



# A CONCISE HISTORY OF CHINESE LITERATURE

Wang Chuanlong



北京语言大学出版社  
BEIJING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

meet  
China



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# INTRODUCTION

"Meet China" is a set of books designed to introduce basic topics in Chinese culture to young people. The first set contains nine volumes, touching on Chinese geography, history, art, literature, science, government, thought, and other areas. The topics of this first set are all large-scale, and have been written with the cognitive perspective of a young person as a starting point. Short, concise texts outline the main ideas of large cultural topics in a logical order, and the principles that can be deduced therefrom are explained in detail. Emphasis is put on detailed description in order to realize the goal of using smaller things or events to explain major issues. We have repeatedly polished our texts so that they are of practical substance, and have carefully selected accompanying artwork to show the value of learning through pictures. We have attempted to combine educational and entertaining material, hoping that our painstakingly crafted world of letters and pictures will open a door to understanding Chinese culture for young people, and that they will obtain from it a pleasant and enjoyable reading experience.

*A Concise History of Chinese Literature* consists of ten chapters, each of which represents a historical period from the origins of writing in the Pre-Qin era to the present day, from "Guan Ju" of the three-thousand-year-old *Classic of Poetry* to the author Mo Yan, who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2012. Taking on the vastness of Chinese literature in this one short volume, we

have had no choice but to overlook many excellent works of literature in favor of the most representative authors and works. We hope that from these carefully chosen texts you will be able to discover the brevity, elegance, and charm of literature in Chinese, and that these short writings will help you take the first steps to understanding how Chinese people express their emotions and thoughts through literature.

"Meet China" Project Team



On Li Bai's "View of Tianmen Mountain"  
(Shi Tao, Qing Dynasty)



Pre-Qin – The Origin of Chinese Literature .....	001
Without Poetry, One Cannot Converse .....	004
The Logic of Zhuangzi.....	009
The Romantic Elegy of Qu Yuan.....	012

Han Dynasty – The Vigor of a Great Age .....	017
The Masterpiece of History by Sima Qian .....	020
The Rich Writings of Sima Xiangru .....	024

Wei-Jin and the Northern and Southern Dynasties – Literary Freedom in a World of Unrest .....	029
Jian'an Poetry and the Three Caos.....	032
Mysterious Ghost Stories .....	037
The Utopia of Tao Yuanming.....	041

Tang Dynasty – Poetry at its Finest .....	045
The Talent and Romance of Li Bai.....	048
The Epic Life of Du Fu.....	053
Reclaiming Tradition with the Classical Prose Movement .....	058

Song Dynasty – Bold and Graceful Verse .....	063
Liu Yong Writing Lyrics by Imperial Order .....	066
Leader of the Literati Su Dongpo .....	070
The Immortal Female Scholar Li Qingzhao .....	075

Yuan Dynasty – The Rise of Popular Literature .....	079
Touching Heaven and Earth – <i>The Injustice to Dou E</i> .....	082
Twists and Turns in <i>The Story of the Western Wing</i> .....	086

# CONTENTS

Ming Dynasty – Novels and Plays ..... 091

An Outpouring of Heroes in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* ..... 094

*Journey to the West* and the World of Fantasy..... 101

Life, Love, and Death in *The Peony Pavilion*..... 107

Qing Dynasty – The End of Classical Literature ..... 113

Rise and Fall in *The Peach Blossom Fan*..... 116

The First Manchu Lyricist ..... 120

Ten Years of Toil for *The Dream of the Red Chamber* ..... 124

The Republic of China – The Era of the Vernacular ..... 129

The Combative Pen of Lu Xun ..... 132

The People's Artist Lao She ..... 136

Resplendent Desolation and Eileen Chang ..... 140

Contemporary Literature in Development ..... 145

The World of Martial Arts and Louis Cha ..... 148

The Expression of Misty Poetry ..... 153

The Magic and Reality of Mo Yan ..... 160

Index of Major Works ..... 164

## PRE-QIN –

## THE ORIGIN OF CHINESE LITERATURE

According to the accepted divisions of the history of Chinese literature, the time from the creation of Chinese characters until the unification of China by Qinshihuang (221 BC) is known as the Pre-Qin period. The origin of Chinese literature, just like the literature of many other countries, was a slow and long process. But more worthy of attention is that the first golden age of Chinese literature occurred during this period.

The German philosopher Karl Jaspers introduced the concept of an “Axial Age”. He believed that the area between the 25th and 35th parallels north during the time from 800 BC and 200 BC was where and when human civilization first made important breakthroughs. The Pre-Qin period corresponds exceptionally well with this Axial Age, making it almost a perfect footnote to this theory.

A generation of philosophers who would have a deep and lasting influence on later generations was born in the Pre-Qin period. The profound thinking of Laozi, Confucius, Zhuangzi, Mencius, Sunzi, Xunzi, and Han Feizi influences the thought processes of Chinese people even to this day. These philosophers were often outstanding writers as well. Their works, such as *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi*, *Mencius*, *The Art of War*, and *Han Feizi* combine fine writing with deep thought, and have an important position in the history of ideas as well as literature.



In summary, the Pre-Qin literature on the whole has the following three characteristics:

First, in the early Pre-Qin period education was for government – only the nobility enjoyed the privilege of receiving an education and undertaking scholarly pursuits. With the collapse of the enfeoffment system, more and more intellectuals from the lower ranks came to the fore and gained the opportunity to reveal their talents in the literary world. The first compilation of Chinese poems and songs, the *Classic of Poetry*, includes not only the elegant odes of the hereditary nobility, but also improvised works from the lower classes, thus more or less accurately reflecting changes in the established practice.



Portrait of Confucius  
(Ma Yuan, Southern Song Dynasty)



Portrait of Laozi  
(Wen Zhengming, Ming Dynasty)

Second, in the middle and later Pre-Qin, China was split into many vassal states, and the competition and wars among them were intense. In this great unrest, intellectuals were forced to wander the country, thereby encountering a wealth of creative material that lay outside their original lives with the nobility. At the same time, upright intellectuals concerned about their country and people often suffered unfair treatment during the years of unrest and urgently needed to give voice to the repression they felt deep in their hearts. This motivated them to create excellent works of literature, such as the classic poem "Encountering Sorrow" by Qu Yuan.

Third, as the Pre-Qin period was relatively long, its literary works not only have the characteristics of early literature, but also of golden-age literature. This particular character has affected later Chinese literature such that the origins of all literary forms, creative methods, thoughts, and emotions can be found in Pre-Qin literature.

## Without Poetry, One Cannot Converse

“Without poetry, one cannot converse.” The “poetry” referenced in this phrase is the *Classic of Poetry*, the first compilation of Chinese poems. It consists of 305 poems, and is thus also called the *Three Hundred Poems*. Its poems are divided by style into the three major categories of airs, hymns, and eulogies. Airs are folk songs from different parts of the country, hymns are odes used by nobles at court and at feasts, and eulogies are used at sacrifices to sing the praises of ancestors and their great achievements. The poems in the *Classic of Poetry* all had musical accompaniment during the Pre-Qin period, but their melodies have been lost as the work was passed down to the present. The lyrics, however, have been perfectly preserved, and constitute an everlasting literary classic.



On the “Odes of Bin” (part) (Ma Hezhi, Southern Song Dynasty)

The Odes of Bin is one of the fifteen Odes of the *Classic of Poetry*. In it are displayed customs and popular feelings from the ancient state of Bin (located around Bin County, Shaanxi).

The origins of the works in the *Classic of Poetry* are wide-ranging, and the contents touch on all aspects of social activity. Since later generations have analyzed these works differently, their features have become more and more mysterious. For example, the first poem in the book, “Guan Ju”:

*Guan-guan* go the ospreys,  
On the islet in the river.  
The modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady:  
For our prince a good mate she.  
Here long, there short, is the duckweed,  
To the left, to the right, borne about by the current.  
The modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady:  
Waking and sleeping, he sought her.  
He sought her and found her not,  
And waking and sleeping he thought about her.  
Long he thought; oh! long and anxiously;  
On his side, on his back, he turned, and back again.  
Here long, there short, is the duckweed;  
On the left, on the right, we gather it.  
The modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady:  
With lutes, small and large, let us give her friendly welcome.  
Here long, there short, is the duckweed;  
On the left, on the right, we cook and present it.  
The modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady:  
With bells and drums let us show our delight in her.

(Trans. James Legge)

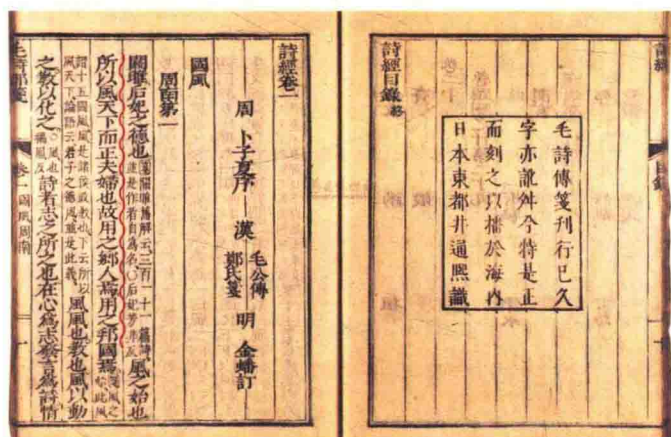


Models from the *Classic of Poetry* – *N. peltatum*  
(Hosoi Tōyō, 1848)

“Guan Ju” describes a man who has fallen in love with a woman, but is not able to realize his love, so he tosses about in bed and is unable to sleep. Its style is regular, with four characters to a line and four lines to a stanza. This shows that poetic form at the time was already very mature. Confucius assessed the poem thus: “‘Guan Ju’ is expressive of enjoyment without being licentious, and of grief without being excessively hurtful.” He advocated the expression of emotion in moderation – extreme sadness and extreme excitement were both not good. This is what he called “propriety”. Obviously, in his view, “Guan Ju” was in accordance with this propriety. In later times, some people interpreted this poem in a new way, considering it to be written in praise of the virtue of the empress, with the goal of educating the common people. If understood in this manner, “Guan Ju” becomes a



political poem, its author using the story of love between a man and woman to advise the king that he should put importance on character when choosing a wife. With a further extension of meaning, the poem implies that the king should choose worthy men for his government.



In later times, some people interpreted "Guan Ju" in a new way, considering it to be written in praise of the virtue of the empress, with the goal of educating the common people.

The *Classic of Poetry* had already spread widely during the Pre-Qin period, and became a way for intellectuals to communicate with each other. During meetings concerning foreign relations, in particular, diplomats would recite certain lines from the work as a way to express their points of view. The opposing party would respond with other quotations from the poems in return. This was called "expressing intention through poetic allegory". So if a diplomat chose an unsuitable poem to use in these circumstances, it would be considered a break with propriety, and could even lead to severe diplomatic incidents.

Confucius emphasized greatly that “if you do not learn the poetry, you will not be fit to converse with.” In the Pre-Qin period, “poetry” meant the *Classic of Poetry*.

For example, the poem “Creeping Grass on the Moor”:

On the moor is the creeping grass,  
And how heavily is it loaded with dew!  
There was a beautiful man,  
Lovely, with clear eyes and fine forehead!  
We met together accidentally,  
And so my desire was satisfied.  
On the moor is the creeping grass,  
Heavily covered with dew!  
There was a beautiful man,  
Lovely, with clear eyes and fine forehead!  
We met together accidentally,  
And he and I were happy together.

(Trans. James Legge)

This romantic love poem describes a young couple who meet by chance in a field sparkling with dew and fall in love. Later, after Zhao Meng finished a diplomatic mission in the state of Zheng, the officials of Zheng went to see him off. Zi Dashu recited this poem, and Zhao Meng was moved, saying, “You have given me a great favor!”

And why was Zhao Meng so excited to hear Zi Dashu recite a love poem during a diplomatic mission? Zi Dashu used the lines originally praising a beautiful lover to express his respect for Zhao Meng, and the lines “We met together accidentally, / and so my desire was satisfied”

to show that his long-cherished wishes had been realized. From this we can see that the substance of a work is not unchangeable; people often use certain parts of certain works to express their own intentions, even when those intentions do not seem to be related to the original content of the work. This usage of the *Classic of Poetry* as a method of communication was a very normal occurrence in the Pre-Qin period, though now the saying “to take the whole meaning from a part” is used in a derogatory sense to express quotation out of context.

## The Logic of Zhuangzi

Zhuangzi (or Zhuang Zhou), a great philosopher of the Pre-Qin period, was one of the principle originators of Taoism. His thoughts are recorded in the book *Zhuangzi*. Due to his singular imagination, elegant writing style, and his delight in using parables to express his reason, when you open *Zhuangzi*, you will find that it is not an old, dry philosophical treatise, but a polished work of literature. The modern Chinese man of letters Lu Xun thought that the literary expression found in *Zhuangzi* could not be matched by any other Pre-Qin work.

In *Zhuangzi* there is recorded an interesting dream that Zhuang Zhou once had. He dreamed that he had turned into a butterfly, and flew about being happy and carefree. After he awoke, he realized that he was still himself, lying on his bed. He thought about this, and came up with a deep philosophical question: was he Zhuang Zhou who had been dreaming that he had turned into a butterfly, or was he a butterfly



Zhuang Zhou's Butterfly Dream (Liu Guandao, Yuan Dynasty)

who was dreaming that he had turned into Zhuang Zhou? Was what he considered reality but the dream of a butterfly? This “butterfly dream” became a classic parable in the history of Chinese thought. Zhuang Zhou was able to find deep philosophical truths in petty, trivial affairs of life and then write them down for us in language exquisite but easy to understand.

Here is another example. It is written that the king of Chu once sent an emissary to request that Zhuang Zhou work in his government, promising a high post and generous salary. Zhuang Zhou didn't answer him directly but said, “I've heard that there was a fairy turtle in your land that was killed and placed in the temple, and covered with precious satin as an ornament. Do you think this turtle prefers being thus