CHINA PERSPECTIVES

An Outline of Chinese Literature I

Yuan Xingpei

Translated by Paul White

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An Outline of Chinese Literature I

Different from previous researches weighted toward historical description and individual writer and work, this book establishes a general analytical system and a multi-angled methodology to examine Chinese literature.

The author Yuan Xingpei is a professor at Peking University, a famous expert on Chinese classic literature. Based on his own appreciation as a reader and years of study, the author expounds on every aspect of Chinese literature: characteristics, time periods, regional nature, categories, allure, transmission, appreciation, etc. It's worth mentioning that the book is written from an individual perspective. The author expresses the depth of his various related impressions of Chinese literature in the book, in the hope that readers can share the emotions. In addition, this book provides readers with many fresh perspectives. For example, it regards poetry being the mainstream, and "upholding goodness," "the spirit of optimism" and "the esthetics of conciseness" as the characteristics of Chinese literature, surpassing the popular academic concepts.

This book will appeal to scholars and students of Chinese literature and comparative literature. People who are interested in Chinese literature and Chinese culture will also benefit from this book.

Yuan Xingpei is a professor in the Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Peking University. His research focuses on Chinese classic literature, especially Chinese poetical art.

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Foreword to the Chinese edition

In September 1987 I was invited by Professor Nagashima of Japan's Aichi University to teach an outline course in Chinese literature. On my way back home via Hong Kong personages in Hong Kong's publishing circles, on seeing my lecture notes, decided that they deserved to be published, and so they were sent to the printer. Due to their kind care, this small volume came to be presented to the readers.

Although this book was written for foreigners who wish to study Chinese literature, the requirements of the Chinese reader have also been fully taken into account. For a long time our research into Chinese literature has been weighted toward historical description and discussions of individual writers and works, and too little attention has been paid to many other aspects of the subject as well as to an overall analysis. The style of writing literary history has hardened into a rigid model – one it is not easy to break away from. In these circumstances, it is hoped that this attempt to expound on Chinese literature using the method of an outline can provide readers with fresh perspectives and awaken in them a deeper interest in the subject.

In the course of compiling this book I have consulted a wide range of authorities and studies and duly noted where I am indebted to them. Some have pointed me in the direction of deeper consideration, and some have furnished me with clues for my research. Although I am not able to cite them one by one, let me take this opportunity to thank them all here. I may mention for special thanks for their assistance Mr. Guo Shaoyu, author of *A History of Chinese Literary Criticism*; Mr. Chu Binjie, author of *An Introduction to Ancient Chinese Inscriptions* and Mr. Qi Zhiping, author of *A Brief Account of Tang and Song Poetry*. Special thanks also go to Meng Erdong and Ma Zili, who helped me with the proofreading of the whole text. Due to the author's limited scholarship, there are bound to be omissions and errors, and he hopes that the readers will bring them to his attention.

Finally, my heartfelt thanks go out to Aichi University and Professor Nagashima. If it had not been for their kind invitation and "assignment" perhaps this book would never have been written.

Yuan Xingpei
December 1987

Preface to the Chinese edition

The word "literature" appeared in China even before the time of the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC). But it had a different connotation from what we mean by "literature" today. In the Confucian classic known as the *Analects* we find the disciples of Confucius divided into four categories of specialty:

> Virtuous conduct: Yan Yuan, Min Ziqian, Ran Boniu and Zhong Gong.
> Eloquence: Zai Wo and Zi Gong.
> Politics: Ran You and Ji Lu.
> Literature: Zi You and Zi Xia.[1]

Xing Bing, in his *The Analects Annotated*, defines the two characters which make up the Chinese word "literature" as follows: "learned in written works."[2] And Yang Xiong, in his *Discourses on Methods * Gentleman*, says, "Zi You and Zi Xia were accomplished at letters."[3] In the *History of the Han Dynasty * Biography of Dong Zhongshu*, it says, "There was a strict ban on literature, and no one could walk around with books under his arm."[4] The word "literature" here originally meant ancient documents. Yang Bojun backs this interpretation in his *The Analects Explained and Annotated* by saying, "Steeped in ancient documents were Zi You and Zi Xia."[5]

The Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) saw a change in the understanding of the word "literature," when it came to mean "learning" in general. As the *Records of the Historian * Chronicle of Li Wu* notes: "In order to spread the Confucian teachings, he summoned the worthy Zhao Wan and Wang Zang and made them senior ministers on account of their learning. And to discuss ancient matters a special hall was set up in the south of the city where the feudal lords who were attending the court could gather."[6]

Zhao Wan and Wang Zang were leading Confucian scholars. The *Records of the Historian * Biographies of Confucian Scholars* says: "The emperor dispatched famous Confucianists in high positions like Zhao Wan and Wang Zang to the provinces and summoned to his court upright and worthy men, scholars renowned for their learning."[7]

By comparing these two passages we can clearly see that "literature" at this time meant Confucian learning. Zhao Wan and Wang Zang were scholars, but not

in the modern sense. In the *Records of the Historian * Preface by Sima Qian*, it says: "And so the Han Dynasty flourished. Xiao He put the laws in order. Han Xin expounded on the military disciplines. Zhang Cang enacted the rules and regulations. Shusun Tong arranged the rites and ceremonies. And so it was that literature advanced in elegance, the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of Documents* were issued in several printings."[8]

Here we can see that the law, military discipline, rules and regulations and rites and ceremonies were all included under the heading of "literature."

It is worth noticing that in Han times, besides "wenxue" the word "wenzhang" was also used. The latter denoted non-scholastic writing. In the *History of the Han Dynasty * Eulogy to Gongsun Hong, Bu Shi and Er Kuan*, it says: "The Han Dynasty had a plethora of talented men. In the field of general erudition outstanding were Gongsun Hong, Dong Zhongshu and Er Kuan . . . and in the field of non-scholastic writing, Sima Qian and Sima Xiangru."[9]

Celebrated for their non-scholastic writings were Liu Xiang and Wang Bao . . . who advocated filial piety and the inheritance of tradition.[10]

"Wenzhang" covered such genres as *cifu* (mixed prose and poetry) and historical accounts, in other words styles of writing displaying elegant wording. As for the difference between "wenxue" and "wenzhang," the clearest definition may be in the words of Xiahou Hui in the *Annals of the Three Kingdoms*: "Xiahou Hui, in an encouraging tone, said, 'A *wenxue* scholar takes care to advance his theme using elaborate detail, while a *wenzhang* scholar takes pride in the close integration of his words.'"[11]

Moreover, the people of Han times took great care over the meaning of words and stressed their composition and use. This is different from what we today call "literature."

Advancing a little from the difference between "wenxue" and "wenzhang" in the Han Dynasty, during the Southern Dynasties (420–589) there emerged a difference between "wen" (writing) and "bi" (writing brush). In the *History of the Southern Dynasties * Biography of Yan Yan*, we find: "The emperor once asked Yan Zi about the ability needed by his officials." Yan Zi replied, 'The quality of his writing is the measure of an official's literary attainment.'"[12]

Liu Xie says in his *Carving a Dragon with a Literary Heart * Chronological Sequence*: "Yu used his writing to endear people to him; Wen used literature to make his own thoughts more generous."[13] In his *Chapter on the Arts*, the same author says, "It is often said that there is literature and there is writing: The latter is not full of pleasing sounds; the former is."[14]

Using the presence or absence of pleasing sounds as the criterion for distinguishing "literature" from "writing" was a concept which sprang up early in history. Xiao Yi, Emperor Yuan (reign: 552–555) of Liang, in his *The Golden Tower * Eternal Words*, says, "In ancient times there were two ways of scholarship; nowadays there are four."[15]

The two ways of "scholarship" of ancient times he is referring to are the "literature" and "writings" of the Han Dynasty; the four ways of "scholarship" of his own day are "Confucian studies" and "learning," into which "Wenxue" was

divided, and "literature" and "writings," into which "Wenzhang" was divided. In the *Chapter on Bequeathing Writings to Posterity* there is a further elaboration on the difference between "literature" and "writings":

> Qu Yuan, Song Yu, Mei Cheng, Chang Qing and their ilk confined themselves to writing *cifu*, which they called literature. . . . As for the works of people like Yan Zuan, whose poetry is awkward, and Bo Song, whose talent lay in composing memorials to the throne, they come under the general heading of "bi" or "writings." The chanting of ballads and long-drawn-out dirges were included in the category of "literature." . . . As for "writings," at the very least they would be called incomplete, and at the very most meaningless. They were regarded as mere clever exercises in composition. As for literary works, they had to be elaborate and embroidered, with high-flown phrases and sentiments.[16]

Xiao Yi's demarcation between "wen" and "bi" was not one simply between the presence and absence of pleasing sounds. He in fact recognized that the characteristic of "wen" was its ability to stir the emotions and thereby rouse men to action. "Wen" also had the value of providing enjoyment through its emphasis on the beauty of its diction (rhythm and flourishes, etc.). "Bi" was the writing style used to frame memorials to the throne and suchlike. As Zhang Binglin said, "'Wen' is used for poetical and *fu* (mixed poetry and prose) works; 'bi' for official documents. That was what they used to say in those days."[17] The "cleverness" in "bi" writings was restricted to the technique of composition and could not be compared to the qualities of "wen."

Xiao Yi's emphasis on the two special characteristics of emotion and diction in "wen" are close to what we today would call "literature." However, the influence of his *The Golden Tower* was not great; the biggest influence on the theory of literary style in China was exerted by two works which appeared at different times: *Carving a Dragon with a Literary Heart* and *Selected Works of Literature*. These two works did not make clear distinction between "wen" and "bi." In the category of "wen" they included the forms of applied writing such as edicts, lyrics, summonses and didactics. This situation lasted down to the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) with the appearance of *A Compilation of Classical Prose* by Yao Nai, an antiquarian of the Tongcheng school. This work contains prose writings in the ancient style dating from the Warring States Period (475–221 BC) to the Qing Dynasty, and includes applied genres.

In traditional bibliographies too the scope of literature is not clear. Xun Xu of the Western Jin Dynasty (265–317) divided writings into four categories which he labeled A, B, C and D. Li Chong of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317–420) combined Xun Xu's B and C categories and divided writings into classics, histories, philosophy and anthologies. But what the bibliographers called anthologies were equivalent to neither what Xiao Yi called collections of "wen" nor what are today called anthologies of literary works. On the one hand, the first included many applied writing genres, some of which could be classified as literature and some of which could not. It is necessary to examine their concrete circumstances before deciding. On the other hand, novels and opera scripts, which today would be

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regarded as indispensable parts of anthologies of literature, are not included in the ancient collections. Novels written in classical Chinese were included under the heading of history or philosophy. Novels written in colloquial language and opera scripts were basically ignored by the bibliographers.

To sum up: In ancient China there was no strict division between literary and non-literary writing. In fact, there was no definite concept of pure literature as such. What was called literature in the old days included, on the one hand, genres which we nowadays would not consider as belonging to the category of literature at all, and on the other, excluded genres which we would include as literature. Therefore, when we embark on a study of Chinese literature we must not only take into account modern ideas of literature but also the more diverse concept of literature that is traditional in China. Based on this principle, this book broadly discusses poetry (including its *fu*, *ci* and *qu* subgenres), the novel and discursive writing.

Notes

1 *Commentary on the Thirteen Classics*, World Bookstore photocopy of the Ruan woodblock print, P. 2498
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3 *Collected Works of the Philosophers*, Vol. 7, Shanghai Bookstore, 1991, P. 39
4 Ban Gu [Han Dynasty]: *History of the Han Dynasty*, Vol. 56, Zhonghua Book Company, 1962, P. 2504
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Part I

The characteristics of Chinese literature

The study of the characteristics of Chinese literature has an inseparable bond with the overall characteristics of Chinese culture, and necessitates probing deeply into the nature of literature itself. As for the overall characteristics of Chinese culture, the author's *Reflections on the Theory of Chinese Literature* summarizes the following five aspects as the contents of Chinese ideological civilization: the theory of Yin and Yang, spiritual culture, respect for virtue and esteem for society, clinging to the middle ground and collective thinking.[1]

To investigate the characteristics of Chinese literature it is necessary to pay attention to the special nature of the Chinese language and its writing system, and their influence on Chinese literature. For example: Chinese is not an inflectional language, which means that it does not have a rigid system of changes of form to express changes in meaning. It does not have limitations of time, number, sex or case. The structure of a Chinese sentence relies more on sense than form. Standard Chinese differentiates between four tones. The writing system is not phonetic; each character represents one syllable, and many characters are actually pictographs. It is because the Chinese language and writing system have these characteristics that Chinese the study of Chinese literature can take into account antithetical balance and combinations of tones, and their parallel usage in modern poetry. It is because the Chinese language has these characteristics that words and phrases and images can be linked in a lively way, prepositions and conjunctions can be omitted, and images can be directly assembled in a lively presentation of time and space, subject and object. This gives a spirited effect to literary works, leaving broad scope for the reader's imagination. This is especially suited to the expression of poetic artistry.[2]

The characteristics of Chinese literature discussed in this section naturally have much in common with the characteristics of Chinese culture, language and writing. But these two topics are too broad to be dealt with as a whole and will be touched upon in their proper places. This section will focus on promoting discussion and clarification of the characteristics of Chinese literature itself, and will, of course, be helpful for an understanding of the overall characteristics of Chinese literature.

1 Poetry is the mainstream

The main current of the long river of Chinese literature is formed of poetry and ballads. This is discussed from five aspects below:

1. The origin of Chinese poetry and ballads is lost in the mists of time. The earliest collection of poems and ballads in China is the *Book of Odes*, compiled between the 11th and sixth centuries BC, or some 3,000 years ago. By comparison, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are probably products of the ninth to eighth centuries BC. The *Ramayana* of ancient India is a product of the third to second centuries BC, and the epic *Mahabharata* was produced in ancient India after the beginning of the first century BC. All these works were later than China's *Book of Odes*.

Following the *Book of Odes*, many fine poets and fine poetic works appeared. In fact, the excellent tradition of poems and ballads in China has never been interrupted. Two high points of China's history of poetry and balladeering came in the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) Dynasties. The poetic stage in those years can be aptly described as a "star-studded autumn sky,"[3] providing endless beauty. The *Complete Tang Poems*, compiled in the Kangxi reign period (1662–1723) of the Qing Dynasty, contains 48,900 works by 2,200 poets. The *Complete Song Ci Poems*, compiled by the modern scholar Tang Guizhang, contains 19,900 works by 1,330 poets. These collections do not exhaust the Tang and Song poetic repertoire by any means, but they give us some idea of how flourishing it was. In fact, the Tang and Song poetic works are a source of great pride to the Chinese people.

Compared to the lengthy tradition of poems and ballads, the novel and the drama in China were tardy bloomers. They joined the long river of literature quite late. In fact, it was not until the Tang Dynasty, in the eighth century, that the novel appeared, in the form of *chuan qi*, or short stories written in classical language. The drama slowly came to maturity in the period of the Song and Jin (1115–1234) Dynasties, and reached its full flowering in the Yuan Dynasty, in the 13th century, some 1,800 years after the Greek tragicomedy and over 2,000 years after the *Book of Odes*.

Lyricism is the mainstay of the Chinese poetry and ballad genre. Epic was developed in ancient Greece and India. There were no long epics in the literature of ancient China, which was written in Chinese characters; or at least no tradition of such long epics has been handed down to us.[4] The poems "The Birth of Ancestors" and "Everlasting" in the *Book of Odes* indeed have the flavor of national

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