



BRILL

JOURNAL OF CHINESE HUMANITIES 10 (2024) 65–84



brill.com/joch

# Is a New Chinese Literary History Possible? A Critical Investigation of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*

Shen Yifan 沈一帆

Associate Professor, Department of Chinese, School of Humanities,  
Shenzhen University, Shenzhen, Guangdong, China

sss.family@163.com

Received 28 November 2023 | Accepted 12 December 2023 |

Published online 16 April 2024

## Abstract

The publication of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* in 2010 stands as a significant achievement in the field of Chinese literary studies within the global field of Sinology. This groundbreaking work challenged the prevailing narratives of Chinese literary history in two key areas: writing style and perspectives of literary history. By employing updated methodologies, the authors addressed the practical question of how to effectively rewrite Chinese literary history. Additionally, they relied on historiographic principles to reconsider the theoretical issues surrounding the nature of Chinese literary history and the reasons behind its rewriting. Through a comprehensive investigation, this literary history offers a theoretical response to the question of what Chinese literary history truly entails. It sheds light on two fundamental compilation principles: the history of history and the history of literary culture. These principles revolve around the three core elements of history, literature, and China itself. By examining the book's interactions with the mainstream Western theoretical community, insight may be gained into the motivations behind the writing process and the paradigmatic shifts within contemporary overseas Chinese literary history.

## Keywords

*The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* – rewriting literary history – history of history – history of literary culture – Chinese literature

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill BV | DOI:10.1163/23521341-12340171

© SHEN YIFAN, 2024 | 2352-1341 (online)

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 license.

Literary history emerged as a modern academic writing style that fused the modernity of Western literature with the specialized nature of academic research. By the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the concept of literary history – together with its writing paradigms – had become part and parcel of China’s academic modernization during the Transfer of Western Knowledge to the East (*xixuedongjian* 西學東漸), a period marked by the growth of missionary activities in China and the profound transformation of Japan’s Sinology. *A History of Chinese Literature*, published by British Sinologist Herbert A. Giles (1845–1935) in 1901, has been recognized by modern academia as the beginning of modern attempts to write Chinese literary histories because it was the first to provide a grand, systematic narrative of the evolution of Chinese literature.<sup>1</sup> The Chinese literary history *Zhongguo wenxueshi* 中國文學史, written in 1904 by Lin Chuanjia 林傳甲 (1877–1922), was the first of its kind produced by a Chinese native. Lin was a teacher at a modern-style school during the late Qing dynasty and drew inspiration from *Shina bungakushi* 支那文學史, a literary history written by the Japanese Sinologist Sasakawa Tanero 笹川種郎 (1870–1949) in 1898. *Zhongguo wenxueshi* not only reflected the methods and vision employed by Japanese Sinology to reshape its understanding of traditional Chinese literature in the modern era but also indirectly inherited the Western learning sources and discourse styles that influenced Japan’s Sinology.

The previously stagnant writing practices of Chinese literary history – particularly those of overseas Chinese scholars – experienced a modest surge in publishing in the 1960s with the successive publications of *Chinese Literature: A Historical Introduction* (1961) by Ch’en Shou-Yi 陳綏頤 (1899–1978), *Early Chinese Literature* (1962) by Burton Watson (1925–2017), *A History of Chinese Literature* (1964) by Lai Ming 賴明 (1920–2011), and Liu Wu-chi’s 柳無忌 (1907–2002) *An Introduction to Chinese Literature* (1966). These remarkable works showcase the dedicated efforts of these scholars in writing a general literary history. They share similarities with the works produced by Chinese scholars in the early 20th century, both in terms of their content and style. Together, these works not only upheld but also strengthened the conventions of modern Western literary history.

In the 1980s, the international study of Chinese literary history entered a new period of change. One notable publication during this time was the Dutch language *Chinese letterkunde: Inleiding, historisch overzicht en bibliografieën* (1985), which was edited by Dutch Sinologists Wilt L. Idema and Lloyd Haft. It was first published in Europe and later translated into English as *A Guide to*

1 Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸, “Ping Giles de *Zhongguo wenxueshi*” 評 Giles 的中國文學史, in *Zhongguo wenxuelun ji* 中國文學論集 (Shanghai: Kaiming shudian, 1934), 389–95.

*Chinese Literature* (1997). It became a prominent work in the field of Chinese literary history in both Europe and the United States. What sets this book apart is its unique compilation of general and genre-specific literary history. It adopts a diachronic approach, tracing the development of Chinese literature throughout different periods. The book provides a comprehensive account of various genres, including prose, poetry, drama, and novels. Another important publication was *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (1986), which was primarily edited by American Sinologist William H. Nienhauser Jr. This comprehensive work adheres to the academic tradition of European and American Sinology, which places great value on well-organized knowledge and thorough bibliographies. It effectively compiles essential information about the historical development of Chinese literature, literary genres, and the works of influential writers into dictionaries and reference books, creating a cohesive and interconnected resource. Both of the aforementioned literary histories delve into the realm of literary style and genre, placing them at the forefront of their research. This juxtaposition reveals an internal contradiction between the very essence of literary history and the awareness surrounding genre research.

Since 2000, Sinologists in Europe and the United States have called for a comprehensive rewriting of Chinese literary history. This movement has led to three influential publishing powerhouses – Columbia University Press, Cambridge University Press, and Harvard University Press – each setting their own agendas to accomplish the task.<sup>2</sup> Among the resulting publications, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* (2010), co-edited by Professor Kang-i Sun Chang of Yale University and Professor Stephen Owen of Harvard University and jointly written by more than ten senior North American Sinologists, has drawn the most attention. *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* challenges the authority of mainstream Chinese literary histories in two specific areas: writing practice and literary historical perspectives. First, the book examines the changes in key issues and narrative styles in historical writings, as well as Western Sinology's reinterpretation of Chinese literary history using concepts such as periodization, literary genre, gender, technology (such as printing), region, relationship (including reception, dissemination, communication), and identity. The book aims to rewrite literary history, and its

---

2 These three literary histories are: *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, edited by Professor Victor H. Mair of the University of Pennsylvania in 2001; *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, co-edited by Professor Kang-i Sun Chang of Yale University and Professor Stephen Owen of Harvard University in 2010; and *A New Literary History of Modern China*, edited by Professor David Der-wei Wang of Harvard University in 2017.

various methodological experiments serve as examples of this rewriting practice. Second, the book explores the conceptual presuppositions derived from considering Chinese literary history as both a method of knowledge production and a writing style. It does not limit its focus to the writing practice of a specific literary history. Through a series of essays and interviews, independent of the book's discourse on official histories,<sup>3</sup> it constructs a loose but interconnected theoretical framework centered on literary history theory. The book then critically evaluates these conceptual prototypes, which can be labeled as literary historical perspectives, using a historical thought approach. Ultimately, the book answers the meta-theoretical questions of what Chinese literary history is and why it needs to be rewritten. Notably, the two editors-in-chief of the book series exhibited these contrasting preferences in their discussion of rewriting literary history – Kang-i Sun Chang emphasized the importance of practice, while Stephen Owen prioritized theory. This article specifically focuses on the theoretical aspect of this debate. By exploring the three fundamental elements of literature, history, and China, which are crucial to understanding Chinese literary history, the theoretical perspective of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* may be uncovered. Additionally, this article aims to shed light on the driving forces and significant shifts in contemporary rewriting of Chinese literary history on the international stage by examining the book's interactions with the mainstream theoretical community in the West.

3 Since the initial decision on the book's title, the editor-in-chief of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, along with many of its contributors, have consistently emphasized the fundamental principles guiding the compilation of this book. These principles have been extensively discussed and disseminated through various authoritative literary research journals on the Chinese mainland, generating an unprecedented level of publicity within the field of Sinological writings. Prior to the book's official release, a total of eight interviews were conducted in both English and Chinese, focusing on the compilation principles and reflecting on the theories of literary history. Influential among these interviews were those with Kang-i Sun Chang 孫康宜 and Sheng Anfeng 生安鋒, "Xinde wenxueshi keneng ma" 新的文學史可能嗎, *Qinghua daxue xuebao* 清華大學學報, no. 4 (2005): 98–108, 15; Ning Yizhong 寧一中 and Kang-i Sun Chang 孫康宜, "Kuayue zhongxi wenxue de bianjie-Kang-i Sun Chang jiaoshou fangtanlu (shang)" 跨越中西文學的邊界—孫康宜教授訪談錄(上), *Wenyi yanjiu* 文藝研究, no. 9 (2008): 70–77; Yuwen Suo'an [Stephen Owen] 宇文所安, "Shizhong youshi-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); Wang Min, "Reflections on The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature: An Interview with Professor Stephen Owen," *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art* 文藝理論研究, no. 1 (2012): 49–60.

## 1 History: from Grand Narrative to a History of History

*The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* introduces two significant changes in terms of compilation principles. These changes are the concepts of “history of history” and “history of literary culture,” proposed by Stephen Owen and Kang-i Sun Chang. Although there is a certain degree of overlap between these concepts, each presents its own novel definitions of history and literature.

When it comes to history, Stephen Owen believes that mainstream Chinese literary histories are influenced by modern historical concepts and practices. He explores the conflict between literary history theory and the actual writing of literary history. Owen suggests that reflections on literary history theory often come before the practical application of writing literary history. This mismatch between theory and method necessitates researchers to separate their thoughts on literary history from the process of writing it.<sup>4</sup> Over the past few decades Owen has scrutinized both literary historiography as influenced by modern historical concepts – and the conceptual presuppositions and theoretical foundations behind it – through writings such as *Huluo de wenxueshi* 瓠落的文學史, *The End of the Past: Rewriting Chinese Literary History in the Early Republic*,<sup>5</sup> *Shi zhong you shi – cong bianji jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi tan qi* 史中有史—從編輯劍橋中國文學史談起,<sup>6</sup> and Introduction to *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* Volume 1.<sup>7</sup> A summary of his findings is provided below.

One of his findings pertains to the linear grand narrative structure. In the realm of modern historical studies, characterized by its distinct historicist traits, a series of cultural narratives has emerged. These narratives embody a continuous sense of temporality, featuring a clear beginning, an eventual conclusion, and a linear progression. They serve as a crucial tool for integrating the diverse range of literary works, acting as a metaphorical foyer that readers must pass through to arrive at poetry.<sup>8</sup>

4 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.

5 Stephen Owen, “The End of the Past: Rewriting Chinese Literary History in the Early Republic,” in *The Appropriation of Cultural Capital: China's May Fourth Project*, ed. Milena Doleželová-Velingerová and Oldřich Král (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), 167–92.

6 Yuwen Suo'an, “Shizhong youshi-cong bianji jianqiao Zhongguo wenxueshi tanqi.”

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

8 Yuwen Suo'an [Stephen Owen] 宇文所安, “Zhi Zhongguo duzhe” 致中國讀者, in *Chutang shi* 初唐詩, trans. Jia Jinhua 賈晉華 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2004), 2.

Another finding relates to the influence of nationalism. It was not only a typical Western import of the time; it also played a pivotal role in reshaping traditions during the May Fourth Movement. Chinese literary history, as a grand narrative, can largely be attributed to the construction of discourse by the modern nation-state, as well as the production and dissemination of national identity within the literary realm. In a similar vein to the triumph of colloquial literature over Latin literature in Western literary histories, Chinese literary history has embraced the narrative logic of vernacular language, replacing classical Chinese as its mainstay.

A third finding explores positivism and certainty. History is a present, objective narrative of a specific period in the past, and as a result, empirical research that examines literary works by placing them into historical contexts can arrive at an objective presentation of the process by which literature develops and evolves.

Fourthly, there is Owen's notion of truthful writing and analytical language. In order to conduct historical research in a scientific manner, it is crucial to uncover, examine, and organize literary materials. The objective of narrating literary histories is to present the facts and laws of literary evolution in an unbiased and analytical style. In contrast, the technique and readability of historical narratives are considered less significant.

Fifthly, Owen delves into the concept of canonization. Similar to how a linear narrative of history is composed of a series of pivotal moments, the evolution of literary history can be seen as a compilation of esteemed writers and their works, along with the process through which they were recognized and included in the literary canon.

In direct contrast to the above principles, however, Stephen Owen's ruminations on Chinese literary histories are deeply rooted in the theoretical changes within the contemporary Western historiography and distinctly characterized by postmodernist historiography.

Firstly, there is the concept of the "history of history." Literary history is seen not as a concrete and objective account of the past, but rather as a constructed idea. It is thought impossible to attain a completely objective understanding of literary history. Instead, all that may be accessed are the accumulated literary evaluations and choices made by one's predecessors. Therefore, the seemingly certain and stable periods, literary works, and writers of the past are in fact understood as undergoing complex processes of change.<sup>9</sup> The true purpose of literary history lies in revealing how literature is filtered and reconstructed by

---

9 Stephen Owen, "Huluo de wenxueshi," 238.

later generations. This demonstrates that the traditional approach of placing literary works within a specific moment in history, as part of a linear narrative, is no longer valid. In addition to uncovering the causal connections between literary works, a new approach to writing literary history must also strive to explain the circuitous path texts take during their formation. That is to say, parts of any given ancient text could have been composed separately by more than one author over a long period of time; it could have been edited into a complete work at a date much later than its original authorship; it underwent many centuries of transcribing, and each new rendition brought with it changes to the text, both intentional and not. This new narrative should have a multi-layered structure and incorporate multiple storylines. It can be described as the “history of history,” a new historicist principle in literary history writing.

Secondly, it is crucial to acknowledge the separation of literary history and national narrative. Chinese literary history, when defined as the account of literature produced and circulated within Han Chinese communities, extends beyond the confines of modern China to encompass diaspora communities as well.<sup>10</sup> This expanded perspective not only widens the range of languages employed in literary writing but also broadens the geographical boundaries considered in documenting literary history. Consequently, this approach challenges the traditional notion of a unified language, race, and political entity.

Thirdly, it is posited that historical imagination and uncertainty play a crucial role in one’s understanding of literary history. While empirical research is undoubtedly valuable, the methodological significance of historical imagination has garnered considerable attention. This is primarily because literary works are selected, disseminated, and preserved in an inherently subjective way that is often influenced by chance. Additionally, many writers and their works have been unjustly overlooked, underestimated, or misunderstood because they reside outside the confines of what is traditionally considered literary history. These neglected voices create a vast expanse of uncharted territory, filled with ambiguity and uncertainty, which undermines the prevailing notion of a stable and unchangeable literary canon.

Fourthly, one may consider the narrative turn and the significance of literary history stories. Distinct from objective historical facts, historiography is a practice that is informed by historical works which are, first and foremost, language structures. Consequently, it becomes imperative for contemporary

---

10 Stephen Owen, Introduction to *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, xxi.

literary histories to place narrative techniques and readability at the forefront.<sup>11</sup> By deftly employing plot development and narrative techniques, an innovative academic writing paradigm can be forged, one that can aptly be labeled as a literary history story.<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, there is de-canonization. The hierarchical structure of the works in the literary system needs to be re-examined and the relativity and historicity of the literary canon need to be emphasized in terms of the canon's reception history, and following that, a large-scale reassessment of the value of minor writers and their works may be conducted.

Since the second half of the 20th century, four influential literary history texts have been published in the United States. These works have consistently challenged conventional modern historical viewpoints by adopting new compilation principles. In 1948, Robert Ernest Spiller (1896–1988) called upon more than 60 scholars to compile a weighty tome of more than one million words, *Literary History of the United States*, and he moved literary history forward into an era of collective creation. Four decades later, *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*, spearheaded by Emory Elliott (1942–2009), emerged as the pioneering response to the challenges posed by postmodernist theory to the conventional practices of literary history writing. This groundbreaking work shattered the confines of linear storytelling and national epic models, instead highlighting the remarkable diversity of American literature in terms of its origins, styles, and narrative approaches. Subsequently, with the successive publication of the eight volumes of *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, editor-in-chief Sacvan Bercovitch (1933–2014) not only pushed to the forefront the undercurrents long overshadowed by literary canons, such as women's literature, colonial literature, ethnic minority literature, and popular literature, but also enabled the diverse voices within literary history to be heard, with the aid of an interdisciplinary method incorporating feminism, ethnic studies,

11 Tian Xiaofei 田曉菲 and Cheng Xiangzhan 程相占, "Zhongguo wenxue de lishixing yu wenxuexing" 中國文學的歷史性與文學性, *Jinagsu daxue xuebao* 江蘇大學學報, no. 9 (2009), 1–6.

12 In a broader sense, the emergence of postmodern academic movements like The New Cultural History and New Historicism in the Western world during the 1970s has brought about a shift in historical writing. Thick description has taken precedence over factual accounts, becoming the new trend in historical writing. Consequently, the importance of both what to tell and how to tell it has grown significantly. This phenomenon can be observed not only in mainstream historiography in the West but also in the works of renowned historians in the field of Sinology who possess a deep understanding of the art of storytelling, such as Ray Huang (1918–2000), Jonathan D. Spence, Timothy Brook, and Stephen R. Platt.



and cultural studies, transforming the field of literary history into a boisterous battleground on an unprecedented scale. Since the start of the 21st century, the tempo of radical American literary history writing has picked up intensely. *A New Literary History of America*, co-edited by Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors, was awarded Best Nonfiction Book of 2009 by Publishers Weekly upon its publication. This remarkable work presents a collection of literary moments, spanning from Elvis Presley to Obama, skillfully woven together to form a captivating and coherent narrative. Departing from the traditional grand narrative model of literary history, it adopts a point-like radiating narrative structure. This innovative approach, coupled with its cultural history writing style, has earned it the reputation of a literary history masterpiece.

The continuous rewriting of American literary history represents a significant advancement in the exploration of postmodernist writing paradigms within the field. This has greatly influenced the way American academia perceives the nature, purpose, and methods of literary history, delving into unprecedented depths and breadth. However, this impact was not mirrored in European and American Sinology until the 21st century. It is equally remarkable that Stephen Owen emerged as one of the first North American Sinologists to acknowledge and respond to the shifts in mainstream American literary history. His extensive research on Chinese literary history, spanning nearly three decades, serves as a valuable testament to the evolving historical perspectives and writing paradigms. His contributions extend from *The Poetry of the Early T'ang* (1977) and *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: the High T'ang* (1980), which are typical grand narratives focusing on the revelation of the laws governing the evolution of literary genres, to *The End of the Chinese "Middle Ages": Essays in Mid-T'ang Literary Culture* (1996), a literary culture survey of Mid-Tang, to *The Making of Early Chinese Classical Poetry* (2006) and *The Late T'ang: Chinese Poetry of the Mid-Ninth Century (827–860)* (2006), both of which focus on the ubiquitous phenomenon of the "history of history" in the preservation and dissemination of texts, and then to *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* (2010), which provides theoretical insights into how historical uncertainties reshape literary history. A continuous return to literary history clearly became a crucial avenue for Owen to reflect on Chinese literary research.

According to Owen, the ongoing shifts in the paradigm of contemporary literary history research highlight the inherent challenge involved in objectively describing the past. These shifts involve attempting to distinguish between history, which encompasses factual events of the past, and historiography, which encompasses the choices, expressions, and interpretations of those events. The task at hand is to effectively present the multitude of perspectives and

complexities that history filters out, as well as the inherent uncertainty that lays beyond overarching narratives. The revolutionary approach to the study of literary history offered by the “history of history” may be likened to the effect quantum mechanics had on physics.

## 2 Literature: from Aesthetic Standards to Literary Culture

The history of literary culture is a crucial aspect of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*. It serves as a fundamental principle that aims to move away from a narrow focus on individual texts. Instead, it emphasizes the interconnectedness between literary practices and other cultural practices. By doing so, it revolutionizes the study of literary history by reimagining traditional genre studies. This approach explores various aspects of literary production and circulation, including reception, anthology, printing, women’s contributions, and periodization. Ultimately, it brings about a shift from a mere examination of literary forms to a comprehensive exploration of the cultural context surrounding them.

When reflecting on the literary history of China and the West spanning over a century, it becomes evident that the 1980s marked a significant turning point. In the academic circles on the Chinese mainland, the imperative task of the new era – following the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution – was to disentangle literature from politics. In the “rewriting literary history” (*chongxie wenxueshi* 重寫文學史) campaign driven by scholars such as Chen Pingyuan 陳平原, Qian Liqun 錢理群, Huang Ziping 黃子平, Wang Xiaoming 王曉明, and Chen Sihe 陳思和, aesthetic standards took the place of political standards and gradually developed into an important paradigm for the self-construction of contemporary Chinese literary history. A case in point is the publication of *Zhongguo wenxueshi* 中國文學史 (1996) co-authored by Zhang Peiheng 章培恒 (1934–2011) and Luo Yuming 駱玉明. During the same period, theorists in the West, particularly in the United States, underwent a contrasting ideological shift. As literary theories continued to be contextualized and politicized, formalism, which gradually became seen as conservative, narrow-minded, and outdated rhetoric, was marginalized. Simultaneously, there was a newfound emphasis on exploring the relationship between literature and other social discourses and cultural activities. In an interview, Stephen Owen explained the significant changes brought about by critical theories since the 1960s. In his view, these theories challenged the de-emphasis on form and the re-contextualization that had been introduced into literary history writing.

Owen also discussed the potential impact of these theories on Chinese literary history writing. Among the key theoretical paradigms he focused on in the interview was New Historicism, with Stephen Greenblatt serving as its standard bearer:

In the 1960s and 1970s, the literary history studies got out of fashion in the academic institutions. ... New Historicism developed in the 1980s and gained widespread influence in the 1990s. New Historicists intend to understand the paralleled [sic] relations between literary works and the cultural, historical context. New [H]istoricism has provided new ways of thinking about the relationships between literary texts and other non-literary events. New historicism criticizes the single coherent linear history. New modes of writing literary history try to provide more plural and dynamic explanations about relationships between literary texts and other factors related. New historicism and postmodernism are closely related. The textuality, language and representation serve as the basis for historical analysis of literature. The specificities and complexities of history are investigated by new historicists. New historicist methods treat a variety of texts in the network of linguistic, cultural, socio-political elements. New historicist approach has great impacts on writing literary history by reconstructing the forces at work in historical periods, particularly, in the time of their production. For them, the literary texts are closely related to the contexts of their production, the socio-political contexts, the institutions (the court, patronage, education, etc.). And literary canons are reconstructed, reappraised, reassigned by literary histories through different institutions across the history. Literary productions are put in the wider field of cultural production, generally speaking. Proto-professionalism is a specific strategy for reading the cultural materialism in literary history. In some ways new historicism and cultural materialism are intertwined.<sup>13</sup>

According to numerous researchers, New Historicism was not the sole subversive movement in the United States during that period. Rather, it served as a representation, within the realms of literary criticism and literary history, of a broader cultural movement that emerged from the postmodern epistemological transformation and the acceptance of pluralism in terms of race,

---

13 Wang Min, "Reflections on The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature: An Interview with Professor Stephen Owen," 56.

gender, religion, class, and orientation. This movement prompted a reevaluation of established cultural boundaries, exploring the intricate connections between literary canons, cultural circulation, and political power. During this time, the prevailing theoretical language used to articulate these ideas was “redrawing the boundaries.” This phrase encapsulated the need to redefine the limits of literary research by reconsidering the relationship between literature and other cultural discourses and social activities.<sup>14</sup> This process also brought about a paradigm shift in the writing of literary history among intellectuals in the United States, with a shift from a focus on the history of literature to a focus on the history of literary culture.

New Historicism emerged as a direct challenge to both formalism and old historicism. At its core, this approach is defined by two key concepts: the historicity of text and the textuality of history. These concepts encapsulate the essence of New Historicism. The historicity of text can be seen as a reimagining of formalism. It asserts that a text should always be examined within the social context in which it was produced and circulated. According to this perspective, the meaning of a text is derived from the cultural network of the historical moment in which it exists. This breaks away from the self-contained explanations of formalism, which tend to separate literature from its cultural surroundings. On the other hand, the textuality of history challenges old historicism by emphasizing the fictional and subjective nature of historical writing itself. It suggests that history, both as a subject of narration and as a textualized entity, is inevitably presented through the lens of reproduction. Consequently, various forms of social consciousness and cultural production that were traditionally considered non-fiction, such as news reports, brochures, philosophical works, scientific papers, advertising copies, letters, speeches, pictures, and even historical tomes themselves, are viewed as cultural texts, much like literary works. In other words, New Historicists argue that all historical texts should be considered literary texts and subject to a common set of interpretive rules. New Historicism posits that literary texts are cultural texts, as the cultural context in which they are produced is not an objective background external to the texts, but rather an integral part of the texts themselves. Consequently, the study of literature becomes the study of culture, and vice versa, as a comprehensive understanding of literature necessitates an understanding of the cultural milieu in which it is situated.<sup>15</sup>

14 Stephen Greenblatt and Giles B. Gunn, eds., *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies* (New York: MLA, 1992).

15 Zhu Jing 朱靜, *Gelinbulate xinlishi zhuyi yanjiu* 格林布拉特新歷史主義研究 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2015), 89.

Tracing back to the influence of New Historicism, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* supports the idea of literary and cultural history. This concept draws inspiration from *The Norton Shakespeare* (1997) and *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (2006), both edited by Greenblatt. *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* has made noteworthy advancements in the understanding of literary history, particularly in two key areas. Firstly, Greenblatt stressed the interaction between literary texts and other social and historical texts, with particular attention paid to material life, gender construction, religious issues, and the power relationship between the creation, selection, compilation, and acceptance in literary production. Secondly, instead of conforming to the prior practice of benchmarking text selection against aesthetic literature only, Greenblatt conducted literary analysis and interpretation of a considerable number of non-literary cultural texts, classified the works of a significant number of post-colonial writers and female writers as literary canons, and even made significant changes in literary periodization. With the Norton literary anthology being the most commonly used textbook for teaching English literature in the West, New Historicism's take on literary history has reshaped the literary awareness of the younger generations in the West.

Considering the typical delay of ten to twenty years in the acceptance of mainstream Western academic theories by scholars working in international Sinology, it becomes evident that the emphasis *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* places on culture, material, and technology is closely aligned with the prevailing discourse of New Historicism in Western literary criticism, which has been influential for almost three decades. Some of the book series' keywords such as "reception," "anthology," "printing," "women," and "periodization" are already established methodological dimensions with practical significance in contemporary American new literary histories. However, it is important to note that the primary objective of New Historicism is to reveal the cultural politics behind a text before deconstructing mainstream ideologies. This approach aims to shed light on the process of text shaping by multiple cultural forces. Its awareness of inherent problems, research ideas, and methods reflects contemporary American political realities. These realities encompass significant issues in American history, such as racism, ethnic minorities, the feminist movement, and popular culture. When Sinologists apply the specific perspectives of this methodological system to Chinese literary traditions, they may not uncover hidden issues in Chinese literary history. Instead, they run the risk of mistaking others' problems as their own and creating false issues that are irrelevant to the development of Chinese literature.

### 3 China: Reinterpretation of Chineseness and the Boundaries of Literary History

The redefinition of Chineseness, the last and most elusive checkpoint in the reshaping of Chinese literary history, bears a close relationship with the formation and development of literary history.

The relatively new writing practice of literary history is deeply rooted in the development of modern nation-states on a global scale since the 19th century. Nation-states are seen as political entities that possess the structure of a sovereign state, acknowledged by the international community, with clear political systems, and defined geographical and temporal boundaries. However, they are also seen as imagined communities, closely linked to the construction of discourse in cultural, linguistic, and religious fields. National literary history, akin to a national epic, has always been a crucial element in shaping national identity. In the modern era, the writing of Chinese literary history has evolved alongside China's integration with the outside world. The unity of language, race, and politics – represented by the Chinese language, the Chinese nation, and the polity of China respectively – has been the fundamental basis for documenting Chinese literary histories. This approach not only strengthens nationalism and the spirit of the times but also plays a vital role in shaping national history and promoting the national language. For nearly a century, Chinese literary history has continuously retold the epic tale of the Han Chinese, recounting the rich history and enduring legacy of Chinese literary culture from ancient times to the present, spanning a vast territory.<sup>16</sup> This is the fundamental function of Chinese literary history, as well as the starting point of its internal logic.

However, in recent years there has been a growing debate among academics on the international stage regarding various contentious issues, such as those relating to New Qing History (*Xin Qingshi* 新清史), the history of the Mongol empire and the Yuan dynasty (*Meng Yuanshi* 蒙元史), Inner Asian history (*Neiya shi* 內亞史), and a circumjacent perspective of China (*zhoubian kan Zhongguo* 週邊看中國). These discussions have emerged amid the wave of globalization and post-colonial discourse in the latter half of the 20th century, leading to a theoretical dilemma about the true essence of China. This dilemma reflects the existence of multiple myths surrounding China, encompassing diverse aspects ranging from its history and culture to its geographical boundaries. In the context of rewriting literary history, it becomes crucial to consider the backdrop of spatial and temporal migration as well as cultural

16 Stephen Owen, Introduction to *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, xxii.

hybridization. Considering these factors, one may question whether the objective should be to construct a shared historical imagination and cultural identity. One may also seek to determine how the concept of “Chineseness” can be defined based on this collective identity.

Nearly half of the content in the Introduction to Volume 1 of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* explores the multiple ambiguities of “Chineseness” in Chinese literary history, as well as the problems these ambiguities cause in the writing of literary history. The book series offers the following definition of “Chinese literature”:

In these volumes we adopt a more restricted definition of the field: literature produced and circulated in Han Chinese communities, both those communities within the borders of modern China and diaspora communities. Even though not all the authors discussed were ethnically Han Chinese, all participated in a Han Chinese culture.<sup>17</sup>

The above definition considers Han Chinese communities as the fundamental parameters for discussion purposes, replacing the term “nation-state” with “community.” This shift is likely a result of the recognition that the unity of language, race, and politics no longer seamlessly aligns with the grand narrative of literary history. In Western sociology and political science, the modern understanding of the term “community” can be traced back to Ferdinand Tönnies’ (1855–1936) seminal work *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* published in 1887. Tönnies, a German sociologist, categorized human group living into two fundamental types: communities and societies. Communities are characterized by organic formation, social connections based on natural emotions, and a strong sense of human touch and direct care. On the other hand, societies are aggregations of individuals that are mechanically formed through external rational interests.<sup>18</sup> Tönnies’ distinction is widely regarded as a keen depiction of one aspect of the Western modernization process: the gradual replacement of ancient, traditional, and close-knit communities with emerging, modern, and rational societies. The term “community” encapsulates a sense of nostalgia and lamentation for the pre-modern social structure, while also emphasizing emotional connections and personal belonging, which have become the central focus in its contemporary usage.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 1: xxi.

<sup>18</sup> Refer to Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft: Grundbegriffe der reinen Soziologi* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1887/1991).

Against the backdrop of the sweeping migrations of diverse ethnic groups throughout the past centuries, particularly since 1949, comprehending the intricate nature of China's geographical space and ethnic composition solely through a political lens has become an overwhelming challenge. The concept of the nation-state fails to capture the true complexity of this phenomenon. Recognizing the emotive power associated with the term "community," *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* takes a bold step forward. It transcends the confines of political expression and delves into a broader exploration of cultural connections and ethnic relationships. By doing so, it reshapes the interpretation of Chineseness, envisioning it as a more loosely connected imagined community. In reference to the relevant chapters in the second volume of the book, Chinese Han communities, when put in common parlance, are those communities which are linked by geography, customs, and language variety in particular, such as the Hunanese, Dongbeinese, Shanghainese, and Cantonese, which are bound with the polity of China as communities within the borders of modern China. Additionally, those overseas Chinese living in Southeast Asia, Japan, and the United States who are not quite certain of their cultural identity are included in the Chinese diaspora communities as defined above. As impressive as the disappearance of the nation-state in the book is the juxtaposition of communities within the borders of modern China and Chinese diaspora communities. It unravels the longstanding connection between the state and literature and as such adds a fascinating element to the discussion.

The separation of literary history and national narrative has led to the disintegration of the unity between language, race, and politics. This disintegration has had a significant impact on modern literary history. In order to fully understand Chinese literature, which has historically been relatively isolated, it is necessary to approach it from a broader perspective such as world literature or comparative literature. This shift in perspective results in a wider range of languages and geographical boundaries being considered in writing. Linguistically, it can simultaneously accommodate literary writing in both classical and vernacular varieties of Chinese, in both Chinese dialects and standard Mandarin. Spatially, the interactions between the Chinese civilization and neighboring countries, as well as foreign cultures such as Buddhism and Christianity, are given greater importance. By adopting this approach, a deeper understanding of the development of Chinese literature may be gained, thereby challenging the perception of it being an isolated or purely domestic system. The significance of transnational textual journeys may also be recognized. For instance, explorations into the premodern Chinese texts circulated within East Asia shed new light on the context of literary history.



Of particular note is that elements of literary geography can be found as early as in Chapter 7 of Volume 2, titled “Chinese literature from 1937 to the present,” written by Michelle Yeh [Xi Mi] 奚密. The chapter delves into Chinese literature created during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. The narrative is organized geographically, highlighting significant locations such as Chongqing, Kunming, Guilin, enemy-occupied Beijing, Shanghai during the Lone Island (*gudao* 孤島) period, Hong Kong, Yan’an, and Taiwan. This approach suggests that the historical challenges and hardships were reflected in the varied voices found in Chinese literary works. These voices emerged from the internal anxieties and conflicts within the national culture of modern China, which experienced both war against aggression and internal civil strife. The scars of history have profoundly influenced the rich tapestry of Sinophone literature since 1949, despite being a subject of heated ideological debate in recent years. The emergence of this phenomenon challenges the conventional understanding of what a Chinese literary classic is, as encompassing not only the vast realm of the national literature of China but also the circulation of premodern Chinese texts across East Asia. Furthermore, it entails the reinterpretation of national culture and political history, and even raises the question of who will speak for and embody China. As a result, these issues present unprecedented challenges to the established boundaries and rationale of literary history.

#### 4 Conclusion

Regrettably, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* falls short in striking an equilibrium between theoretical conceptualization and writing practice. Despite the theoretical conception of a postmodernist historiography – championed by Stephen Owen and other scholars – which challenges the grand narrative and causality prevalent in modern historiography, the book series curiously adheres to the traditional style of general history writing throughout. This adherence is even considered one of its most important innovations.<sup>19</sup> Yet this presents a contradiction. On one hand, the adoption of a linear narrative structure in the overall historical writing provides a certain level of coherence and continuity, giving the book a sense of order and causality that

19 For more details, please refer to “Xinde wenxueshi keneng ma” by Kang-i Sun Chang and Sheng Anfeng; “Kuayue zhongxi wenxue de bianjie-Kang-i Sun Chang jiaoshou fangtanlu (shang)” by Ning Yizhong and Kang-i Sun Chang; “Chongxie zhongguo wenxueshi” 重寫中國文學史 by Li Huaiyu 李懷宇 and Kang-i Sun Chang.

aligns with modern historiography. However, while delving into lesser-known historical events does offer valuable insights into the complexity and diversity of history, this pursuit of order, as evident in the general historical writing, ultimately undermines its purpose. By way of comparison, one may consider *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* (2001) edited by Victor H. Mair and *A New Literary History of Modern China* (2017) edited by David Der-wei Wang. These publications are arguably more successful in addressing the relationship between narrative style and literary history theory, although *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* was regarded as a failure by the editors of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*.

Furthermore, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, with its strong advocacy for the concept of the history of literary culture, deviates from the core criteria of aesthetic experience, judgment, and argumentation through close reading. Instead, it adopts a cultural perspective to explore peripheral literature, thereby expanding the scope of literary history to encompass broader cultural aspects. This approach involves a significant increase in the number of selected writers and works, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of Chinese literature. However, this substantial expansion in subject matter and discussion has resulted in a rather generalized narrative, lacking in-depth analysis and citations from even the most fundamental literary histories. This limitation is particularly critical for the book, especially when considering its target audience of English-language readers who may not possess a basic knowledge of Chinese literature.

We believe the writing of *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* has not achieved its intended goal. However, it is worth pondering why the book series has garnered unprecedented attention and sparked heated debates in academic circles around the world. In the eyes of Chinese scholars, this work not only represents a theoretical exploration rather than a practical one, but it also stands as the first literary history to incorporate and apply the paradigmatic transformations in literary history achieved by leading scholars in Europe and the United States since the 1980s. It specifically applies these transformations to the research field of contemporary Chinese literature, particularly the general history of classical Chinese literature. With its imposing theoretical stance, this book has enabled the academic community to view Chinese literary history itself as a subject for theoretical discussion. As scholars delve deeper into questions such as the nature of literature, the essence of history, and the concept of China, the traditional grand narrative structure of Chinese literary history, along with its aesthetic standards, formal analysis, and the model of literary sources and classical systems, will be subject to rigorous testing.

Based on the current response from academia, there has been an unprecedented surge in theoretical introspection in this area. In comparison to the more historiographical explorations carried out by Chinese scholars like Dai Yan 戴燕, Chen Pingyuan, and Leonard K. K. Chan [Chen Guoqiu] 陳國球, this introspection not only focuses on the specific form and technique of writing but also delves into a profound theoretical reflection on the underlying nature of literary history. However, despite these efforts, it seems that this attempt has not been as successful as initially envisioned in accurately describing and interpreting literary history. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether the post-modernist trend driving this attempt can truly elevate the rich historical tradition of Chinese literature.

*Translated by Yue Wang and Carl Gene Fordham*

### Works Cited

- Greenblatt, Stephen Jay, and Giles Gunn, eds. *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*. New York: MLA, 1992.
- Li, Huaiyu 李懷宇 and Kang-i Sun Chang 孫康宜. "Chongxie zhongguo wenxueshi" 重寫中國文學史. *Shidai zhoubao* 時代周報, June 8, 2009, C3.
- Mair, Victor H. ed. *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.
- Ning, Yizhong 寧一中 and Kang-i Sun Chang 孫康宜. "Kuayue zhongxi wenxue de bianjie-Kang-i Sun Chang jiaoshou fangtanlu (shang)" 跨越中西文學的邊界—孫康宜教授訪談錄 (上). *Wenyi yanjiu* 文藝研究, no. 9 (2008): 70–77.
- Owen, Stephen. *The Poetry of the Early Tang*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977.
- Owen, Stephen. "The End of the Past: Rewriting Chinese Literary History in the Early Republic," in *The Appropriation of Cultural Capital: China's May Fourth Project*, edited by Milena Doleželová-Velingerová & Oldřich Král, 167–92. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002.
- Sun, Kangyi [Kang-i Sun Chang] 孫康宜 and Sheng Anfeng 生安鋒. "Xinde wenxueshi keneng ma" 新的文學史可能嗎. *Qinghua daxue xuebao* 清華大學學報, no. 4 (2005): 98–107.
- Sun Chang, Kang-i and Stephen Owen, eds. *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Tian Xiaofei 田曉菲 and Cheng Xiangzhan 程相占. "Zhongguo wenxue de lishixing yu wenxuexing" 中國文學的歷史性與文學性. *Jinagsu daxue xuebao* 江蘇大學學報, no. 9 (2009): 1–6.

- Tönnies, Ferdinand. *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft: Grundbegriffe der reinen Soziologi*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1887/1991.
- Wang, David Der-wei, ed. *A New Literary History of Modern China*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017.
- Wang, Min. "Reflections on The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature: An Interview with Professor Stephen Owen." *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art* 文藝理論研究, no. 1 (2012): 49–60.
- Yuwen Suo'an [Stephen Owen] 宇文所安. "Huluo de wenxue shi" 瓠落的文學史. *Zhongguo xueshu* 中國學術, no. 1–3 (2000): 237–54.
- Yuwen Suo'an [Stephen Owen] 宇文所安. "Zhi Zhongguo duzhe" 致中國讀者. In *Chutang shi* 初唐詩, translated by Jia Jinhua 賈晉華. Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2004.
- Yuwen Suo'an [Stephen Owen] 宇文所安. "Shizhong youshi-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.
- Zheng, Zhenduo 鄭振鐸. "Ping Giles de Zhongguo wenxueshi" 評 Giles 的中國文學史, in *Zhongguo wenxuelunji* 中國文學論集, edited by Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸, 389–95. Shanghai: Kaiming shudian, 1934.
- Zhu, Jing 朱靜. *Gelinbulate xinlishi zhuyi yanjiu* 格林布拉特新歷史主義研究. Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2015.