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Recent Developments in Medieval Chinese Literary Research and Pedagogy: An Interview with Ronald Egan

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Abstract

In this interview, Professor Egan and I discuss issues related to reception studies, Chinese literary history, translation, and graduate education. The interview begins with the advantages and disadvantages of applying reception studies to premodern Chinese literature and to the works of major writers in particular. We then discuss two recent Chinese literary histories written in English and compare them to mainstream literary history written by Chinese scholars in China in terms of their different audiences, purposes, and uses. As scholars and students consult these histories, this discussion led to the topic of how to teach and how to train graduate students. Egan shares his experience with effective approaches for teaching classical Chinese literature in the American academic setting. In the last section of the interview, he focuses on graduate education, the academic and intellectual preparation that students need before they begin their PhD, what they should pay attention to as students, and their job prospects after they receive their degree.

Keywords

Chinese literary history – graduate education – reception studies – translation

Ronald Egan is currently the Confucius Institute Professor of Sinology in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Stanford University. His research interests include Chinese poetry (with a focus on Song dynasty poetry), literati culture, and the social and historical context of Song dynasty aesthetics. His many books on these topics include: *The Works of Li Qingzhao* (2019), *The Burden of Female Talent: The Poet Li Qingzhao and Her History in China* (2014), *The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in Northern Song Dynasty China* (2006), *Qian Zhongshu's Reading of the Classics: An Analysis of the Underlying Principles of Guanzhui bian* (1998), *Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters by Qian Zhongshu* (1998), *Word, Image, and Deed in the Life of Su Shi* (1994), and *The Literary Works of Ou-yang Hsiu (1007–1072)* (1984, 2009).

Zhang Yue: Thank you for giving me this opportunity to talk with you and to pose some of the questions I have had about your research. Let us start with reception studies. Your book on Li Qingzhao 李清照 [1084–1155], The Burden of Female Talent: The Poet Li Qingzhao and Her History in China, has received very positive feedback not only in the US but also in China.¹ Stephen Owen, Kang-i Sun Chang, and Grace Fong have praised your book on Li as the “last word,” “brilliant,” and “peerless scholarship and erudition,” respectively.² Could you talk about the advantages of using reception studies to research Chinese literature?

Ronald Egan: Because Chinese history is long and unbroken, it is a different situation from studying reception history in Western literature. In the latter, we are usually just talking about a couple of centuries, two or three centuries. Chinese literary history seems to lend itself to reception studies because of these peculiar links and continuity. I think that, obviously, many people have undertaken reception studies, but it is an approach to studying major writers that makes more sense in the Chinese context.

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- 1 For a sample of book reviews in English, see Stephen Owen's review of *The Burden of Female Talent: The Poet Li Qingzhao and Her History in China*, by Ronald Egan, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 74, no. 2 (2014): 363–67; Kang-i Sun Chang's review in *Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 4 (2014): 1105–6; Grace S. Fong's review in *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 45 (2015), 402–8. For a Chinese article analyzing this book, see Zhang Yue 張月, “Wanjin Beimei Hanxue yanjiu fangfa yu wenxue shi bianzhuan guankui 晚近北美漢學研究方法與文學史編撰管窺 [On the Recent Research Methodology of North American Sinology and the Compilation of Chinese Literary History],” *Guoji hanxue 國際漢學* 20, no. 3 (2019): 185–87.
 - 2 Owen, review of *The Burden of Female Talent*, 363; Chang, review of *The Burden of Female Talent*, 1105; Fong, review of *The Burden of Female Talent*, 402.

As you mention, the long history of Chinese literature contributes to the large amount of material from later periods on certain writers or literary phenomena, leading Chinese scholars to produce compilations of materials [ziliao huibian 資料彙編]. For example, because there are so many studies on Tao Yuanming, scholars have compiled several ziliao huibian.³ The same phenomenon occurs with other major writers. Scholars have compiled ziliao huibian for Li Qingzhao.⁴ I think, to a large extent, scholars naturally want to study Chinese literature and major writers using a dynastic framework. Along with the advantages of reception studies, what kind of shortcomings does this theory have? In other words, to what should we pay attention when we attempt to apply this approach to researching literary works?

A possible shortcoming is that it forces or could encourage the scholar just to examine the reception history and neglect the original writings. This is a possible outcome. However, in the book that I wrote on Li Qingzhao, I tried to balance the reception history and original works. I try not to consider only one or the other.

Yes, you have done a good job of achieving that balance. In the book, you place Li in her contemporary context of other female writers in the Song dynasty and autobiographical reading of her lyrics. You have chapters dedicated to the reception of her literary writings as well as those focused on a close reading of her lyrics.

Li Qingzhao's case is especially complicated because of the reception history. My argument is that such history essentially came to act as a shroud or veil: covering the original, obscuring or altering the nature of the original writing. This has probably happened to Li Qingzhao and, no doubt, to other writers. However, I think in her case, the amount of distortion was extreme.

Right, it is difficult to fully understand her works without adopting a reception studies approach, because, as you mentioned, there is a lot of misunderstanding about her works and personality. I assume this is why you adopted that approach.

3 Two examples of compilations of material on Tao Yuanming are Beijing daxue Beijing shifan daxue Zhongwen xi jiaoshi tongxue 北京大學北京師範大學中文系教師同學, ed., *Tao Yuanming yanjiu ziliao huibian* 陶淵明研究資料彙編 [Compilation of Research Materials on Tao Yuanming] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962); and Zhong Youmin 鍾優民, ed., *Tao Yuanming yanjiu ziliao xinbian* 陶淵明研究資料新編 [A New Compilation of Research Materials on Tao Yuanming] (Changchun: Jilin jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000).

4 Chu Binjie 褚斌杰, Sun Chong'en 孫崇恩, and Rong Xianbin 榮憲賓, ed., *Li Qingzhao ziliao huibian* 李清照資料彙編 [Compilation of Materials on Li Qingzhao] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984).

That is right, and it took me a long time to figure out that I really had to deal with the reception history first, rather than just treating it as an afterthought. That is because, in her case, this history or the received image of her that seems to have accumulated over time became so ingrained. You cannot first deal with her works and then discuss her reception, because as soon as you start by dealing with her works, whether knowingly or not, you are already seeing them through the lens of the reception history.

I agree with your point. This is true not only of Li Qingzhao but also of other major writers: Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 [ca. 365–427], Li Bai 李白 [701–762], and Du Fu 杜甫 [712–770].⁵ I think it is why so many scholars, including you, have dedicated time and energy to studying their reception. With respect to reception studies, I wonder, in your view, what other writers and works are good candidates for this approach?

I think it can be used for most major writers, probably at least most of those from – I do not know about Ming-Qing – the Tang-Song and earlier periods. This has become a major issue in how we perceive them. Thus, I think this methodology could certainly be used. Although it is not going to be equally illuminating for all writers, for some, reception studies are especially revealing.

Major writers have more influence over later periods, so there are more materials on them. For major writers, one can conduct substantial studies on these different materials and understand different moments of reception in different periods and analyze the various factors that have contributed to them.

You are right. Earlier, you mentioned *ziliao huibian*. They are enormously useful. It would be very hard to make one if I had to start from scratch. These compilations are very valuable.

*Yes, especially when one thinks about when these *ziliao huibian* were compiled; these scholars did not have computers at that time, let alone databases. The*

5 For reception studies on Tao Yuanming, see Wendy Swartz, *Reading Tao Yuanming: Shifting Paradigms of Historical Reception (427–1900)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008). For reception studies on Li Bai, see Paula Varsano, *Tracking the Banished Immortal: The Poetry of Li Bo and Its Critical Reception* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003). For reception studies on Du Fu, see Ji Hao, *The Reception of Du Fu (712–770) and His Poetry in Imperial China* (Leiden: Brill, 2017). For the reception of history in Chinese literature, see Yue Zhang, *Lore and Verse: Poems on History in Early Medieval China* (Albany: State University of New York, 2022).

achievement is stunning. Nowadays, however, we have various databases that we can use to search materials.

Yes, but you still have to be selective. You cannot rely only on an electronic search because 90 percent of the results are typically uninteresting and of no use. You still have to make traditional decisions about what to include and what to exclude.

That is a good point. Careful selection still plays an important role in understanding the texts. Turning to the origin of reception studies, what do you think of the development of this theory and its use in Sinology, as it is a Western theory? Do you believe that there has been any development of this framework? What is the future of reception studies?

I do not really have an answer to your question, except to say that the theory should be informed by Chinese literary history, because this history is well suited to the approach, as I mentioned before. If scholars of European literature knew about what you can do with this approach when it is applied to Chinese literary history, they would find it illuminating.

Additionally, I think, at least for Tao Yuanming and Li Qingzhao studies, many Chinese scholars have tried to understand these writers from a diachronic perspective, but I do not think their research has the complexity of yours.

Perhaps not. My impression is that Chinese scholarship, at least in the case of Li Qingzhao, has conventionally been quite blind to the implications of her image's changes over time.

And your book has definitely made great contributions to illuminating those implications. Let us move to the writing of Chinese literary history. You are one of the few scholars who have contributed to both the history of Chinese literature published by Columbia University Press and one published by Cambridge University Press.⁶ How have those two histories contributed to Chinese literary studies?

6 Victor Mair, ed., *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, ed., *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). On the characteristics of these two literary histories, see Zhang Yue, "Wanjin Beimei Hanxue yanjiu fangfa," 187–91.

I think a natural question to ask if you are thinking about those two histories is which is more traditional and which is less traditional or which is more conservative or conventional and which is less so. You might think I am going to say that the *Cambridge History* is more conventional, but, actually, I think it is the opposite. It is the *Columbia History*. I mean, in terms of the categories, and the ways of dividing up genres, in a way, the Columbia one is very traditional and conservative, whereas the *Cambridge History's* insistence on looking across genres and having one scholar writing about all the different genres coexisting with one another at the same time, I think that is quite innovative. That is probably, for better or worse, the most important structural principle of that work: the insistence on not just focusing on a single genre but taking an overarching view.

So, from this perspective, I would like to make a comparison of Chinese and Western works on Chinese literary history, as Chinese scholars, especially in recent decades, have written many works. Yuan Xingpei's premodern Chinese literary history in four volumes is probably the most popular of these works.⁷ If you compare this with its Western counterparts, what do you make of their differences? Do they examine premodern Chinese literature from different angles? Do they have different targets or audiences? I think they definitely have different audiences in mind.

They definitely do, although there is a great irony here because in the case of the *Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, probably 95 percent of the readers are reading the Chinese translation, rather than the English-language original. As a contributor, I can tell you that many of us – at least I can speak for myself in hindsight, I feel that I was writing essentially for the wrong audience. Maybe we should have known that, but we did not know that when the thing came out in English, it would be so expensive that no one would be able to afford to buy it. However, the Chinese version is affordable, so people buy it, and they read it. However, we were not writing for a Chinese readership (at least I was not). Our thinking was not clear on this issue.

About the audience, I would also like to ask another question.

Sorry to interrupt you. If I go back to your question about comparing, let us say, the *Cambridge History* with some of the standard high-quality Chinese

7 Yuan Xingpei 袁行霈, ed., *Zhongguo wenxue shi* 中國文學史 [The History of Chinese Literature] (Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 2003).

literary histories, it is hard to generalize. However, if I am forced to generalize, I will make a statement that might sound very simplistic. I do not think this will surprise you to hear. I would suggest that there is generally a more skeptical attitude about traditional viewpoints, opinions, and received wisdom in the *Cambridge History* than you will find in many Chinese literary histories.

I agree. In many of the chapters of the Cambridge History, the authors make some excellent points that challenge our received wisdom about literary development. I assume that when Chinese scholars write literary histories, they tend to delineate and narrate a continuous literary tradition because they typically have a sense of cultural identity and a strong nation-state ideology. In this way, they want to construct and shape some cultural heroes.

Right. It is not only that. I agree with everything that you just said, but on top of that, Chinese scholars usually have great reverence and respect for those who came before them. So, it is much harder for them to disagree with the scholars who wrote two or three generations ago. However, for us, it is quite easy to be very irreverent (not that irreverence is always a good thing). Scholars outside China can readily be irreverent, whereas, for a scholar writing in the Chinese academic tradition, it is much harder. And I completely understand that, and I respect that.

Yes, because the contemporary generation of literary scholars shows great respect for their teacher's works.

Of course. Not only their teachers but their teachers' teachers.

Considering the other side of the coin – that is, teaching literary history – would you mind talking about what kind of materials you use when you teach, for instance, in a literary survey class or when you teach a topic in premodern Chinese literature? Could you give me some examples?

Actually, I try to avoid teaching survey classes.

So, you focus on teaching topics.

Right. Because a survey class does not work very well with American students. It is especially ill suited to American undergraduate students. They are not interested in literary surveys. Therefore, I teach topical courses, courses on specific writers, or I try to think of interesting topics. For graduate students,

you could teach surveys, but even with graduates, it is my own preference to teach more courses concentrating on topics than surveys. I also use a mixture of original sources and secondary scholarship.

So, what about your teaching approach? Do you often use close reading? I am curious about how you interact with students.

I do a lot of close reading, but in recent years, I have really been trying to force myself not to do only this, because it is very slow and does not cover much material. Therefore, I try to find some kind of mix between close reading and reading large amounts of secondary interpretive scholarship, and then have a discussion.

That format sounds effective and interesting! Your students must enjoy this combination.

When I was in graduate school, all we did was close reading, and we did not take other approaches. It is a wonderful training, but it is also very limited in a way, because the amount of text you can get through is very small. If you are focusing on all materials via close reading and are never forced as a student to think of your own ideas, then, there is something wrong with that.

By combining close reading with the analysis of secondary scholarship, students not only become familiar with the texts but also build their ability to understand those texts in a larger context, so I very much agree with this approach.

My next question is related to translation, both from English into Chinese and from Chinese into English. When we deal with Chinese literary texts in Anglophone scholarship, we have to translate these texts to make our arguments understandable. There are two approaches to this task. The first approach is literal translation that focuses on semantic meaning: translating the text word for word and then polishing it to make it publishable or “authentic-sounding” to native speakers. The second approach focuses on preserving the rhyme. In this translation approach, the translator paraphrases the work and produces a version that rhymes. What do you think of these two distinct approaches? I feel that when Chinese scholars translate poems or lyrics from Chinese into English, they tend to use the second approach, whereas American or Western scholars typically prefer to be closer to the original literary text.

Right. Very few of us who are native speakers of English even consider trying to rhyme the English translation. It just involves so much sacrifice of accuracy

that most of us throw up our hands and settle for translating the rhymed Chinese poem into unrhymed English.

So, what do you think about Chinese scholars' tendency to produce rhymed translations? Interestingly, when I read journal articles or books published in North America, I notice that Western scholars rarely use translations by Chinese scholars in China. Is it because of the language barrier or their translation style, or something else?

I think you raise a very good point. It is a delicate point, but you are actually right that leading Western Sinologists pay very little attention to translations from literary Chinese into English by scholars working in China. I think the simplest explanation is that the quality of those English translations often leaves a lot to be desired. To native speakers, it is often not of sufficient quality.

In addition to translations from literary Chinese into English, it is also worth discussing Chinese translations of secondary English scholarship on Chinese literature. For example, in recent decades, many American scholars – you, Stephen Owen, Paul Kroll – have published studies of premodern Chinese literature and culture in English, and they have been translated into Chinese.⁸ Having had this experience, what advice would you give to those translating your works from English into Chinese? What kind of challenges do they face?

I am glad that you asked this question. It is very hard to have a good translation of academic writings either way, whether from Chinese into English or vice versa. Doing a good job requires gifted and hard-working translators. I have

8 Egan's monographs have been translated into Chinese: *Cainü zhilei: Li Qingzhao ji qi jieshou shi* 才女之累：李清照及其接受史 [*The Burden of Female Talent: The Poet Li Qingzhao and Her History in China*], trans. Xia Lili 夏麗麗 and Zhao Huijun 趙惠俊 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2017) and *Mei de jiaoliu: Songdai shi dafu shenmei sixiang yu zhuiqiu* 美的焦慮：宋代士大夫審美思想與追求 [*The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in Northern Song Dynasty China*], trans. Du Feiran 杜斐然, Liu Peng 劉鵬, and Pan Yutao 潘玉濤 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2013). Almost all of Owen's books in English have been translated into Chinese, mainly by Jia Jinhua 賈晉華 and Tian Xiaofei 田曉菲: *Sheng Tang shi* 盛唐詩 [*The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High Tang*], trans. Jia Jinhua 賈晉華 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2004) and *Tashan de shitou ji: Yuwen Suo'an zixuan ji* 他山的石頭記：宇文所安自選集 [*Borrowed Stone: Stephen Owen's Selected Essays*], trans. Tian Xiaofei 田曉菲 (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2002). Kroll's books have recently been translated into Chinese: *Li Bai yu Zhonggu zongjiao wenxue yanjiu* 李白與中古宗教文學研究 [*Studies on Li Po and Religious Literature in Medieval China*], trans. Bai Zhaojie 白照傑 (Jinan: Qi Lu shushe, 2017) and *Zhonggu Zhongguo de wenxue yu wenhua shi* 中古中國的文學與文化史 [*Essays in Medieval Chinese Literature and Cultural History*], trans. Tong Ling 童嶺, Yang Dufei 楊杜菲, and Liang Shuang 梁爽 (Shanghai: Zhong Xi shuju, 2020).

been approached by Chinese scholars in China several times. They write to me and say they want to translate either an article or a book that I have done. And I always ask them first to translate one or two pages and send it to me. Almost every time, I end up writing back to them, saying thank you, I am grateful for your interest, but I do not want to proceed. This is because they have not sufficiently understood the English. Sometimes, you can tell that their English reading ability is not as good as it should be, or sometimes their approach to translation is not appropriate, sticking too closely to the English words, syntax, and usage. It is difficult to get inexperienced translators to translate the meaning, rather than the words. The same problem occurs when Chinese is translated into English.

From your viewpoint, a major problem with some Chinese translations is that when you read them, you feel that they are not in fluent Chinese.

That is right.

In a sense, as you have mentioned, Chinese translations of English-language books or articles are typically strongly influenced by English-language usage, syntax, and so on. Even you have mentioned that you have to take time to understand the content of their Chinese translation. To some extent, one encounters more difficulty in reading Chinese translations than the original English-language versions.

I have now had two books of mine translated into Chinese. In both cases, I feel that I have been very fortunate because they were translated by diligent graduate students whose translations are excellent. They do not have any trouble in understanding the meaning of my original books written in English. Their translations into Chinese are fluent and idiomatic. They have worked long hours. I also insist on having final approval and being able to supervise and approve the work. All these things are very important.

You are right. I feel that the English-language academic writing style is somehow different from its Chinese counterpart. For example, academic writing in English often contains many long and complex sentences with attributive clauses, whereas academic writing in Chinese tends to have shorter sentences. So, when those graduate students translate your works, I imagine they have to break up these long sentences.

I have no objection to that.

However, I think the most difficult part is to do Chinese translations that can be easily understood by the Chinese audience and yet still reflect what you wish to say.

It is not easy. And it goes without saying that they also have to have a good grounding in the subject. They cannot just be translators; they have to have scholarly knowledge.

That is the difficulty of translating academic materials from English into Chinese and vice versa. I tend to think that North American academia has not given enough credit for translation. Is that fair to say?

Yes.

Translation is important, as it enables works to reach audiences in both the anglophone world and China, and scholars spend an immense amount of time and effort on academic translations. However, it does not seem that translation is given enough weight in the systems of evaluation or promotion, and it is difficult for scholars to spend time on translations when they receive little credit for it.

This is a constant problem. I do not know so much about Europe, but in North American academia, there is a tendency to devalue translation. It does not get you tenure and promotion. So, that is a real problem. It is directly responsible for the small number of Chinese literary translations into English.

Thanks for your insightful explanation. Since we are touching on issues in academia, I would like to briefly discuss graduate training and placement in the United States. First, what advice would you give students applying for a PhD program in the United States? If they want to study premodern Chinese literature in the US, what challenges will they face?

Anyone, especially in China, who is thinking about applying to a PhD program in this field in North America needs to understand that the two education systems are *very* different. Consequently, many of us who work with PhD students are quite reluctant to accept people straight out of Chinese universities. I will just speak for myself. I am reluctant to accept a student who comes straight from a Chinese university and has no prior experience in academia in North America. I know from experience that accepting such a student is a risky thing to do. The students do not know what they are getting into. They are going to be faced with academic shock, culture shock, and language shock,

all at the same time. And you do not want to take a risk, such as jeopardizing the student's long-term well-being (and potentially taking up one of your department's precious admission slots). So, I tend to accept students who have already completed a two- or three-year master's degree outside China.

What advice would you give Chinese students enrolled in a PhD program in the US who want to make that five- to eight-year period of study as successful as possible? What suggestions do you give when they first enter the program?

One thing I often tell them is that I hope that they will take courses not only in the East Asian Languages Department but also in the Comparative Literature Department, the History Department, and the Religious Studies Department. I want them to get more exposure to other disciplines, topics, and literary history and literature, because I think this kind of interaction with other teachers and other graduate students is very beneficial for them.

After PhD students spend so much time and energy obtaining their degrees, they then face the major challenge of obtaining an academic job in their field in North America. I want to ask you about your perspective on this challenge. The employment prospects for these young scholars are not good. In Chinese studies, most employers prioritize students who study modern literature, contemporary media, and fiction, rather than poetry. Given this situation, what suggestions do you have for doctoral students who have a long-term career goal of working in North America?

There have always been just a small number of academic jobs in our field, especially in premodern Chinese studies (literature and history alike). Actually, I am quite sure that there are more positions now than thirty years ago, even in classical Chinese literature. However, as you and I both know, there are also far more candidates for positions now, so it seems as if the number of positions is smaller. In fact, the number [of positions] has grown nearly as rapidly as the number of new PhD holders applying for those positions.

Thank you for that context. So, it seems as if there are fewer positions, but that is actually not the case?

I do not think that there are fewer positions. The number of openings has always been tiny compared to modern Chinese studies, political science, economy, and sociology. Relatively speaking, it has always been small compared to those larger fields.

To give themselves more time to prepare for their future career, some PhDs apply for postdoctoral positions. I know that Stanford has a postdoctoral fellowship available in Chinese studies every year. As a senior scholar, could you take this opportunity to explain postdoctoral fellowships, particularly the one at Stanford, for newly minted PhDs and those who are about to complete their degree? I assume that the competition is very fierce.

It is extremely competitive. I think there is one postdoc position, and [Stanford gets] over a hundred applications. One has to bear in mind that the committee is made up of people from all different fields and periods in Chinese studies. For example, if [a candidate's] project is on Chinese poetry or something like that, [that student] really has to reach out and explain why this is important, and what it is going to contribute to Chinese literary and cultural history. One has to talk about the larger implications of one's research project.

Right, appealing to scholars in different disciplines, which also makes your proposal stronger overall. Thank you very much for your time, Ron. I have learned a lot from our conversation.

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