

UC Berkeley

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review

Title

A New Perspective on the Scope and Meaning of Chinese Literature

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3vd4n98k>

Journal

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review, 1(4)

Author

Choe, Yongchul

Publication Date

2012-09-01

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3vd4n98k#supplemental>

Peer reviewed

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

A New Perspective on the Scope and Meaning of Chinese Literature

Yang Yi 杨义, *Chong hui zhongguo wenxue ditu tong shi* 重绘中国文学地图通释 [Redrawing the Map of Chinese Literature]. Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo Chubanshe, 2007.

Reviewed by Yongchul Choe, Korea University

Since the publication of the first volume of Chinese literary history in 1904 by Professor Lin Chuanjia (林传甲) of the Imperial University of Peking (today's Peking University), this field has witnessed an accumulation of rich scholarship, with as many as sixteen hundred publications over the past hundred years. There is no doubt that such a vast literary heritage has benefited scholars of recent generations, serving as a basis for the exploration of Chinese literature. Nevertheless, although the research is abundant, the overall method of scholarship has remained more or less the same. With few exceptions, publications on the history of Chinese literature compile lists and canonize important authors and works of each period, normally starting with *The Books of Odes* (诗经) and *Songs of Chu* (楚辞). What is more, most of these lists focus mainly on works produced in Chinese (汉字) by Han Chinese authors (汉族).

Considering that the Middle Kingdom experienced the rise and fall of heterogeneous dynasties and involved a wide variety of people, the question arises as to whether mainstream literature was always dominated by the Chinese written literature produced by Han Chinese authors. Yang Yi, director of the Institute of Literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS) and professor at the University of Macau, began his research with that question. After twenty years of studying this problem, he presented a conclusive thesis in his 2007 book, *Redrawing the Map of Chinese Literature*, a publication that embraces both Han Chinese

literature and the literature of minority groups in China. His thesis received an immediate, enthusiastic response from contemporary scholars.

In the introduction to this book, Yang states that previous descriptive methods in the study of Chinese literary history had several limitations. First, they focused too much on the history of Han Chinese written literature while neglecting the embedded presence of literatures of other peoples and the mutual exchange between them (whether in the form of conflict or collaboration). Second, earlier methods ignored the authors' places of residence, their families, and issues in their private lives. This made it impossible for scholars to consider the personal factors that undoubtedly had a large influence on the literature. Third, they ignored the tradition of oral literature through which classical and popular literature were passed down. In other words, Yang claims that previous scholarship failed to maximize the potential of literature to transcend time and space and to serve as a source of or insight into universal wisdom. He argues that earlier scholarship has ignored the fact that diverse forms of everyday life—that is, civilizations, institutions, material lives, scholarly traditions, and folk religions—have influenced the (trans)formation of literary works.

Yang entitles his approach to writing literary history, the methodology adopted in the book reviewed here, as “one theory, three perspectives, and four areas” (一纲叁目四经). That is to say, under the consilience of the concept of integrated literature (一纲), three academic theses (三目)—“the temporal and spatial structure of Chinese literature,” “the dynamic system of literature development,” and “the depth of cultural spirit”—should be thoroughly examined. In addition to these considerations, the object of study should be extended to include four academic disciplines: ethnology, geology, cultural studies, and iconography (四经).

By adopting this approach, according to Yang, a comprehensive remapping of Chinese literature becomes possible. This remapping can embrace ethnic diversities all over China while simultaneously harmonizing heterogeneous languages and cultures and thereby challenging the long-standing dominance of Han Chinese writings in Chinese literary history. For example, Yang explains that the influx of Jurchen Jin customs into China proper brought about a shift in the prevalent ethical conception of time and gradually resulted in the transition from the tragic ending of *The Biography*

of *Yingying* (莺莺传) to the happy ending of *Romance of the Western Chamber* (西厢记). By means of ample examples, Yang further illustrates the extent to which local cultures have influenced and contributed to the formation of Chinese literature. Clearly, what Yang seeks to examine is not only literary history but also Chinese culture in general from an integrated perspective.

Yang, whose original area of study was modern literature, expanded the domain of his research in the 1990s to include classical literature and culture and then went on to publish monumental works that continue to have a large influence on academia, *Redrawing the Map of Chinese Literature* (2007) and *Chinese Narratology* (2009) among them. Yang had already established four principles when he published *Redrawing the Map of Chinese Literature*: first, “refocus on the origins of Chinese culture”; second, “refer to modern Western scholarly theory”; third, “examine ancient and modern literature and history”; and fourth, “make a new scholarly system by combining these principles.” He used these principles as a basis to establish a new Chinese form of narratology by finding unique Chinese characteristics in Chinese narratives. He referred to Western literary theory but didn’t depend on it too strongly. This new theory of narratology still has immense influence in academia.

Redrawing the Map of Chinese Literature is the first book to study the close textual relation between words and images (such as photographs, pictures, and rubbings) in Chinese literary history. The book analyzes in detail the subtle relationship between images and modern publications and the cultural disposition of literary circles. Yang emphasizes the worth of that relationship even in today’s society, where inserting illustrations in books has become common practice. Yang’s book has also been a catalyst for studying the relationship between images and words in Chinese classical literature.

After publishing *Redrawing the Map of Chinese Literature*, Yang turned his eye to pre-Qin texts to crystallize and articulate the proposition he broached, namely “the integrated literature.” The result was his *Sourcebook for Chinese Philosophy* (诸子还源) series (2011). In this series Yang recognizes the significant contribution of the existing research method of pre-Qin studies (诸子学) to the organization of existing editions: theoretical interpretation using the concepts of “proofreading and

supervision about the meaning of letters” (字意校勘) and “questioning the antiquation and distinguishing the false” (拟古辨偽) with Western theories. However, he points out the lack of insightful research on the “original nature” of pre-Qin thought—that is to say, its birth, process of development, inherent cultural DNA, and the spiritual context of the idea’s creation. On the basis of these ideas, he produced *Sourcebook for Chinese Philosophy* and recognized the culture of pre-Qin thinkers as a kind of living being and creative manifestation of humankind’s activity. Yang investigates pre-Qin philosophers’ ways of thinking and values, the cultural implications of their religion and faith, and their methods of description based on an enormous quantity of primary materials—records of ancient times, oral tradition, folk materials from the primitive times, and archeological specimens—and rich theories, such as history, sociology, ethnology, and geography. He has been praised for offering a persuasive answer to questions that have remained unsettled for several thousand years in pre-Qin textual studies.

From my perspective as a Korean researcher of Chinese literature, it seems that Yang’s achievements over the last two decades, including his original theories and methodology, are worthy of continued attention. However, there have been some recent attempts, such as the controversial “Northeast Project” (中国东北工程) conducted in 2002-2006 by CASS, to incorporate marginal Chinese cultural areas under the idea of “Chinese national culture” (中华民族文化). The Northeast Project attempts to incorporate the literary and cultural styles of those surrounding areas into the Chinese cultural map by the standard of current Chinese territory, raising important questions regarding the intentions of Chinese academia and the Chinese government and underscoring the importance of keeping a critical eye on such developments.

About Yang Yi:

Professor Yang Yi 杨义 (1946–) is from Guangdong Province, Dianbai County, in China. He has held positions as the director of undergraduate studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and director of the Research Center of Literature (文学研究所) and Research Center for Minority Literature (少数民族文学研究所). He is currently professor of Chinese literature and doctoral advisor at the University of

Macau. He has been a visiting scholar and exchange professor at numerous universities, including Oxford and Cambridge in the United Kingdom; Yale, Harvard, and Stanford in the United States; and other prestigious universities in France, Korea, and Japan. He is also the chief editor of *Literature Review* (文学评论) and president of the Chinese research association for Lu Xun (中国鲁迅研究会).

He is the author of *Zhongguo xiandai xiaoshushi* (中国现代小说史), *Zhongguo xinwenxue tuzhi* (中国新文学图志), *Zhongguo gudian xiaoshu shilun* (中国古典小说史论), *Zhongguo xushi xue* (中国叙事学), *Chuci shixue* (楚辞诗学), *Li du shixue* (李杜诗学), *Jingpai haipai zonglun* (京派海派综论), *Zhonghui zhongguo wenxue ditu tongyi* (重绘中国文学地图通释), *Zhongguo gudian wenxue tuzhi – song, liao, xixia, jin, huigu, tufan, daliguo, yuandai juan* (中国古典文学图志—宋, 辽, 西夏, 金, 回鹘, 吐蕃, 大理国, 元代卷), *Wenxue ditu yu wenhua huanyuan: cong xushi xue, shixue dao zhuzixue* (文学地图与文化还原: 从叙事学、诗学到诸子学), and *Zhuzi huanyuan* (诸子还原).

Professor Yongchul Choe is professor of Chinese Literature and director of the Research Institute of Korea Studies (RIKS) at Korea University.

References

- Yang Yi. 2009. *Zhongguo Xushixue* 中国叙事学. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
 ———. 2011. *Laozi Huanyuan* 老子还原. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
 ———. 2011. *Zuangzhi Huanyuan* 庄子还原. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
 ———. 2011. *Mozi Huanyuan* 墨子还原. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
 ———. 2011. *Hanfeizi Huanyuan* 韩非子还原. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.