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Musings on Literary History Research: *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* as a Case Study

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Abstract

In the study of literary history, how can we transcend the traditional models found in existing works? How can we take literary history research in new directions? For scholars of literary history who aspire to break new ground in the field, these are questions that must be properly considered. Published outside of China, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* offers us a paradigm for literary history writing. While some of its features might be debatable, it offers much inspiration and food for thought. In this case study, the author shares with our readers some of his insights and opinions regarding the study of literary history.

Keywords

The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature – literary history research – literary history writing

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When we mention literary history, the first thing that comes to mind is that it must fulfill the scientific definition of the concept – that is, it must be a scientific and historical study of the evolution of literature from a macro perspective,

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offering a summary of a descriptive nature. With a historical perspective integrating both macro and micro perspectives, the compiler ought to scrutinize, summarize, and explain the development of literature. Thus the compiler encapsulates, in a scientific manner, patterns and trends of literature during the entire process of its historical development (or during a certain historical period). Undoubtedly, this is completely different from merely introducing and commenting on authors and their works. If a certain editor refers to compilations of commentaries of authors and their works as literary history, that can only indicate that he or she lacks a true understanding of literary history.

This has to do with the introduction and dissemination of the concept of literary history in China. Certainly, prior to the late nineteenth century, China lacked the concept of literary history as we understand it today. Alternatively, we may say that not only did China lack works that can be referred to as “histories of literature,” but the Chinese people were as yet unaware that this genre even existed. When did the Chinese embark on writing and research on literary history in the true sense? When did the Chinese begin to internalize the concept of literary history and produce textbooks or monographs on literary history, on the basis of emulating Western (or Japanese) models and paradigms? Two histories of literature compiled by Huang Ren 黃人 (1866–1913) and Lin Chuanjia 林傳甲 (1877–1922) during the early twentieth century qualify as pioneering works in the genre, which followed prevailing Western models in the most basic sense.¹ Regrettably, however, both of these histories of literature followed Western paradigms in literary history only in terms of their general framework; they differ greatly from what we understand today as literary history both in terms of their content and their written expression. Following the emergence of these pioneering works, Chinese scholars gradually grasped the concept of literary history and eventually understood it holistically. They conducted in-depth research into literary phenomena, literary movements, literary criticism, and literati and their works. This gave birth to many histories of literature, including general histories (such as Xie Wuliang’s 謝無量 *Zhongguo da wenxue shi* 中國大文學史² and Liu Dajie’s 劉大傑 *Zhongguo wenxue*

1 Published around 1910, Huang Ren’s 黃人 *Zhongguo wenxueshi* 中國文學史 was originally intended as a textbook while he was teaching at Soochow University. The entire book consists of about 1.7 million characters; however, the bulk of the book comprises excerpts of literary works, with minimal commentaries by the editor. Consisting of over 70,000 characters, Lin Chuanjia’s 林傳甲 *Zhongguo wenxueshi* 中國文學史 was compiled from lecture notes at the Imperial University of Peking (the predecessor to Peking University) and was published by Shanghai kexue shuju and Guangdong kexue shuju in 1910.

2 Xie Wuliang 謝無量, *Zhongguo dawenxueshi* 中國大文學史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1925).

fazhanshi 中國文學發展史³), histories of certain periods and dynasties, as well as histories of various genres including poems, novels, and prose. Looking back from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, an immense collection of literary history in all its varieties has emerged in the Chinese literary sphere.

A general survey of the several hundred histories of literature published in China to date would certainly reveal disparities in quality and standards, but in terms of format, they are largely similar.⁴ These works generally consist of three parts, namely a background (historical and cultural), a biography of the author, and an analysis of his or her work (with a focus on content and literary expression). There are very few exceptions to this norm. Moreover, histories of literature aimed at giving the reader a general overview (mostly general histories that focus on premodern Chinese literature) typically discuss the various dynasties in chronological order, lumping a few dynasties together as a unit. These histories begin with the pre-Qin era (before 221 BCE) to the Han dynasty (206–220 CE), followed by the Wei dynasty (220–265), the Jin dynasty (265–420), and the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589), then the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties, before finally concluding with the Yuan (1206–1368), Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (1616–1911) dynasties. (In recent years, some histories of literature have made attempts at slightly modifying the dynasties being lumped together, but the overall structure remains unchanged.) This begs a very practical question: is it inevitable that histories of literature compiled by Chinese scholars follow this anachronistic model, without any prospect of achieving a meaningful breakthrough? Relatedly, does this also mean that Chinese scholars' overall understanding and opinions regarding a series of issues in literary history, as well as their analyses and understanding of literati and their works, must be constrained by traditions, without any prospect of change and renewal? These have been the subject of much debate and exploration within Chinese literary circles.

Slightly broadening our horizons and studying this issue from a macro perspective might give us some inspiration. *The Cambridge History of Chinese*

3 Liu Dajie 劉大杰, *Zhongguo wenxue fazhanshi* 中國文學發展史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1941).

4 According to Chen Yutang's 陳玉堂 *Zhongguo wenxueshi jibuan shumu tiyao* 中國文學史舊版書目提要 (published by the Institute of Literature, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences), over 300 general histories, dynastic histories, and specialized histories (including historical commentaries and reviews) related to literary history had already been published by 1949. If we add to this figure works of premodern history, modern history, and contemporary literary history published after 1949, this tally would be far greater.

Literature,⁵ which was recently published by Cambridge University Press, presents its readers with a very different picture from that portrayed by most histories of literature published within China. Granted, its editors intend it for the average English-language reader in the West, and have made it accessible and reader-friendly to the non-specialist. It is intended neither as a reference book for researchers, nor as a history of Chinese literature for Chinese readers. Upon reading the entire book, however, Chinese readers (including academics) will certainly be drawn to its distinct style. While this style cannot be said to be completely flawless, it certainly gives us much to think about.

2

First, the design and arrangement of its overall framework are worthy of our attention. The editors accepted this editorial assignment from Cambridge University Press with a clear conviction: this book must not only serve as a monograph (as opposed to an academic reference book) for the non-specialist reader in the West, but ought to achieve a breakthrough in terms of the structure of histories of Chinese literature compiled by Western (Euro-American) scholars. That is, it “must question deep-seated norms and paradigms, and qualify as a new history of literature which is both innovative and convincing.”⁶ These so-called “deep-seated norms and paradigms” refer first to the mechanical division of literary works by genre; that is, writing works of literary history that are entirely classified by genre (including poetry, prose, novels, and drama). This practice not only severs the internal connections between these genres, but also fails to highlight the fact that some authors are perfectly capable of producing literary works of different genres. To address this shortcoming, the editors adopt the concept of integrating culture as a whole into literary history. That is, they attempt to write a history of literary culture. On the one hand, they have constructed a framework of cultural history, complementing this with a literary and cultural narrative, and tried to respect the historical

5 The original English edition of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* was edited by Americans Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen and published by Cambridge University Press in 2010. The simplified Chinese edition, translated by Liu Qian 劉倩 et al., was published by Beijing's Sanlian shudian in 2013. The book consists of two volumes. The Chinese edition totals around 1.126 million characters.

6 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), 2.

context behind the emergence and evolution of certain genres. On the other hand, the editors devote special attention, in most cases, to historical contexts and writing styles, as opposed to centering narratives around individual authors, as is the norm for most histories of literature published previously. This approach enables the editors to produce a history of literature that is different from the usual histories of literature classified according to genre. Next is the issue of periodization in the history of literature, which has long been a tricky problem for researchers in the field. The crux of this problem lies in the ability of researchers to write a history of literature without being bound by dynastic periodization, which has long restricted past generations of researchers. Admittedly, being a work of history, a history of literature cannot be divorced from the path of historical development and evolution. However, a history of literature is ultimately a work of history that revolves around literature, and cannot be a pure work of history. If the work revolves completely around premodern dynasties, leading the developmental path of literature itself to be obscured or even completely absent, then it can scarcely qualify as a literary history in the true sense. Therefore, the editors have striven to change the previous practice of dividing the history of Chinese literature into different periods according to the chronological order of dynasties. Instead, they have embarked on periodization according to the evolutionary process of literature itself, giving rise to the rather novel periodization as follows: the separation of the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–25 CE) from the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220), and the merging of the Western Han with the pre-Qin era; the separation of the Western Jin dynasty (265–317) from the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420), and the merging of the Eastern Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties, and the early Tang dynasty; the separation of the early Tang from the high Tang, mid-Tang, and late Tang, and the merging of the high Tang, mid-Tang, and late Tang into a period named “the cultural Tang,” with Wu Zetian’s 武則天 reign (r. 690–705) being regarded as the turning point in Tang literature; and the separation of the Ming dynasty into the early, mid, and late Ming, designating the year 1375 as the dividing line between the first and second volumes of the book. The year 1937, moreover, is designated as the dividing line for the 1841–1949 period, as opposed to the traditional practice of designating the May Fourth Movement in 1919 as the dividing line between modern and contemporary China. The years 1841 and 1937, which marked the outbreak of the Opium War and the War of Resistance against Japan respectively, both wars against foreign aggression which left an indelible imprint on the collective psyche of the Chinese people, are also designated as dividing lines in the periodization of the history of literature. This editorial practice is aimed at avoiding the constraints associated with mechanical periodization according to Chinese dynasties, thereby creating a unique model in literary history. This practice can indeed be justified by

the realities of literary history. For instance, the merging of the pre-Qin period and the Western Han can be justified by the fact that we are now able to read many pre-Qin classics mostly by virtue of various annotated versions that emerged during the Western Han. Clearly, the Western Han cannot be omitted from any discussion of pre-Qin literature and culture. Another key issue is the judgment and selection of literary works and their authors for inclusion in histories of literature (or which can be included in histories of literature). On the surface, this might appear to be a matter of personal preference among the editors of histories of literature. This is an important question regarding the “filtering” and “selection” of literary works from past ages by later generations, so that selected works can survive the test of time and even become “classics.” In other words, researchers of literary history must scrutinize both objective and subjective factors contributing to the historical longevity of literary works: why are some works passed down the generations, even becoming time-honored classics, while others are condemned to oblivion? The editors of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* pay special attention to this question and offer their views in this regard. In the preface to the book’s first volume, the editors note that the impact of judgments and value orientations of later generations on the shaping and preservation of earlier works cannot be ignored. They write that: “We have tried to take some account of the ways in which earlier works were preserved and shaped by the judgment of later ages.”⁷ Citing the examples of obscure literary works during the Northern Dynasties (439–581) and the popularity of the poetry attributed to Hanshan 寒山 (dates unknown) in the United States, they argue that the obscurity of Northern Dynasties writing in later ages cannot be attributed to the illiteracy or cultural incompetence of northerners in that era, but rather to the prejudice against them in seventh-century texts. Hanshan’s poems, which have escaped attention within China itself, have attracted widespread attention via several translations by renowned Sinologists in the United States, causing their influence there to far surpass that within China. These phenomena illustrate how “there are very few cases of permanent consensus; the most famous figures often need time to appear, and the canon of one age is the target of another” and “so long as a text is preserved, history has strange, sometimes roundabout ways of rectifying unfair neglect.”⁸ The same phenomenon also exists with respect to the poetry and prose of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Any contemporary discussion of literature from the Ming and Qing dynasties is bound to be centered on “Ming and Qing novels” almost by default (as is the case with

7 Stephen Owen, Introduction to *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), xxviii.

8 *Ibid.*, xxviii.

“Tang poetry and Song verse”), yet the mainstream of Ming and Qing literature consisted of poetry and prose. At that time, novels hardly constituted the mainstream, and never came close to replacing the paramount position of poetry and prose. The accolades heaped on novels of the Ming and Qing by the literati of later generations artificially elevated their status, so much so that people began to fixate on Ming and Qing novels at the expense of other genres. It is worth noting that *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* highlights the need for developing an objective understanding of Chinese literature. Conversely, it seems that Chinese researchers of literary history have yet to notice this problem. If they have, then they have devoted insufficient attention to it. Other similar problems also exist. Print culture played an important role in the spread and preservation of literary works; as a medium, printing plays an essential role in this regard. If we were to compare handwritten texts with printed texts, which of them would enjoy wider dissemination and influence? The answer would surely be the latter. Printed texts clearly boosted the popularity and impact of literary works, and had a concomitant effect on the popularity, in both their time and later ages, of a given author in the literary sphere. This included questions of whether the author justified inclusion in literary histories, as well as the size of their readership. Hence, the relationship between print culture and the spread of literature is quite important in the study of literary history, especially during the Ming and Qing dynasties which followed the Song and the Yuan. To a large extent, it determined the impact and popularity of a given literary work and its author, and determined their standing, legacy, and impact in literary history.

In research on Chinese literary history, a very important question, and yet one that we have generally neglected (“we” referring largely to mainland Chinese scholars, but also those in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau) is this: when we research literary history, what is the actual human and geographical scope of our study? That is, when we refer to the history of “Chinese” literature today, what does “Chinese” refer to? Does it refer to the entire population living on the 9.6 million square kilometers of Chinese territory? Does it refer to all 56 ethnic groups? Does it include Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau? Does it even include the overseas Chinese? Does it include people who used or are still using Chinese characters in their writing and composition of literary works? We ought to realize, upon deep reflection, that this issue deserves much attention. A general survey of the many histories of Chinese literature currently circulating on the market would reveal that, in spite of the claims in their titles to be “histories of Chinese literature,” they do not encompass all ethnic Chinese people and the literary works they have created. These works typically cover the literature of the Han ethnic group living on the Chinese mainland as well as its historical evolution. That is, they are histories of literature of the

Han ethnic group, written and composed in Chinese. They cover the literature of the other 55 ethnic groups written in the script of these ethnic minorities only cursorily, if at all. (In recent years, historical works with titles such as “the literary history of Greater China” have somewhat rectified this situation.) They also devote scant attention to the literature of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau, or even ignore it completely, much less literary works by the overseas Chinese. Literary works from the Korean peninsula, Japan, and Vietnam that were historically composed in Chinese, as well as their historical interactions with literature from China itself, have also been completely ignored. Having noted the problematic marginalization of these groups, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* proposes that we first define the scope of Chinese literary history in the conventional sense. It further argues that the contemporary definition of Chinese literary history should include, in theory and in practice, both the Han ethnic group and ethnic minorities living within China’s borders, as well as the Chinese diaspora outside China’s borders. The idea of including all Chinese, which naturally encompasses Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau, is certainly laudable.⁹ We also face the problem of how to integrate the premodern and the present in literary history writing. Of course, “integration” does not refer to an intentional or contrived association of the premodern with

9 Scholars have noted this problem in recent years and written a series of journal articles and monographs in response. For instance, Prof. Zhu Shoutong 朱壽桐, who is currently the dean of the Department of Chinese Language and Literature, University of Macau, proposes the concept of “new Chinese literature” (*hanyu xin wenxue* 漢語新文學) to replace Chinese literary history. Of course, this would apply solely to literary history after the modern era. See Zhu Shoutong 朱壽桐, “‘Hanyu xin wenxue’ gainian jiangou de lilun yiyi yu shijian jiazhi” “漢語新文學” 概念建構的理論意義與實踐價值, *Xueshu yanjiu* 學術研究, no. 1 (2009); Zhu Shoutong 朱壽桐, “Hanyu xin wenxue: zuowei yizhong gainian de xueshu youshi” 漢語新文學：作為一種概念的學術優勢, *Jinan xuebao (zhexue shehui kexueban)* 暨南學報 (哲學社會科學版), no. 1 (2009); Zhu Shoutong 朱壽桐, ed., *Hanyu xin wenxue tongshi* 漢語新文學通史 (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2010); Zhu Shoutong 朱壽桐, *Hanyu xin wenxue tonglun* 漢語新文學通論 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2018). In addition, Liu Jun 劉俊 proposes replacing the current concept of “the literature of Taiwan and Macau plus overseas” (*kuaquyu huawen wenxue* 跨區域華文文學) with “trans-regional Chinese literature” (*Taiwan Ao ji haiwai huawen wenxue* 臺灣澳暨海外華文文學), while Huang Wanhua 黃萬華 has argued for the expansion of “Chinese (defined by the boundaries of the nation state) literary history during the twentieth century” into “a literary history of the Chinese language during the twentieth century.” For a more detailed discussion, see Liu Jun 劉俊, “Kuaquyu kuawenhua de huawen wenxue yanjiu” 跨區域跨文化的華文文學研究, *Jiangsu shehui kexue* 江蘇社會科學, no. 4 (2004); Huang Wanhua 黃萬華, “Yuejie yu zhenghe: Cong 20 shiji Zhongguo wenxue shi dao 20 shiji hanyu wenxue shi – jianlun bainian haiwai huawen wenxue de yiyi he jiazhi” 越界與整合：從20世紀中國文學史到20世紀漢語文學史—兼論百年海外華文文學的意義和價值, *Jiangnan luntan* 江漢論壇, no. 4 (2013).

the present. Rather, it refers to the establishment of links between modern and premodern literature while describing or commenting on the former in an objective manner, thus uncovering intrinsic links between them and explaining patterns and characteristics which remain poorly understood today. The second volume of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* devotes much space to this. The editors have striven to change the conventional practice of emphasizing the Tang and the Song at the expense of the late Qing and modern era, and have taken care to highlight the fact that writers during the late Qing and modern era indeed innovated and achieved breakthroughs while following traditions, thereby transcending traditional literature and established genres. Especially worthy of praise is the attempt by *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* to integrate the premodern and the present by dispensing with the traditional division of the history of Chinese literature into the premodern era, modern era, and contemporary era. As a result, the entire book flows seamlessly across two volumes, presenting the development of Chinese literature from the premodern to the present within a single historical work, which can be seen as a whole. This is most conducive to fully showcasing the remarkable continuity of Chinese literature through the ages, and allows for the establishment of links between the literature of the present (modern) and the past (traditional).¹⁰

Reading *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* closely, we can also detect a series of personal imprints by individual contributors – their thoughts, their unique writing styles, and their insightful opinions. I would like to elaborate on these in further detail. In a most straightforward fashion, the opening section of the first chapter of the book sums up the four defining characteristics of the Chinese script. This is a systematic summary and demonstration of the characteristics of the Chinese writing system. Perhaps we may also interpret this as a conscious attempt by Western scholars to achieve two aims simultaneously. The first is to discuss the origins of Chinese literature. The second is to introduce the differences between the alphabetic script

10 We may list even more unique features of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* which distinguish it from more conventional literary histories published within China, such as its focus on the translation of Western literature and its lexicon, its focus on the impact of foreign religions on Chinese culture and literature as well as resulting changes in the latter, the first description and commentary of contemporary Web literature in a history of literature, among others. Moreover, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* was compiled by individual writers, and the inclusion of their names on the contents pages and at the opening of each chapter is an excellent practice worthy of emulation by Chinese scholars. This allows readers to identify clearly the writer of each chapter, and allows individual writers to establish authorship rights.

of the West and the logographic script of China and the East to readers in the West, thus associating different written scripts with differences in literature. Of these aims, the latter is probably the more important. On the origins of Chinese poetry, historians of Chinese literature have traditionally advanced various theses such as the “labor thesis,” the “game thesis,” and the “romance thesis.” *The Cambridge History*, however, emphasizes the “ancestral sacrifice and political ritual thesis,” and argues that these poems were composed by court officials during ancestral sacrifice and political rituals. (This thesis is indeed valid in the case of the “San song” 三頌 and “Da ya” 大雅 sections of the *Shijing* 詩經.) Thus the book observes that:

A somewhat looser understanding of poetry as intensified, rhythmic speech, directed at both the spirits and the political elite, also allows us to better appreciate the continuity of such speech across the different “genres” of ritual hymns, bronze inscriptions, and the royal pronouncements of the *Classic of Documents*. These expressions form the backbone of early historical consciousness, mythological remembrance, and political representation.¹¹

It further notes that: “It is this all-embracing view of human existence, expressed in the solemn and straightforward diction of pre-classical Chinese, that has established the *Poetry* as the foundational text of Chinese literature.”¹² Especially worthy of note is the editors’ attention, in the discussion of the *Shijing*, to artifacts and texts recently unearthed in China, for instance, the Shangbo and Guodian bamboo slips, as well as artifacts unearthed at Mawangdui. Undoubtedly, this lends much credibility to their discussion, while allowing readers to immerse themselves in the historical context more thoroughly. In discussing the literary history of the Eastern Han dynasty, the editors open the chapter with a section on “the Ban family and its contemporaries,” which is a refreshing and innovative approach. Not only does the integration of various genres in that section including *fu*, history, poetry, and prose reflect the intent of the editors to adopt a different narrative from the genre-based traditional literary history, it also highlights the concepts of clan and family during the Eastern Han, which accurately reflects the historical background of the era. (The section on the Ban 班 family, however, is immediately followed by

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), 17.

12 *Ibid.*, 18.

another section titled the “Cui family.” The Cui 崔 family could scarcely match the Ban family in terms of prestige, achievements, or influence. This latter section consists of a mere page and a half. Hence, its inclusion does not exactly seem to have been the best choice.) In particular, the editors analyze the emergence of literary expressions based on landscapes during the Southern Dynasties (420–589), arguing that this was related to the profound influence of Buddhism on the gentry during the Jin dynasty. This can in turn be attributed to the emphasis on visual means of Buddhist proselytization:

The Eastern Jin elite were deeply influenced by Buddhism, which was dubbed the “doctrine of images” because of its emphasis on teaching through visual means. For the Eastern Jin elite, landscape was a grand image (*xiang*), and the perception, interpretation, and very construction of this image were contingent upon the workings of the individual mind. Imagination was therefore a full verb indicating image-making. While geographic treatises began to appear in large quantity in this period and continued in the fifth and sixth centuries, the rise of landscape representation in the fourth century was, in many ways, as much a movement inward as outward; that is, the heightened interest in physical nature was but an extension of the primary engagement with the inner world of a particular person. It is for this reason that imaginary landscape is such a prominent motif in Eastern Jin literature.¹³

The objective analysis of the editors correctly identifies the core reason for the rise of landscape literature during the Southern dynasties (beginning with the Eastern Jin dynasty), and elucidates the substance of this phenomenon in literary history. In close connection to this, the writer’s description of Xie Lingyun’s 謝靈運 (385–433) composition of landscape poetry is also worthy of praise: “Xie’s biggest innovation lies in his crafting of a landscape poetry that is personal, intense, and poignant in its emotional complexity, and in his representation of a body moving through landscape.”¹⁴ The writer further notes that:

Xie presents a landscape observed by an assiduous traveler in motion, a physical journey literalized in minutely observed details of nature.

13 Xiaofei Tian, “From the Eastern Jin through the early Tang (317–649),” in vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 213–14.

14 *Ibid.*, 235.

Moreover, the long narrative titles of his poems allow no ambiguity as to the time and place of his sightseeing. We may well imagine that when his contemporaries read his poetry, they felt that they were there with him.¹⁵

In my opinion, the chapter on “the cultural Tang” (chapter four) authored by Stephen Owen (who is also one of the editors) best answered the editors’ call to write literary history as the “cultural history of literature.” A survey of that chapter not only reveals that the label “the cultural Tang” is manifested most clearly and in an unambiguous fashion, but also that culture and literature are integrated seamlessly from beginning to end. This is especially true of the section on “the reign of Emperor Xuanzong,” which clearly adopts a storytelling narrative style. (I am unable to elaborate here, given space constraints.) In addition, several of Owen’s arguments and opinions in this chapter are most insightful. For instance, in discussing the role of the Empress Wu, he writes that:

The most enduring strain in the Chinese literary tradition valued not praise, but a persuasive representation of the writer’s true feelings and an intense, usually critical, engagement with the problems of society and the polity. As a consequence the writers of her reign most appreciated later were often not the great literary courtiers, but those who were unsuccessful or presented themselves as critics of a woman’s empire.¹⁶

This is truly a most accurate depiction of premodern Chinese literary tradition, which is not only accurate with respect to Wu Zetian’s reign during the Tang dynasty, but does justice to the premodern history of Chinese literature as a whole. Regarding the spectacular achievements of Tang literature, he further points out that it was Wu Zetian who extended literary composition to wider circles of the elite, allowing them to participate in a unified culture and to advance in the central government. As a result, the center of literary production gradually moved away from the court and became the defining competence of a class. The striking achievements of Tang literature are in part due to its production and circulation in expanded communities of changing values and fashions that were no longer centered on the court. (Of course, several factors were responsible for the flowering of Tang literature, and this is merely one of

15 Ibid., 236.

16 Stephen Owen, “The cultural Tang (650–1020),” in vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 294.

them, albeit an important one.) It is also worth noting that the chapter on “the cultural Tang” encompasses the first sixty years of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), which is unthinkable in literary histories written by the average Chinese scholar. In justifying this, the writer of chapter five notes that:

The formative stage of what came to be distinctively “Song” in Northern Song literature did not occur at the dynasty’s founding in 960 or any time close to it. In other words, the Northern Song is an example of a time when dynastic change and literary development are distinctly out of sync, belying the widespread assumption in representations of Chinese literary history that the two go hand in hand. The new imperial era would indeed eventually develop a distinctive literary style, but this did not begin to happen until the 1020s and 1030s, roughly two generations after the Song began.¹⁷

This is an extremely convincing argument that fulfils the editorial brief to go beyond the traditional framework defined by dynasties in writing literary history, and to instead attempt a new periodization based on the developmental trajectory of literature itself. This example pertaining to the Northern Song is indeed the most successful attempt at this new periodization. The section on the impact of *Daoxue* (道學) or “Learning of the Way” on literature during the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), is also most impressive. This section is a full exploration of the clash and integration of literature with other fields (ethics and religion). With discussions such as “the *Daoxue* critique of embellished language,” “a literature of interiority and the countermovement outward,” “the convergence of aesthetic and philosophical issues in Yang Wanli 楊萬里” and Lu You 陸遊 (1125–1210) as well as “Zhu Xi 朱熹 and the transparency of texts” during the early Southern Song, the writer does justice to Southern Song literature in the broad sense of the term while paying attention to the historical context, and is able to employ multidisciplinary analysis to great effect.¹⁸

In several instances throughout the book, the writers make a conscious effort to compare Chinese and Western literatures. While these comparisons are fairly brief and stop short of launching into a full-fledged discussion of the subject at hand, they nonetheless show the unique perspective through

17 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), 384–85.

18 Michael A. Fuller, “Literature and the Way: the impact of Daoxue,” in vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 476–97.

which Western scholars approach Chinese literary history. Despite the fact that these discussions are succinct and do not elaborate at length on East-West comparisons, they are able to offer inspiration and food for thought to readers (particularly readers in the West who are familiar with Western literature). For instance, when discussing the “Da ya” section of the *Shijing*, dating from the earliest phase of Chinese literature, the writer draws a comparison with the Homeric epics with respect to content and expression. (Some scholars believe that this is evidence that premodern China also had epics in the Western tradition of narrative poetry, albeit of far shorter length.) In another striking example regarding the blossoming of literature during the mid-Ming, the contributor proposes that literature from that period constitutes excellent material for comparative studies of Chinese and Western literature, and that in terms of the extensive reach of certain cultural products, mid-Ming literature was comparable to the Renaissance in Europe. Certain views of the Revivalists during the Ming naturally remind one of lyric poetry in the West, both of which saw music as an intrinsic element of poetry. Yet another example would be the comparison of the spread of the hand-copied manuscript of *Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅 to the authoritative versions of the Bible and Shakespeare’s works, as well as the comparison between southern drama and drama in England during the same period. While these comparisons are merely one-line statements and do not involve lengthy discussions, they leave the reader with much food for thought. Especially worthy of note is the book’s attention to the censorship of Qu You’s 瞿佑 (1347–1433) *Jiandeng xinhua* 剪燈新話 during the Ming, which curtailed its spread within China, but did not stop it from gaining a wide readership in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, among other countries. This in turn encouraged several foreign authors to emulate him in writing many similar stories, which demonstrates that political censorship and print culture worked in tandem to facilitate the international spread of literature. This is indeed a most interesting phenomenon in literary history (which the typical literary history written by Chinese scholars scarcely mentions). Chapter one of volume II discusses at length the reconstruction of images of women in Ming literature. This reflects the intent expressed by the editor in the preface, in which she identifies the focus on women’s literature as one of the key characteristics of this literary history. This focus on women’s literature encompasses two areas: literary production by female authors; and the reconstruction of images of women in literary works, with a particular focus on the latter, which has been largely overlooked in previous histories of Chinese literature. Literary production and the spread of literary works during the late Ming were closely linked to print culture. Therefore, the editors dedicate chapters and sections to discussions of the relationship between print culture and manuscript culture in

their treatment of the history of books during the late Ming, which truly constitutes a fresh perspective. In chapter four of volume II, writer Shang Wei 商偉 links the novel *Shitou ji* 石頭記 (*The Story of the Stone*) to another contemporary novel *Rulin waishi* 儒林外史 (*The Scholars*) as a matter of course, and consciously compares the authors of both novels, namely Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (1710–1765) and Wu Jingzi 吳敬梓 (1701–1754), thus introducing a refreshing perspective to readers. He writes that: “While Wu Jingzi was still working on *The Scholars* in the 1740s, Cao Xueqin had already embarked on his ambitious novel *The Story of the Stone* (also known as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, hereafter referred to as *The Stone*).”¹⁹ He further writes that “[n]o evidence indicates that Wu Jingzi and Cao Xueqin knew about each other, and their novels differ in fundamental ways”²⁰ and that “*The Stone* is the true intellectual rival of *The Scholars*, despite their differences in theme, sensibility, and narrative style. Together these two novels constitute a critical breakthrough in the literary and intellectual history of early modern China.”²¹ Few scholars would consciously examine these two Qing novels side by side. Similarly, few would realize the symbolic significance and value of both novels to early modern Chinese literary and intellectual history. The chapter six commentary on Wang Tao 王韜 (1828–1897) reflects the objectivity and fairness of the editors and their holistic understanding of historical figures. On the one hand, the writer lauds Wang as “a paragon of the first generation of enlightened literati,”²² commenting that “he forged an unexpected career in Western learning, translation, publication, and journalism – something that would have been unthinkable for Chinese intellectuals and literati only decades before.”²³ On the other hand, Wang continued composing traditional poetry, with classical poetry and prose constituting a major part of his output. As the writer states, it is thus evident that:

Wang Tao presented a double image. Hailed as a champion of the new learning, he was no less renowned for his hobby of frequenting courtesan houses and churning out writings on erotic and fantastic subjects. He was

19 Shang Wei, “The literati era and its demise (1723–1840),” in vol. II of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 282.

20 Ibid., 282.

21 Ibid., 283.

22 David Der-Wei Wang, “Chinese literature from 1841 to 1937,” in vol. II of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 438.

23 Ibid., 438.

thus as much a pioneer in Chinese journalism and reformist discourse as he was a connoisseur of the fading splendor of traditional literati culture.²⁴

The commentary on the May Fourth Movement, also found in chapter six, captures the essence of that period as follows:

Although politics and literature had been closely tied since the rise of “new fiction” in the late Qing era, it was in the May Fourth era and subsequent decades that writing was finally transformed into political action, and became a vocation that regularly demanded as much blood as ink. This revolutionary poetics manifests itself in a belief in the immediate link between literary rhetoric and national policy, in a Promethean symbolism of rebellion and sacrifice, in an “obsession with China,” and in an apocalyptic vision of national rejuvenation through revolution. Writing could expose social evils, propagate new and progressive thought, illuminate a gendered and politicized subjectivity, and map out a bright future for China.²⁵

In sum, the brief analyses and citations above allow us to see clearly that *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, published overseas and edited collectively by international scholars, indeed breaks new ground in several areas including the research and writing of literary history, and is worthy of emulation by Chinese scholars in more than a few respects. Notwithstanding its numerous achievements, however, an honest and objective assessment would reveal some flaws and shortcomings. To encourage further discussion, I offer some preliminary insights into these in the following paragraphs.

3

It must be pointed out that the editors of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* consciously de-emphasize literary genres while seeking to focus equally on literature and culture. This was intended to allow readers to better grasp the formation and development of literature within its cultural context and environment, as well as its intricate and inseparable links with culture, as opposed to the approach adopted by traditional literary histories, which

²⁴ Ibid., 439.

²⁵ Ibid., 468.

simply list the position, influence, and standing of various genres in literary history in a straightforward fashion. This is undoubtedly rather innovative in terms of its rationale and intent. Considering the book as a whole, however, this approach proves unsatisfactory in certain respects. For instance, owing to this de-emphasis on genre, certain genres that are particularly distinctive in literary history tend to be obscured, making it hard for the reader to discern their influence and standing. The discussion of these is conducted in a piecemeal fashion and diluted within the broader narrative. Take for instance *fu*, a genre which, following its appearance in Chinese literary history, continued to exert considerable influence on later generations, but has been relatively neglected by historians of Chinese literature. In its description and assessment of *fu*, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* does not seem to do justice to this particular genre. In other words, its classification of *fu* by genre is problematic. In discussing *fu*, chapter one of the book states that “the dominant genre of Han poetry was the ‘poetic exposition’ (*fu*) that for Western Han times is best understood as a genre of rhapsodic performance.”²⁶ The chapter later notes that “[v]irtually any poetic text of a certain length could be called *fu*, occasionally also in alternation with terms like ‘eulogy’ (*song*) or ‘(elegant) phrases’ (*ci*)”²⁷ and “the Western Han term *fu* covered the entire gamut of poetic forms and topics.”²⁸ However, chapters three and four of volume I offer a rather different narrative. In chapter three it is stated that “dynastic histories tend to include prose pieces such as edicts, epistles (including petitions to the throne), proclamations, treatises, or even *fu*, rather than poetry.”²⁹ In chapter four we read that “[p]oetry was the most common literary form, inviting, as prose and *fu* did not, composition in the context of a group.”³⁰ Clearly, the writers of the three chapters differ in their views and opinions toward *fu* as a genre, leading to inconsistency regarding the characteristics and classification of a particular genre within the same work of literary history. I would further suggest that the opinions presented in chapters three and four are closer to the objective facts. Although the origins of *fu* can be traced to poetry, as far back as the *Shijing*, with the *Chu ci* 楚辭 being a less distant predecessor, it is, in the final analysis, both related to and distinct from poetry and verse. (Strictly speaking, *ci* ought to be referred to as poetry, but that is not the case with *fu*; rhythmic *fu*, which only came into existence later, is altogether different.) *Fu* originated during the

26 Martin Kern, “Early Chinese literature, beginnings through Western Han,” 88.

27 Ibid., 89.

28 Ibid., 89.

29 Xiaofei Tian, “From the Eastern Jin through the early Tang (317–649),” 276.

30 Stephen Owen, “The cultural Tang (650–1020),” 289.

pre-Qin period, with works by Xunzi 荀子 (ca. 313–ca. 238 BCE) and Song Yu 宋玉 (298–222 BCE), which were labeled as *fu*, being commonly regarded as the genre's prototype. By the Han dynasty, the unique style and form of *fu* had evolved. As a genre, it is neither poetry nor prose, yet it shares characteristics with both. It emphasizes syntax as well as a certain cadence, yet it does not rhyme. Broadly speaking, it ought to belong to prose, yet it is not exactly prose. Based on today's standards of genre classification, it is rather similar to modern prose poetry.

Seen as a whole, it must be said that the planning and coordination by both editors are excellent. Kang-i Sun Chang, in particular, devoted more effort to this area (Cambridge University Press had approached her initially), which is evident from the preface as well as the introductions to both volumes. However, this is ultimately a volume edited collectively. Consequently, there exist obvious inconsistencies in the format, which undoubtedly undermine the book's integrity. For instance, the contents page clearly reveals a lack of coordination and consistency. To be clear, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* has made a bold attempt to go beyond the traditional dynastic framework, but the chapter headings are composed rather differently. While most of the chapters follow the chronological order of dynasties, some individual chapters follow the century system (for instance, chapter six of volume I), while others take specific years as their cut-off points (for instance, chapters six and seven of volume II). Chapter three of volume I is titled according to the dynastic convention ("From the Eastern Jin through the early Tang"), yet its sections are defined by "century," which seems inappropriate. The division of historical periods into "centuries" is clearly in accordance with Western convention, since the concept of "century" did not exist at all in Chinese history. If the editors of this book wished to cater to the preferences of a Western readership, then they ought to have ensured consistency throughout the entire book, or perhaps defined each chapter according to "century," while including the dynasties in an appendix.

In addition, the book clearly diverges from the objective truths of literary history in certain respects. For instance, an entire section is devoted to the Cui family of the Eastern Han, which places it on an almost equal footing with the Ban family. Yet, in terms of their achievements, influence, and representativeness in literary history (historiography), the Cui family pales in comparison to the Ban family. Moreover, the editors do not seem to have devoted much thought to the issue of which genres, authors, and literary works ought to have been included in the chapter and section headings, and which ought to have been excluded. With respect to genres, *ming* (inscriptions) and *zhen* (admonitions) are included in the headings, yet *fu* are omitted. With respect

to authors, Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220) and the “Seven Masters of the Jian’an” (*Jian’an Qizi* 建安七子) are omitted from the headings, yet Du Du 杜篤 (d. 78) and Feng Yan 馮衍 (fl. 24) are somehow included. With respect to literary works, prominent examples such as *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 and *Shipin* 詩品, among others, are curiously missing from the headings. Moreover, the editors seem to have focused on the Jin dynasty (1115–1234) at the expense of the Liao dynasty (907–1125). Both chapters six and seven of volume 1 discuss the Jin at length (even going so far as to include it in both chapter and section headings), yet the Liao is almost completely absent. Since both the Liao and the Jin represent the literary achievements of ethnic minorities in northern China, does the Liao not deserve more attention? Much can be said about the literature of the Liao.

Unquestionably, of course, the issues I have just pointed out do not detract from the book’s overall standard and its unique style. It is my firm contention that, although the editors intended *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* to be an accessible handbook of Chinese literary development through the ages for the non-specialist reader in the West, it is nonetheless a unique, valuable, and outstanding work of literary history for both the non-specialist reader and professional scholars of Chinese literary history in China. It is precisely for this reason that I have recommended this book so enthusiastically in addition to reviewing it at length, and it is my fervent hope that Chinese readers and scholars may accord it the attention it deserves as a result.

Let us return to the question of literary history. Beginning in the early twentieth century, our research of literary history has continued for over a hundred years. We must continue composing literature, simply because literature itself is a never-ending enterprise. As long as humans continue to exist, they must continue to give expression to their emotions, experiences, ambitions, and aspirations, and describe the various current phenomena and changes in nature and the human world which they have witnessed or heard. Since that is the case, literary history must exist alongside literature in order to record the path of its evolution as well as summarize its characteristics and experiences. Naturally, future generations must offer their judgments, commentaries, and analyses of these records and summaries from a historical, scientific, and aesthetic perspective. Of course, we scholars must also compare and scrutinize these judgments, commentaries, and analyses to ascertain their validity, thus distilling the characteristics and patterns of literary development to promote the healthy development of literature in the future. Most importantly, during this process, we must realize that literary history is comprised of fluid

understandings and interpretations of literature by various scholars belonging to different ages, and is thus never cast in stone. Precisely because of its fluid nature, we are able to make new discoveries and arrive at fresh judgments every now and then. Moreover, the perceptions of literary historians themselves are also in a state of constant flux. In this sense, we may say that *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* has done us a great service in inspiring us to delve ever deeper into literary history, while discarding outdated traditional models and opening up a new dimension in literary history research.

Translated by Zhong Yiming 鍾逸明 and Damien Kinney

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