 et al., 1–5. Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2013.
- Sun Chang, Kang-i, and Stephen Owen, eds. *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Tian, Xiaofei. *Yuanming and Manuscript Culture: The Record of A Dusty Table*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005.
- Tian, Xiaofei. *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502–557)*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Tian, Xiaofei. “From the Eastern Jin through the early Tang (317–649).” In vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, edited by Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, 199–285. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Vitiello, Giovanni. Review of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, edited by Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen. *China Review International* 20, no. 1–2 (2013): 54–60.
- Wang, Pengcheng 王鵬程. “Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi cuowu juyu” 《劍橋中國文學史》錯誤舉隅. *Zhongguo tushu pinglun* 中國圖書評論, no. 5 (2016): 37–42.
- Xu, Wenxiang 徐文翔. “Linian’ haishi ‘zhaoshu’? – ye tan Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi de jieou zhuyi wenxueshi guan” “理念” 還是 “招數”? 一也談《劍橋中國文學史》的解構主義文學史觀. *Zhongguo tushu pinglun* 中國圖書評論, no. 2 (2014): 43–47.
- Yuwen, Suo'an [Stephen Owen] 宇文所安. “Shizhong youshi (shang)-cong bianji jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi tanqi” 史中有史—從編輯劍橋中國文學史談起. *Dushu* 讀書, no. 5–6 (2008): 21–30, 96–102.
- Yuwen, Suo'an [Stephen Owen] 宇文所安. “Huluo de wenxueshi” 瓠落的文學史. *Zhongguo xueshu* 中國學術, no. 1–3 (2000): 237–54.
- Zhang, Dinghao 張定浩. “Jieou zhuyi de zhaoshu – du Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi shangjuan” 解構主義的招數—讀《劍橋中國文學史》上卷. *Wenxue bao* 文學報, September 19, 2013.
- Zhang Peiheng 章培恒 and Luo Yuming 駱玉明, eds. *Zhongguo wenxueshi xinzhu* 中國文學史新著. Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2011.