

Chinese Tradition in the World Literature: Review of Zhang Longxi's *A History of Chinese Literature*

◎ Chao Ling

City University of Hong Kong

Abstract: This essay reviews Zhang Longxi's *A History of Chinese Literature*. The book covers Chinese literature from its very beginning to modern times. It emphasizes texts' literary and aesthetic qualities when evaluating and historicizing literature. The book demonstrates the importance of canons in literary history, using Chinese tradition as an example. Therefore, it also brings the Chinese tradition into the broader framework of world literature. Reading Zhang's concise historical overview of Chinese literature, we can better understand the interplay between literary tradition and the individual talent. Zhang Longxi has skillfully combined the writing of a history of literature with literary criticism in this book. Zhang's successful attempt informs literary scholars of possible paradigms of compiling literary history in a post-cultural-studies theoretical context.

Keywords: Chinese literature, Chinese literary history, world literature, literary tradition, literary canons

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Professor Zhang Longxi's new book, *A History of Chinese Literature* covers Chinese literature from its very beginning, the *Book of Poetry* (*Shijing*; 诗经), to the contemporary time. It offers a systematic and comprehensive overview of major achievements in various genres, while poetry occupies a relatively central position due to this genre's preeminence in classical Chinese literature. The book is arranged chronologically, and chapters are divided according to dynastic changes. Each chapter introduces major writers, genres, and anthologies of that period.

Even though the author made it clear in the preface that he envisioned this book to be an introductory reader for English-speaking literature lovers who want to gain basic knowledge of Chinese literature, Zhang Longxi, as a renowned scholar of comparative and world literature,

manages to produce a work which brings refreshing scholarly insights to the old paradigm of literary history. Firstly, it emphasizes the independent value of literature itself in an academic climate where cultural studies and historicism are increasingly dominant. Secondly, although the book is based solely on Chinese literary materials, it contributes to the theoretical inquiry of canonicity in the broader context of world literature. Thirdly, as the book outlines the literary development from ancient times to the present, it demonstrates the interplay between tradition and authorial creativity. Lastly, in terms of the aesthetic evaluation of literary texts, the book provides an elegant reading experience with the author's careful interpretation of primary sources.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, there have been numerous attempts to write a literary history. Qian Jibo (钱基博) wrote one in literary Chinese; Tai Jingnong's (台静农) students expanded his lecture notes in the 1940s and 1950s into *History of Chinese Literature*, and several editions of the history of classical Chinese literature were composed as college textbooks. Among them, ones by You Guo'en (游国恩) et al., by Yuan Xingpei (袁行霈) et al., and by Zhang Peiheng (章培恒) and Luo Yuming (骆玉明) are widely used. In the 21st century, there have been several important works by American and Japanese Sinologists, some of which have been translated into Chinese in recent years. *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), edited by Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, invites specialists of each dynastic period to write chapters about specific periods' cultural history. *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* (Columbia University Press, 2010), edited by Victor Mair, is accompanied by an anthology of translated literature. *Chūkoku bungaku shi (History of Chinese Literature)* (Tokyo University Press, 1975; Chinese translation, *中国文学史*, Fudan University Press, 2012), edited by Naoaki Maeno (前野直彬), was written by eleven Japanese scholars collectively and represents the state of Sinological studies in Japan.

When lined up in chronological order, the aforementioned books demonstrate a clear academic trajectory of growing focus on the social, political, and cultural factors behind the production of literature. On the one hand, these extrinsic studies of literature do help us better understand the complex nexus in which literature is entangled and why certain kind of literature was possible in a given historical space; on the other hand, the lack of intrinsic study of literature undermines the power of language and individual talent, in terms of expressing human sentiments and perceiving the material world. In particular, in the Chinese cultural context, due to the enormous political agency of the traditional Confucian view of poetry, literary history is easily reduced to footnotes and supplementary to political history. If the writing of literary history continues to overemphasize the political-historical context, literature's enlightenment and humanistic spirit will be further neglected. Moreover, it also deprives national literature of the chance to create global influence. There are values intrinsic in the literature that exceed historical context and contribute to the construction of shared canons in world literature.

It is precisely within the aforementioned academic background that we should understand the primary contribution of Zhang Longxi's version of Chinese literary history. And that is its emphasis on the literary and aesthetic values of the literary canons. In addition to providing

bibliographical information about literary texts, Zhang pays great attention to analyzing their rhetorical features, such as imagery, prosody, and metaphors. His close reading enables the non-specialists to grasp the lasting charm of the texts better. I will give only two examples here. When discussing Sima Qian's (司马迁) *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shi Ji*; 史记; 38-41), instead of explaining its historiographical value, the author focuses on the narrative technique and, in addition, emphasizes the relationship between literary writing and the pursuit of immortality as understood by Sima Qian. His analysis not only unveils the narrative strategy utilized by Sima Qian, which implicitly opens up a conversation with Hayden White's theory about narratology in historical interpretation, but also situates Sima Qian's work within the Han-Wei literary theory, which concerns the immortality of literature (i.e., Cao Pi's (曹丕) understanding of literature as non-perishing grand affair [Buxiu zhi Shengshi; 不朽之盛事]). Du Fu (杜甫) is often labeled as a great poet historian in literary history for his realistic poetry, which witnessed the dramatic and chaotic social events during the An Lushan rebellion. Zhang Longxi, however, while acknowledging such an achievement, emphasizes Du Fu's tremendous efforts in perfecting prosody and developing various poetic styles. (135, 136, 138-141) He convincingly argues that Du Fu did not stand out from ordinary poets, who before Du Fu had already integrated narrative techniques into poetry and spoken for the suffering of the people, for recording historical events in poetry. However, Du Fu crafted his poetic lines and "combined the narrative and the lyrical" (136) so powerfully that he would impress future readers sharing similar historical and poetic sensitivity. While using literary value as the primary criteria to evaluate the works covered in the book, Zhang Longxi (re)translates many poetic works in lucid and graceful verse to present a "literary" history to English-speaking readers. Even though it is practically impossible to keep all the metric structures of classical Chinese poetry, the translations are at least rhymed, so readers can taste the rhythmic character of Chinese regulated verses.

In recent years, Zhang Longxi has been dedicating his scholarly work to the conceptualization and historical construction of world literature. Thus this book, while dealing with materials from only one linguistic tradition, embodies the ambition of reemphasizing the canons in the context of world literature. Interested readers should refer to the four-volume *Literature: A World History* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), which he co-edited. In the current book, the author is less concerned with the circulation of Chinese literature in other languages. However, he frequently compares Chinese literature to Western literary canons with which English-speaking readers should be familiar and outlines some dominant motifs in world literature. For example, in the section about the *Book of Poetry*, the theme of love, common to both Chinese and Western literature, is emphasized and compared with Shakespeare's tragedies (23); when talking about Qu Yuan's (屈原) "Encountering Sorrow" (*Lisao*; [离骚]), he contrasted it with Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This comparison is, of course, intended first and foremost to allow Western readers to establish a frame of reference. However, for Chinese readers, it also provides a perspective to re-examine Chinese literature in the broader picture of world literature. Chinese literature, therefore, is viewed as empirical evidence for theoretical inquiry of literary canon in a cross-cultural and multilingual

context.

The sensitivity to the common themes of cross-linguistic literary canons, as mentioned above, is also demonstrated on the historical level. Taking love as an example. When analyzing works from different periods, of diverse genres, and by various authors, Zhang Longxi deliberates to show how each writer, for example, Yuan Zhen (元稹) in “The Tale of Ying Ying” (170), Li Shangyin (李商隐) in his untitled poems (177), and Liu Yong (柳永) in his long *ci* lyrics (202), approached the common theme, love, in unique ways. Historical perspective is important here because it shows how the predecessors inspired the writing of later generations and how the changing context of the times brings birth to literary innovation. Literature is not confined within but, rather, transcends history. By using literary motifs, instead of keywords in political or intellectual history, to observe literary creation throughout history, the author avoids the drawbacks of excessive historicism, namely, annotating history with literature and diminishing literary works to mere documents. The author also avoids writing a linear history and allows readers to perceive the interactions and dialogues across eras, genres (and languages). The role of canonical texts and authors in literary history is thus brought to the foreground. This subtle modification of historical perspective allows the history of literature to be not simply a department of history or a retrospective examination of causality but a roadmap of individual talents and literary tradition working together in individual texts, which would inspire contemporary readers and writers to renovate our literary tradition in a global context.

Since the book is written by a single author, there will not be inconsistency in aesthetic standards or literary views, compared to a collaborative literary history. Moreover, it allows the writing of history to be combined with literary criticism, a more personal format of reading literature aesthetically and theoretically. In order to include literary works from almost three millennia, Zhang has to make selections. The selection criteria, apart from whether they have been canonized (which is basically literary history's choice), reveal the author's preference for elitist *belles lettres*. This vision of literary history is based on the author's critical taste maintained after reading literature of various traditions widely and closely. Whenever he discusses influential writers, Zhang Longxi always presents their position in the relevant literary genealogy with precise and concise summaries, such as when he talks about Wang Wei (王维) and Meng Haoran (孟浩然) in the school of landscape and idyllic poetry (108) and the reception of Du Fu in the Jiangxi poetry school (Jiangxi Shipai; 江西诗派; 232, 243). This kind of literary history, which does not avoid personal aesthetic preferences, is rather like that of Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian* in the Chinese historiographical tradition or Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* in the English critical tradition, which are an individual scholar's objective evaluation of the tradition.

Due to the limitation of the intended audience, some issues are left untouched in the book. As a scholar of classical poetic culture, I would love to address a couple of questions in the hope of future discussions with the author. First, the literary status of authors and the reception history of their works are not observed in a longer span of historical development. In the case of Tang poets,

for example, there is a significant discrepancy between the judgments of the Tang people and those of later generations. If the author considers the contemporary Tang critics' evaluation of later canonized poets, such as Li Bo (李白) and Du Fu, as reflected in the anthologies compiled in the mid and late Tang, one can have a clearer understanding of the process of canonization. Secondly, for some writers whose anthologies include many problems in the process of compilation and reconstruction, such as Yu Xin (庾信) and Li Qingzhao (李清照), if a bibliographical perspective can be taken into account, we can obtain a much deeper theoretical understanding of canonization and authorship in pre-modern China.

Nevertheless, Zhang Longxi's personalized attempt of a history of Chinese literature and the discussion it will surely provoke in the academic community have given a positive answer to the following question: is it still possible to write literary history under (or after) postmodernist cultural studies? Perhaps, there should soon be an updated history of Chinese literature. It would combine perspectives ancient and modern, local and world; it would integrate contemporary literary theory and philosophy of language while inheriting the classical critical tradition of poetry notes (*shi hua*; 诗话); and it should be based on the traditional scholarship of philology and bibliographical studies.

As the author promised in the preface, the book provides a clear and concise overview of Chinese literary history in elegant prose, supplemented with beautiful translations of primary sources, for English readers interested in China. It also demonstrates the crucial place of canons in literature and culture by using Chinese literature as an example. Although the book is intended for English readers, it offers native speakers and researchers growing up in Chinese culture a special kind of "stone from other hills" —a way to see Chinese literature within its own tradition while informed by others, and to see it as canons of world literature.

Works Cited

Zhang, Longxi. *A History of Chinese Literature*. Routledge, 2022.