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# Introduction: a New Discussion on Chinese Literature

## *A Review of The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*

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China does not have a tradition of writing literary histories. The first history of Chinese literature to ever be written was by Germans in the 19th century. The first to be written by a Chinese scholar was in the early 20th century.<sup>1</sup> Since the 21st century there have been four English-language histories of Chinese literature of major significance: Victor H. Mair's *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* (2001); Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephan Owen's *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* (2010); David Wang Der-wei's *A New Literary History of Modern China* (2017); and Zhang Longxi's *A History of Chinese Literature* (2023).

All of these works attempt to break certain molds in the field of Chinese literary history, some from the sheer amount of new content, some from new methodologies. The editors consider the old histories to be too linear, too monotonous, too lacking in critical analysis. To make up for this, the new histories approach Chinese literature in non-traditional ways. They rewrote the stages of Chinese literary history. They introduced interesting and modern categories of Chinese literature, such as that of ethnic minorities, expatriated Chinese, low-brow and folk literature, science fiction, internet and social media, as well as musical and cinematic literature. These are categories that are rarely discussed in traditional, Chinese-language literary histories. All of these works are of great academic value to the Chinese literary community.

1 Gu Mingjia 顧明佳, "Oumei zaoqi Zhongguo wenxueshi shuxie: wenxueshiguan yu bianzuan fangshi" 歐美早期中國文學史書寫：文學史觀與編纂方式, *Shenzhen daxue xuebao (renwen shehui kexue ban)* 深圳大學學報 (人文社會科學版), no. 6 (2023): 23.

*The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* edited by Mair was the first history of this century. In organizing its sections, it considered both chronology and themes, thus parting from the traditional organizational principle of simple breaking down Chinese literature by dynasty. Wang Der-wei's *A New Literary History of Modern China* deliberately goes against the common distinction of "Old" and "New" China by defining everything from the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644) up to the present as modern Chinese literature. Zhang's *A History of Chinese Literature* claims to be a book for the average reader, but his work is in fact academically rigorous, consciously pushing back against the destructive tendencies of postmodern theory and adopting a wide and worldly approach to literary theory. He aims to raise the classical authors and their classical works back to their rightful place.

Of these four histories, the one that has proven to be most influential and most controversial is *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* edited by Sun Chang and Owen.<sup>2</sup> It was written by eleven top scholars in America in the field of Chinese literature. This number puts its collaborators below Mair's *Columbia History*, which had dozens of writers, and Der-wei's *A New Literary History*, which had more than one hundred. (Zhang's *A History of Chinese Literature* was written by Zhang alone.) Precisely because of these large numbers, Mair's and Der-wei's histories have been criticized as lacking coherence,<sup>3</sup> internal connectedness,<sup>4</sup> and have been labeled as resembling literature-themed anthologies rather than coherent histories.<sup>5</sup>

Sun Chang, as one of the two main editors, said that their *Cambridge History* is part of a larger Cambridge project on world literary history.<sup>6</sup> As such, the editors stress that they approached their project as a "history of literary culture"

2 Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, eds., *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

3 Tian Xiaofei 田曉菲 and Cheng Xiangzhan 程相占, "Zhongguo wenxueshi de lishixing yu wenxuexing" 中國文學史的歷史性與文學性, *Jiangsu daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* 江蘇大學學報 (社會科學版), no. 5 (2009): 2.

4 Ke Mading [Martin Kern] 柯馬丁 and He Guli [Robert E. Hegel] 何穀理, "Gelunbiya Zhongguo wenxueshi de bianzuan fangshi jiqi juxian" 《哥倫比亞中國文學史》的編撰方式及其局限 (The Complication Methods and Limitations of *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*), trans. Lu Xu 盧絮, coll. Gu Yixin 顧一心 and Yao Zhuming 姚竹銘, *Xuexi yu tansuo* 學習與探索, no. 1 (2021): 161.

5 See Tian Xiaofei and Cheng Xiangzhan, "Zhongguo wenxueshi de lishixing yu wenxuexing," 2; Yan Cheng 嚴程, "Gelunbiya Zhongguo wenxueshi: chidao de huigui" 《哥倫比亞中國文學史》: 遲到的回歸, *Wenxue bao* 文學報, August 18, 2016, 2.

6 Sun Kangyi [Kang-i Sun Chang] 孫康宜, "Zhongwen ban xuyan" 中文版序言, in vol. 1 of *Jianqiao Zhongguo wenxue shi* 劍橋中國文學史, ed. Sun Kangyi [Kang-i Sun Chang] 孫康宜 and Yuwen suo'an [Stephen Owen] 宇文所安, trans. Liu Qian 劉倩 et al. (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2013), 2.

(文學文化史). They analyze the texts on a micro level, as well as looking at macro sociocultural trends. This, they believe, can paint the most comprehensive picture of Chinese literature. They try to deduce patterns across the development of Chinese literature through the ages and delineate the stages of Chinese literature along historical/developmental lines as opposed to genre or dynasty lines (such as Tang *shi*, Song *ci*, Yuan *qu*).<sup>7</sup> The other main editor, Stephan Owen, similarly stresses the importance of taking a historical view of Chinese literature, seeing their work as a “history of history.”<sup>8</sup> *The Cambridge History* also pays particular attention to how works of literature were filtered and reconstructed through the ages.<sup>9</sup>

Since the publication of the original English version in 2010, and even more so with the Chinese translation in 2013, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* gave rise to a heated debate within China. This debate has lasted till the present, producing a large amount of critical literature. With all of *The Cambridge History* authors working in American institutions, *The Cambridge History* represents an “outsider’s” point of view, but not necessarily in a bad way. As opposed to much of the culturally overbearing and western-centric Orientalist research of the past, this is an educated and sympathetic history of Chinese literature.<sup>10</sup> That being said, many of the methods and conclusions of *The Cambridge History* run counter to traditional wisdom in China’s academic circles, but that is precisely why it is important for us to study it. Based on this we have chosen for this issue four articles which represent mainstream critiques (both good and bad) from within China on *The Cambridge History*.

Collectively these four authors recognize the contributions *The Cambridge History* made in its methodology and praise its “history of literary culture” approach. Xu Zhixiao 徐志嘯 points out two specific advantages of this history. The first is the organization of its overall framework, the second is the grand scope of its research, which includes many categories and genres that traditional Chinese language histories eschew. Zuo Dongling 左東嶺 too praises the work for avoiding the traditional paradigms of history writing. Xu Yan 徐豔 classifies most traditional Chinese research on literary history as the “standard narrative,” while this work actively considers individual texts and their cultural contexts, successfully combining literary theory with historical reality. Shen

7 Ibid., 2–3.

8 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).

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

10 Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, *Chen Yinke ji: Jinminguan congkao erbian* 陳寅恪集：金明館叢稿二編 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2001), 279.

Yifan 沈一帆 admits *The Cambridge History* is a salutary challenge to traditional historiography based on its editorial principles and its comprehensiveness.

All four authors also hold critical opinions about this work. Xu Zhixiao points out that while it is admirable that this work goes beyond the traditional classification system of simple genre, the unfortunate result is that certain genres do not receive as much individual attention as they should, such as the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) *fu*. Zuo Dongling lists several perceived flaws, such as insufficient analysis on literary tropes and genres, the arbitrary division of content between the first and second volumes, and the authors' overly subjective reconstruction of a historical narrative. He also expresses dissatisfaction at their use of new research and academic standards. Xu Yan laments that the authors' over-emphasis on culture and history came at the expense of proper textual analysis. She also argues that the individual authors' creative methodology has led to contradictions in their overall narrative. The authors stress the importance of placing ancient works and trends of literature in their appropriate historical context, but at the same time view literature through a postmodern lens, creating an anachronistic narrative. Shen Yifan argues that this work lays too much importance on historiographic theory and not enough on the realities and specifics of Chinese works of literature, creating sometimes confusing and even contradictory narratives. The authors have forgotten, according to Shen, the essence of literary examination, which is an academic and aesthetic evaluation of literary works, not a lesson in cultural history.

It is worth noting that in their appraisals of *The Cambridge History*, all four authors expressed optimism for the future of literary studies. The inclusion of previously neglected categories such as women's literature is a trend that will definitely be carried forward in future attempts at writing Chinese literary history. *The Cambridge History* has proven itself to be not just controversial but inspirational to Chinese scholars, who can benefit from its advances and perhaps write a new history of Chinese literature that continues to advance the field.

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