



Introduction

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This special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* has brought an exceptionally accomplished group of scholars together to reflect on the impact of theoretical and methodological trends on our field. Surveying the past achievements, current state, and future prospects of the study of premodern Chinese literature from broadly cosmopolitan theoretical and comparative perspectives, these scholars address, inter alia, the following questions: What place do works written in a Western language and/or from perspectives informed substantially by non-Chinese scholarship occupy within the full ambit of Chinese literary studies? If scholarship written in English or other Western languages is for the most part pitched primarily to non-Chinese audiences, what are its strengths and weaknesses for native-speaking readers? And, how has theoretically informed work complemented and drawn upon the rapidly expanding body of Chinese- and other East Asian-language research in these fields? Finally, what is the current state of the dialogue between scholarship on Chinese literature—whether in Western languages or not—and that of other literatures? Has it resulted in any significant impacts on the latter, or on the literary field as a whole?

Each of the nine articles in this issue takes a slightly different tack in treating their respective genres, fields, or texts. While the first four engage primarily in retrospective surveys of previous scholarship, the remaining five introduce and apply relatively novel conceptual and interpretive models to Chinese examples. Although this division is far from absolute—all of the articles engage to some degree in both of these exercises—we have organized the chapters into two sections to reflect their relative differences in emphasis. In aggregate, all nine authors both argue for and demonstrate the value of the

application of theory to Chinese literary works while also reflecting on the shortcomings, detours, or disappointments of some approaches as well as the controversies that have arisen among their practitioners.

Needless to say, we have not attempted to survey all of the genres and periods in which theoretical interventions have made an impact. A more exhaustive project would require several volumes and a significantly larger cadre of contributors. Our hope is that future scholars will fill in the gaps that we have left unexplored, in areas such as narrative theory, mixed media (e.g., illustrated fiction, drama, or other works), commentarial traditions, and the heterogeneous materials that fall under categories such as *biji* 筆記 or other compendia, as well as orally recited and other demotic literature. We also wish to stress that, while we have framed this overall endeavor in the terminology of theory that, as François Jullien and others have argued, imposes dualisms alien to Chinese epistemological as well as exegetical habits, our contributors have benefited from and participated in the revival of philological inquiry of recent years, in both China and the West. A felicitous complementarity between textually grounded, philologically informed scholarship and literary theory is evident in all of the articles contained herein.

Paula Varsano sketches an illuminating overview of the postwar zeitgeist of Anglophone academic Sinology and the debates that have taken place around its relationship with and place within the disciplines of both literature and history. Her discussion begins with the exchanges published in two issues of *Journal of Asian Studies* (1961 and 1962) among four China historians—Frederick Mote, Denis Twitchett, Joseph Levenson, and Mary Wright—that illustrate the divisions between those who would “fence off” Chinese studies from other specializations (Mote and Twitchett) and others who sought greater dialogue with and integration within their disciplines (Levenson and Wright). She finds strong echoes of this dispute in the subsequent reception of James J. Y. Liu’s path-breaking books on Chinese poetics and traditional literary criticism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which in turn leads her into the heart of her article: the seminal studies of Chinese poetics coauthored by Yu-kung Kao and Tsu-lin Mei of the 1970s that redefined the study of Chinese poetry, and subsequent contributions by Stephen Owen and Pauline Yu, among others, that complemented or built on these achievements.

Xinda Lian hones in on the insights of Stephen Owen and of the Mei-Kao collaboration discussed by Varsano, elaborating their significance to the field of poetry studies through meticulously delineating both their readings of specific poems and the overall conceptual architecture of their arguments. Moreover, he traces the further development of their discoveries in some of Kao’s later single-authored essays on Tang and Song *ci*, as well as in multiple essays and

monographs by Zong-qi Cai about poetic prosody, syntax, and structure published over the past three decades. By freeing themselves from the bonds of the European-language-based classification of parts of speech imposed on the Chinese language that prevailed in much Western-oriented scholarship, and applying instead the topic-comment linguistic paradigm first elaborated by Yuen Ren Chao (Zhao Yuanren) and others to the analysis of poetry, the contributions of Kao, Mei, and Cai have opened a new horizon for the study of Chinese poetry. While demonstrating the novelty of these approaches, Lian also draws attention to their points of similarity and connection to the New Critical tradition of close reading that, both for its original proponents and for Cai as well, proves highly productive as a methodology of systematic study and analysis.

Lucas Klein turns his lens toward European and American poststructuralist writers who have laid some claim to knowledge of China (such as Julia Kristeva and her contemporaries in the 1970s journal *Tel Quel*) to explore their impact on various representatives of academic Sinology over the past four decades. Dividing the latter into two groups based on the degree to which they either deconstructed or reinforced European tendencies to reify East-West divisions (exemplified by Jacques Derrida's infamous othering of Chinese philosophical writings as "thought"), he argues that the most successful poststructural decentering occurs when Sinologists themselves decenter French theory and disseminate this decentering through a more dissipated poststructuralism. Whereas influential figures like Stephen Owen and Pauline Yu have simultaneously adhered to and dissented from poststructuralism, nodding to its critique of Western dualism while also carving a space outside of that dualism, a considerable proportion of such literary scholarship ultimately reproduces Derrida's positioning of Chinese as "outside of all logocentrism" through the pretense of offering a "gaze coming from the inside." Instead, Klein finds in some exemplary recent scholarship the production of knowledge that is not centered on a binary opposition of China and the West, which he calls, after Roland Barthes, a "sideways glance" that has absorbed influences of poststructuralism without succumbing to its blind spots.

In her retrospective portrait of the rise of feminist perspectives in literary scholarship over the past several decades, Grace S. Fong draws attention to the obstacles such work had to overcome even (or perhaps especially) within the academy and specifically the largely conservative, theory-averse domain of Sinology. Thanks to the valiant efforts of pioneering scholars like Maureen Robertson, Ellen Widmer, Kang-i Sun Chang, Haun Saussy, and Fong herself, vigorous theorization and analysis of premodern Chinese women's writing came to the fore in the late 1990s and has blossomed since then. She notes how such work was motivated not only by purely academic concerns but also the feminist desire for the advancement and equality of women socially, politically, and

intellectually. And thanks to the fairly recent discoveries and research of significant but previously neglected or unknown troves of women's writing from the last two dynasties, Fong shows how much the study of women's writings has demonstrated that a women's literary tradition flowered during the seventeenth and again in the nineteenth centuries, even if "contending views expressing both support for and opposition to women's participation in learning and writing by both men and women persisted to the end of the imperial period."

In a path-breaking reappraisal of the textual history of the *Lisao* 離騷 (Encountering Sorrow), Martin Kern mines insights from cultural memory theory, pioneered in the 1990s by Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann. The approach of the Assmanns and their successors diverges from both history and tradition: from history in that its stated focus of interest lies not in the past as such but in its successive retrospective configuration, and from tradition in that it is not static or conservative but, because of its responsiveness to an ever-evolving present, dynamic and innovative. Kern brings this methodology to bear on what he calls the "distributed Qu Yuan Epic," the narrative of a composite Qu Yuan 屈原 (trad. 340–278 BCE) persona that is distributed across multiple prose and poetic texts within and beyond the *Chuci* 楚辭. Based on his close and original analysis of the *Lisao* as a discontinuous and nonlinear sum total of parallel discourses of separate origins and diverse literary idioms, Kern argues that the model of a paragon of loyalty in an unappreciative and self-destructive royal court emerged from the Han literati's refashioning of a Chu aristocratic poetic hero into a heroic poet, a new ideal of authorship advanced by Liu An 劉安 (179–122 BCE), Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 85 BCE), and Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BCE). Rather than being a stable historical entity, this Qu Yuan was developed as a textual configuration through which events and ideals were "inscribed in the discourse of the nation," a continuous process that allowed for destabilization, reconfiguration, or expungement.

The concept of *mouvance*, articulated by European medievalists to analyze and indeed embrace the fluidity of pre-Gutenberg scribal culture, is deployed to great effect in Christopher Nugent's discussion of the mid-Tang florilegium *Xinji wenci jiujiing chao* 新集文詞九經抄 (New Compilation of Phrases Excerpted from the Nine Classics, ca. 755–883), a manuscript found in at least sixteen fragments at Dunhuang. While the value of this conceptual framework has already been demonstrated by scholars working on early Chinese texts, which recent archeological finds have shown to be much less stable than what was believed just a few decades ago, Nugent shows its relevance to later eras in his careful comparisons of passages from the Confucian *Analects* and a few other classical texts quoted in these manuscripts. Memory and memorization clearly functioned in ways parallel to the "joyful appropriation" that characterizes

medieval texts, with materials rearranged, paraphrased, reattributed, or even invented, for works like *Analects*, whose textual uniformity was promoted and enforced by the state through institutional mechanisms such as the examination system. Nugent's work opens up possibilities for postulating the contours of a literate population beyond, and much larger than, the examination-taking elite, for whom these variorum texts served as the principal medium by which they knew and appreciated the values and their attendant practices across multiple segments of society. Their understandings of the "classics" may well have differed substantially from our own conceptions of such works.

Manling Luo surveys the expansive terrain of what she separates into two categories of spatiality, "general theories" and "local theories," and their potential for application to Chinese examples from the medieval period. She notes the distinction between space (a geometrically quantified raw material) and place, the latter preferred by humanistic geographers as the product of human activity, enabling the "seeing, knowing, and understanding [of] the world." Discussing Edward Soja's Thirdspace, feminist traditions of urban design, Edward Said, bell hooks, and numerous other examples, Luo contemplates their potential relevance to the historical excavation of medieval Chinese conceptions and practices of spatiality. She gives us a broad sampling of recent scholarship on, inter alia, medieval urban spaces such as Chang'an, the landscapes of the poetry of Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385–433), sacred mountains and pilgrimage sites, qualities like *feng* 風 and *qi* 氣, "meta-geographies of ecumenical regionalism," and her own work on the sixth-century *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記 (Records of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang), providing a comprehensive palette of possibilities for geographical theorizing about and interpreting the vast range of writings and topics that are relevant to understanding space/place in Chinese contexts.

As with the expansive view of theoreticians and their writings in Manling Luo's article, Patricia Sieber gives us a similarly wide-ranging and thought-provoking survey of contemporary developments in theater studies with potential applicability to Chinese theatrical texts and performance studies. Taking note of the methodological pluralism that characterizes theoretical writings and the considerable range of opinion even over what constitutes theatricality, she then turns to the historical reception of Chinese theater in Europe and North America, beginning with its relegation to the category of opera, as well as other preconceptions that became attached to it thanks in part to Jesuit moral preoccupations. Sieber discusses the exceptionally rich variation in language registers and their rhetorical manipulation in all three of the early theatrical genres (*zaju* 雜劇, *nanxi* 南戲, and *chuanqi* 傳奇) and notes how the attention to language use in which recent Western scholarship (including her

own) has excelled can contribute to the cross-cultural studies of mixed-register literature as a whole. Concluding with Brecht's famous engagement with Chinese theater and the continuing controversy over whether his conception of the alienation effect stems from misunderstanding of that tradition, she cites several provocative recent efforts to revisit fundamental questions of theatricality in its Chinese contexts.

Alexander Des Forges brings a novel perspective to late imperial literary history through the application of the concept of involution, including both aesthetic and sociopolitical ramifications, to the understanding of classical prose, specifically the genre of examination prose known popularly as the "eight-legged essay" or, in its normative name, the "prose of our time" (*shiwén* 時文). Beginning with involution's history of use in debates over late imperial Chinese economic development, Des Forges demonstrates its potential for illuminating the "complex interiority" of the formally intricate examination essays that evolved continuously from the mid-Ming to the late Qing. Institutionally, involution was evident among government departments of the imperial bureaucracy that were balanced against one another, duplicating their functions, and also within departments where bipartition into parallel, virtually redundant units occurred, and was further replicated by commercial brokers whose development mirrored their bureaucratic counterparts. Des Forges then reminds us that involution originated as a critical term in the field of art history, and only much later appropriated by Clifford Geertz to describe the division of Javanese rice paddies in increasingly granular fashion. This mutual imbrication between the aesthetic, political, and institutional dimensions of involution make it a useful tool in examining the parallels between dissatisfaction expressed by critics of such institutional subdivision and reduplication, on the one hand, and criticism of the allegedly superfluous doubling that characterizes the eight-legged essay, on the other. Des Forges argues that we can attribute these processes to the "industrialization of the subjectivity production process" that is not unlike the alchemy by which our "free time" activity is transmuted into data mined so profitably by the algorithmic wizards of Silicon Valley and elsewhere.

In conclusion, we wish to acknowledge the contributions of Yuan Xingpei 袁行霈, director of the International Academy for Chinese Studies (IACS) at Peking University and leader of the multilingual project History of the Dissemination of Chinese Civilization (*Zhonghua wenming chuanboshi* 中华文明傳播史) based there. Along with other volumes devoted to the Western reception of Chinese literary and philosophical texts, Yuan and his collaborator Zong-qi Cai of Lingnan University and the University of Illinois first conceived the idea for a collection of articles devoted to the application of Euro-American theoretical or methodological tools to the study of traditional Chinese literature. The

authors presented papers at a preparatory virtual workshop in July 2021, and the present volume represents the fruit of their efforts. We offer our heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Yuan and the faculty and staff members of IACS for their encouragement and support of this project and, indeed, for their steadfast and energetic commitment to the dissemination of knowledge about Chinese literature and culture throughout the world.



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