

A History of Chinese Literature?

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It is difficult enough to write the history of a national literature where this history is relatively short, as in Russian or American literature. The problem becomes exponentially larger with a national literature that spans three millennia, and, measured by sheer volume of text, might well be larger than all other national literatures combined. Yet writing a history of Chinese literature is not impossible. Over the last century, a number of efforts have been made in various languages: many in Chinese, a good number in Japanese, and about twenty in European languages, including a few in English (none of which are mentioned in the book under review). Writing yet another history of Chinese literature has to take this fact into account because each new such history is built—not always consciously—on previous efforts.

To a greater extent than is sometimes acknowledged, our own limitations are inherited. In some particular instances we might be successful in transcending this heritage; but for the larger part, we remain confined to it. Each new history of literature inevitably joins the process of canonizing, anthologizing, and tradition-making that is, to no small extent, the very subject under study. Thus, the conventional version of Chinese literary history that matches particular genres with particular dynasties—Han *fu* 漢賦, Tang *shi* 唐詩, Song *ci* 宋詞, Yuan *qu* 元曲, Ming-Qing *xiaoshuo* 明清小說—is the direct result of such history-cum-canonization. This scheme simultaneously mirrors and confirms the prevalent research interests in Chinese literature, perpetuating the limitations of past inquiry as expectations for future work. Once accepted in a scholarly community, the reproduction of the conventional version reigns as a matter of convenience for all.

As the editor of *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* (hereafter: CHCL), Victor H. Mair submits that his volume transcends such limitations. In his own characteristic words, offered in the “Prolegomenon” (pp. xi-xiii) and “Preface” (xv-xviii), he declares that his history includes “the latest findings of critical scholarship” (p. xii). It is a work where “the history of Chinese literature is seen through entirely new prisms that transcend both time and genre” (p. xii). It is a volume packed “with as much basic information as possible” (p.xv) and built upon “rigorous marshalling of evidence” (p. xvi). It is also a history that “touches on such matters as the fuzzy interface between

prose and poetry, the uncertain boundary between fiction and drama, and the ineffable interplay between spoken and written language," tracing "the varied nature of Chinese literature, its shifting contours and kaleidoscopic transformations, its subtle lineaments and lasting verities" (p. xiii). More specifically, the problems of genre distinction, the interaction between Han-Chinese and other literary cultures, the literature by women and ethnic minorities in China, the relation between the national and the regional and local strata of the literary tradition, and its performative and oral dimensions all fall within the scope of Mair's vision. The intended audience are "specialists and nonspecialists alike" (p. xv), in other words, "the serious student of Chinese literature" (ibid.) as well as "those who are completely unacquainted" or "minimally acquainted" (p. xii) with the subject.

Indeed, the volume seems to be targeting the undergraduate survey courses and is explicitly (p. xvi) marketed to be used alongside Mair's *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* that appeared in 1994 and was followed in 2000 by his *The Shorter Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*. To make this connection unmistakable, CHCL now shares a virtually identical dust jacket design with the *Shorter Anthology*. Apparently for the same purpose, priority is given to the elsewhere rapidly disappearing Wade-Giles transliteration system employed in Mair's anthologies. That the volume also includes a conversion table to the de facto standard *pinyin* system of transcription (pp. 1155-60) points directly to the inherent contradiction in trying to maintain and further promote what Mair insists is Columbia University's preferred transcription system while hoping to reach the average undergraduate—an unfortunate dilemma that will be addressed in more detail below.

Other peculiarities also point to a non-specialist audience. Most strikingly, the volume's sequence of short chapters divides the reading into small portions, ready to be assigned to individual sessions across a semester-long syllabus. In fact, the book can only be read in this fashion, because little effort was made to connect its many chapters. A reader willing to read through larger portions in one move would have to come up with his or her own idea of what holds them together, and in which sequence they should be approached. Another characteristic that may surprise the specialist reader is the bibliography that is not only devoid of works in Chinese and Japanese but also largely omits the relevant scholarship in European languages other than English. A few titles in French and German are noted (many of them old translations of the classics), but no serious reader will fail to note the absence of a large number of excellent works in these and other languages alongside the inclusion of not a few titles in English that seem mediocre or out of date by comparison. On its own, this bibliography cannot be used as a guide by graduate students and other advanced readers of Chinese literature. However, for these members of its potential audience, the book offers (p. 1105) the URL of a larger, internet-based bibliography. Another feature of CHCL that may surprise readers is the absence of Chinese characters in the main text (a phenomenon that no longer can be explained by technical difficulty); instead, a long and cumbersome three-part glossary is appended (pp. 1161-1240). One is left to speculate that the decision to

exclude Chinese characters from the main text may be meant to facilitate its reading—for readers illiterate in Chinese, even though it is certainly a disservice to all others.

Although there may not be an infinite range of choices, one could think of structuring a history of literature like the formal histories of premodern China: the *jizhuan ti* 紀傳體 (“annals and biographies” format), the *biannian ti* 編年體 (chronology form), or the *jishi benmo ti* 紀事本末體 (topically arranged essays). In the first model, one might have general discussions of literary forms or periods, essays on perennial themes or motifs, charts to put all significant works in their chronological order, and biographies of important authors. The second model would focus on the diachronic sequence in which literary texts were produced, juxtaposing contemporary texts in quite different literary forms for comparison and analysis. The third might concentrate on the historic trajectories of the fashions that brought one form or one theme into prominence while others slipped from use, concentrating on major examples of forms or periods. Victor Mair chose none of these models, which is hardly surprising; all would be much easier for a single author or editor to employ than for a group of 45 individual writers working independently without much apparent coordination.

In his “Prolegomenon,” Mair dismisses those unnamed scholars who did not “attempt to construct a systematic account of the development of genres, styles, and themes or to analyze the relationship of literature to society, political institutions, or even the other arts.” (p. xi) In an effort to transcend their limitations, Mair divides the content into such major (and quite conventional European) categories as Poetry (Part II), Prose (Part III), Fiction (Part IV), and Drama (Part V). Within these categories he includes chapters on such commonly used Chinese categories as Tang poetry, *ci* lyrics, “Records of Anomalies” (*zhiguai xiaoshuo*), Tang tales, vernacular stories, novels, all of which seem unsurprising. The “new prisms” might include the discussions of poetry by century (14th, 15th and 16th, 17th, 18th to 20th, in Chapters 19 to 22 respectively), a brief and very informative introduction to the 20th century essay, and another chapter that lumps all theatrical texts into “Traditional Dramatic Literature” (while somewhat artificially having a separate chapter for “The Oral-Formulaic Tradition”). The substantial attention devoted here to traditional commentary and literary theories is hardly new, although as a field of study most significant research has been done in the past 25 years. So the organization here is unusual, or ordinary, depending on how one looks at it. One can only wonder, however, who at the turn of the 21st century still thinks of Chinese literature as “effete, exotic, and monotonous” as Mair asserts from “Peking” in his Prolegomenon. No matter how “multifarious” Chinese literature has been, certainly this *History* is just that.

Our decision to divide the present review more or less chronologically allows us to ask what “history” in this history of literature actually means. Thus, considering the cumulative account of the twenty-four chapters that contain material mostly up through the Song dynasty, it is possible to look not only at the individual chapters but also at how they together manage or fail to constitute a coherent historical account of the early period. The way that these twenty-four chapters are arranged in CHCL is quite peculiar. In Section I, “Foundations,” one finds chapters on “Language and

Script," "Myth," "Philosophy and Literature in Early China," "The Thirteen Classics," "Shih-ching Poetry and Didacticism in Ancient Chinese Literature," but also "The Supernatural," "Wit and Humor," "Proverbs," "Buddhist Literature," "Taoist Heritage," and "Women in Literature."

The line-up raises a number of questions: what exactly is "foundational" about "The Supernatural," "Wit and Humor," or "Proverbs"? Are we asked to believe that proverbs and humor reside at the very basis of Chinese literature?¹ What is to be gained from a section on "Women in Literature" (in distinction to the more complex notion of gender)—will female authors not be discussed throughout? What is the difference between "literature" (for Buddhism) and "heritage" (for Daoism)? How are the chapters on "Myth" and "The Supernatural" related? Why is there a chapter on the thirteen classics followed by one on the *Shijing* 詩經 (the classic *par excellence*, and one of the thirteen)? And to look beyond the "Foundations": as the *Shijing* chapter deals not only with the anthology proper but also with "didacticism," that is, a category of *Shijing* exegesis, why do we find two more chapters on "Classical Exegesis" and "Literary Theory and Criticism" much later in the book (Chapters 44 and 45)?

The same pattern of redundancy continues throughout the book: Chapter 26 is devoted to "The Literary Features of Historical Writing," followed by a chapter on "Early Biography" (despite the fact that "biography" is at the core of Chinese historiography). Chapter 47, "Balladry and Popular Song" seems potentially related to Chapter 49, "The Oral-Formulaic Tradition" as well as to the other chapters on poetry. At the same time, no serious discussion is given to the oral composition hypothesis proposed for early *yuefu* 樂府 poetry or for the *Guofeng* 國風 section of the *Shijing*.² With respect to oral aspects in the composition and transmission of the *Shijing*, new

¹ Surely, attention is due to literary phenomena such as "Wit and Humor" (chapter 7) or "Proverbs" (chapter 8). To evacuate and isolate such phenomena into separate chapters, however, instead of alerting the authors of all chapters to consider their relevance, creates exactly the wrong, because ahistorical, perception. In effect, it undermines the claim that these phenomena are "foundational" to the tradition.

² Neither Chapter 47 nor Chapter 49 is helpful here. In Chapter 47, some vague notion of "orality" is simply assumed, without distinguishing between oral composition, performance, and transmission of texts. Chapter 49 opens with the following sentence: "The oral-formulaic tradition in China refers to expressive genres that rely on oral culture either for their performance milieu or as a model for the written text." (p. 989) Such a general pronouncement—what exactly is "oral culture," and what are "non-expressive" genres from which the "expressive" are then to be distinguished?—cannot possibly pass as a serious reflection on the subtleties of the Parry-Lord hypothesis on oral composition that can be gleaned, for example, from the writings of the eminent Hellenist Gregory Nagy. Moreover, the most prominent cases where scholars have applied the hypothesis to Chinese literature are those argued by C.H. Wang (*The Bell and the Drum*, 1974) for the *Shijing* and by Hans H. Frankel (in his *BIHP* and *HJAS* articles of 1969, 1974) for early medieval ballads. Oral composition "as a model for the written text" can certainly be applied already to the *Shijing*, the *Shangshu* 尚書, the line statements of the *Yijing* 易經, and Western Zhou bronze inscriptions (as, in fact, to *all* early Chinese poetry). Yet curiously, Chapter 49 is precluded from mentioning pre-Tang literature altogether.

reflections should entail a careful review of at least the Mawangdui 馬王堆 “Wu xing” 五行 and the Fuyang 阜陽 *Shijing* manuscripts published decades ago, together with the extensive scholarship that has been devoted to them. And for a book published in 2001, one could also ask for a discussion of the important evidence from the Guodian 郭店 manuscripts that have been available since the summer of 1998.

The concluding section of CHCL is labeled “Popular and Peripheral Manifestations.” It juxtaposes such diverse and interesting topics as “popular” (as distinct from “literati,” a problematic dichotomy in itself) texts, regional literatures, translations into Chinese, and the influence of Chinese literature on writing in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Some of these subjects are innovative; others are not. They appear to be subjects that did not fit elsewhere. This section functions as an analytical category only if one accepts that all other chapters are devoted to texts produced by the elite and connected to government (see Mair’s suggestion to this effect in his Introduction, p. 5). But coming at the end of a *history*, where we might expect most recent literary developments in a variety of forms, this division seems more like afterthoughts, or topics of marginal interest. Given its diverse content, this section might well have justified the title for CHCL of “Sinitic” literature, not just “Chinese” literature, to follow Mair’s linguistic terminology. Fortunately, he chose to be straightforward and identify the subject of the book by a name that will allow the less technically informed to recognize its content.

Within the 55 chapters of this massive text, the approaches of individual writers vary greatly from one another. Some seem to address scholarly readers of other Chinese literary fields, and some have quite nonscholarly audiences in mind.³ Thus, for example, Mark Bender provides a synopsis of *Changban po* 長板坡, the *zidi shu* 子第書 on Three Kingdoms’ heroes, and a lively snippet of a Mandarin version of another, seemingly a treat for the neophyte (Chapter 50). Others, most notably Philip Williams in his essays on 20th century prose (Chapter 32) and 20th century fiction (Chapter 39) devote a certain amount of space to recitations of generally well known political events and thus spend less on the literary significance of the texts they mention. William H. Nienhauser, Jr. in his survey of “T’ang Tales” (Chapter 33) provides a catalogue of content summaries of the twenty-five best known *chuanqi*. The catalogue is useful and competently done, and surely a worthwhile introduction for students, but it is not a *history* of the genre. Paul Rakita Goldin’s chapter on the thirteen classics (Chapter 4) is a good standard account of this body of texts (not different from similar accounts found elsewhere), but it does not relate the classics to the development of literature. In a history of Chinese literature (as distinct from one of philosophy), one wonders why no notice is taken of the veritable traditional industry of Chinese literary thought, especially genre theory, where the different classics were systematically established as fountainheads of different forms of literary expression. (It should be noted that among the chapters covering material mainly through the Song dynasty, the study of the classics as an inspiration to literature is entirely absent from all but Paul W. Kroll’s Chapter 14 on

³ A radical example of the latter is Stuart Sargent’s Chapter 15 on *ci* 詞 poetry.

Tang poetry.) Michael Puett, writing on early philosophy (Chapter 3), spends most of his pages on a single point, namely, the question of cultural “artifice” and “creation”—an important topic, but surely not the only one. Judith Magee Boltz, while furnishing a superb survey of technical Daoist writings (Chapter 10), refrains from discussions of how deeply Daoist learning and religious ideas pervade a large body of *literary* writing from Han times onward.

By contrast, Wilt Idema (in his survey of dramatic literature, Chapter 41) and Emanuel Pastreich (in his “reception” essays at the end of the volume, Chapters 53-55) provide extensive lists of important texts, identifying each generally without regard for the historical context. Paul W. Kroll, in what is one of the longest chapters of CHCL, provides a rigorously compressed but exceedingly competent and well-organized account of Tang poetry (Chapter 14)—the best succinct treatment of the subject available and mandatory reading for all students of Chinese literature—that is full to brim with specific historical and literary detail. A few, including Daria Berg in her extremely useful survey of lesser-known novels (Chapter 36), expend enough effort on each text to give the reader a succinct sense of what makes each noteworthy. Yenna Wu provides the most complete survey currently available in English of the *huaben* form in her Chapter 34, providing thumbnail summaries of dozens of outstanding stories. In his survey of Yuan *Sanqu* (Chapter 17) Wayne Schlepp even gives page references to specific poems in the *Quan Yuan sanqu* 全元散曲 of 1664. Both could serve as guides for further research. Richard John Lynn, Daniel Bryant, and Michelle Yeh provide similar service with their careful notes on Qing period and 20th century poets (Chapters 21, 22, 24), as does Allan Barr’s survey of Ming-Qing classical language fiction (Chapter 37). However, these, and other entries as well, provide far too much detail for the beginning student, who is likely to find their volume of detail simply overwhelming. The same might be said for the amount of biographical information in Robert Joe Cutter’s survey of Han through Six Dynasties poetry (Chapter 13). On the other hand, Milena Doleželová-Velingerová summarizes recent scholarship on fiction of the period 1897-1916 (Chapter 38) with a completeness that should appeal to all levels of readers.

But as the editor has obviously failed to inspire a unified vision of the purpose of the whole enterprise, one can also put this the other way around: there are simply too many chapters that rehearse what is already known and readily available elsewhere (often from the same authors, and then usually in greater detail). Altogether, there is too little new information for which the serious student of Chinese literature—that is, someone who also reads monographs and journal articles—might be encouraged to purchase and read the whole book. While, as noted above, the editor has allowed specialists outside the field of literature to stay within their own areas of expertise without reaching out into “literature” in the more narrow sense, it seems that something similar has happened also to some of the finest scholars of Chinese literature proper. Thus, Stephen Durrant on “The Literary Features of Historical Writing” (Chapter 26) remains almost exclusively focused on *Zuo zhuan* and *Shiji*. His chapter begins with a brief account on oracle bone and bronze inscriptions that one will find

slightly at odds with recent scholarship,⁴ and it ends with less than four pages on the entire historiography postdating the *Shiji*. Ronald Egan, writing on “Expository Prose” (Chapter 28), begins with some conceptual (historically unspecific) considerations and then spends the remaining chapter on the well-known authors from the Tang and Song. Charles Hartman on “Poetry and Painting” (Chapter 25) basically ends with the Yuan dynasty. Haun Saussy on “Classical Exegesis” (Chapter 44) pays due attention to the centrality of commentary in the reception of the classics and notes several of the most influential commentaries; but the *history* of classical exegesis would have benefited from some attention to those works that were both absorbed and eclipsed by their more famous successors. Thus, the myth—itsself a fact of literary history—of the four long centuries between the Han and the Tang as a dark age of “Confucianism” and classical learning could be more clearly confronted.⁵ Dore J. Levy’s Chapter 45 (“Literary Theory and Criticism”) ends with just two pages on all of Ming and Qing literary thought, followed by a little over half a page (!) on the twentieth century. Jeffrey Riegel’s Chapter 5 (“*Shih-ching* Poetry and Didacticism in Ancient Chinese Literature”) offers mostly solid facts but says practically nothing about the *Shijing* songs’ early relation to music (or, for that matter, to the diction of the bronze inscriptions), about the early use of the songs as proof text in historiographic and philosophical discourse, or about the important historical shifts in interpretation from late Warring States to early imperial times.⁶ Anne Birrell’s Chapter 47 (“Balladry and Popular Song”) largely repeats the

⁴ The idea of oracle bone inscriptions as “historical documents” that were “stored in archives” (p. 495) seems contradicted by the evidence, as has long been pointed out by David N. Keightley and other specialists. Similarly, the discussion of bronze inscriptions is reduced to the theme of “historical records” without attention to their religious circumstances which Lothar von Falkenhausen and others have discussed prominently.

⁵ At the same time, the title of the single most influential *Shijing* commentary, Zheng Xuan’s 鄭玄 (127-200) *Mao Shi zhuan jian* 毛詩傳箋, is never once mentioned throughout CHCL. And for later *Shijing* exegesis, the serious student might wish to be given at least the names of the major Qing commentators such as Yao Jiheng 姚際恆 (b. 1647), Ma Ruichen 馬瑞辰 (1782-1835), Chen Huan 陳奂 (1786-1863), Fang Yurun 方玉潤 (1811-1883), or Wang Xianqian 王先謙 (1842-1918). Finally, readers should not be misled by the misspelling of the most important Song commentary on the *Shijing*—Zhu Xi’s (1130-1200) *Shi ji zhuan*—that is wrongly given as *Shijing zhuan* (p. 914), an error, luckily, not repeated in the glossary (p.1230).

⁶ On the other hand, I (Kern) question the remark that “a close comparison of differences between the text readings of the Mao school and those preserved in the Fu-yang [early Han manuscript, MK] exemplar suggests that the Mao school may have triumphed over competitors because its rendering of the songs more closely represented contemporary Han dynasty pronunciation, rather than the more archaic readings of the other schools, and supplied cues for performance missing in other versions” (p. 100-101). Having worked extensively on all early manuscripts that contain portions of the *Shijing* songs, having read the relevant scholarship, and having thoroughly analyzed the textual variants found in these manuscripts, including the one from Fuyang, I confess I have never seen any evidence to support this statement. To the contrary, Chinese and North American scholars have shown that virtually all textual variants, regardless of

author's earlier (and not always undisputed) work on the development of *yuefu* poetry from the Han through the Tang, including the remarkable fantasy about the imperial state sacrificial hymns (which despite their importance are not given any attention in Chapter 13) as some kind of popular ballad.⁷

In pointing out the historical limitations of these chapters, we do not in every case mean to diminish the quality of their actual contributions. Indeed, what Stephen Durrant writes about *Zuo zhuan* and *Shiji*, Ronald Egan about Tang and Song prose, and Charles Hartman about the relation between poetry and painting is often brilliant and admirable, and certainly important and worth recommending. These chapters should be read by all students of Chinese literature who wish to understand the state of the field in these areas. Yet what makes them appear disconnected and in the end unsatisfying as *historical* accounts is the fact that the editor has allowed his contributors to stay largely within the boundaries of their former work—which is, incidentally, the opposite of what he promises us in his “Prolegomenon.” As a result, CHCL has next to nothing to say about, for example, Han and Six Dynasties (or Ming and Qing) expository prose, nor do we find a serious discussion of the single most important work of historiographic criticism, Liu Zhiji's 劉知幾 (661-721) *Shitong* 史通 of 710. Repeatedly, one finds a chapter dropping the larger part of the tradition it is devoted to (added up, the gaps in certain chapters easily exceed a full millennium).

Another question mark may be put behind the overall absence of considerations on textual history in most chapters of CHCL. For several decades now, a lively discussion has been conducted on the composition and textual history of the *Shiji*, with scholars struggling to determine how much of the text goes back to Sima Qian and his father Sima Tan 司馬談 (d. 110 B.C.), and how much of it is later composition based on the *Hanshu* and other sources. Likewise, the composition of the *Zuo zhuan* has been a subject of intense debate throughout modern scholarship on the work. Neither Chapter 26 nor any other offers a hint at these issues. In the same vein, the name of the most important *Hanshu* commentator, Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581-645), a towering figure of traditional learning, appears just once (in Kroll's Chapter 14, p. 283)—when it should be known to every student of Chinese literature how much his commentary, especially in the form of phonetic glosses,⁸ has done for the understanding not only of *Hanshu* and

their graphic difference that may derive from other recensions, closely match their counterparts in the Mao recension in phonological terms.

⁷ More specifically, the first of the Western Han *jiaosi ge* 郊祀歌 (Songs for the suburban sacrifice), “Lian shiri” (“We have chosen an auspicious season and day”), a fast-paced, elaborate sacrificial hymn to invite the spirits, couched in the sensualistic language of the contemporaneous *fu* and the earlier “Nine songs” (*Jiu ge* 九歌) of the *Chu ci*, is mentioned as “a seasonal carol of spring sowing” (p. 958). This is, with all due respect, nonsense. No doubt, the confusion of hymns with “ballads” stems from the inclusion of these hymns in the first twelve chapters of Guo Maoqian's (12th century) monumental *Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集—which only goes to show that the *Yuefu shiji* is exactly not reducible to a collection of “ballads.”

⁸ Technical commentary like that of phonetic glosses, without which one can understand neither the classical texts nor the classical learning of these texts, is another field completely excluded from CHCL.

Shiji but also of the Han *fu*, and how active a role he assumed in editing the *Hanshu* text proper. Similar observations could be noted for any number of texts mentioned in CHCL.

Such pervasive silence on textual history and the very formation of the Chinese literary tradition (notable exceptions among the chronologically earlier chapters are 9, 10, and 13) has befallen not only the more technical issues involved in the history of literature but even some of the most basic concerns. Rarely do we see the fundamental questions that need to be asked anew for each period and every genre, namely: what is a text, and what is a book? What is an author, and what kind of social performance is the composition of (however defined) "literature" in different periods and under varying circumstances? How did a "reader" get to it, and what kind of "reader" was that, with what kind of reading practice? What kind of work did an early "editor" like Liu Xiang 劉向 (79-8 B.C.) perform on the texts? Why does the same text, when available in two or more manuscripts or in a manuscript and a transmitted version, usually appear in differing internal organization? Why do we find early texts so often overlapping in their material? How are the hundreds of recently excavated ancient manuscripts from early China related to their transmitted counterparts (in the roughly ten per cent of manuscripts where such counterparts exist), and how do they relate to the late Western Han imperial order of texts, when the previous tradition was fixed and normalized by scholars working at the imperial court and under imperial supervision? These questions are pertinent not only to the beginnings of the literary tradition but, in continuously shifting formation, all the way up through the twentieth century. At stake are precisely such issues as literary communication, textual transmission and performance, and social contexts that Mair promises in the "Prolegomenon" and that CHCL mostly fails to make good on.

Also virtually excluded are considerations of how the Chinese literary tradition formed itself through the means of commentary and the compilation of anthologies. For example, a reader of Chapter 13 on pre-Tang poetry will learn about new developments of poetic self-expression but without a hint that these developments must be seen in relation to the concomitant development of classical learning. A discussion of the poetics of Wei and Jin times is surely incomplete without reference to the foundational exegesis especially of the *Guofeng* section of the *Shijing* that had become explicit during the Han. Likewise, one should not be left uncertain about the significance of the Song and Qing commentaries that partly revised the earlier views. When later scholars praised the poetry of the *Jian'an* 建安 period (196-220) for its vigor, realism, and intensity of expression, they related them not just to the *Guofeng* but to the *Guofeng* within their Han exegetical framework (a brief allusion to such mechanism is given in Chapter 45, p. 927). The production of literary *wenzhang* 文章 (refined brilliance) is not adequately explained without consideration of *wenxue* 文學 (refined [classical] learning).⁹

⁹ Note that right at the beginning of chapter 44 (p. 909), *wenxue* is translated as "the study of writings" in the context of the *Analects*; the author asserts that "this was doubtless a course of

In this context, the most egregious neglect affects the *Wenxuan*, the Chinese anthology of the early sixth century that defined the standards for literature across a broad range of topics and genres like no other text in the entire tradition.¹⁰ Just as the Five Classics (*wu jing* 五經)¹¹ since Han times (if not earlier) were memorized and studied only through established exegetical traditions, so the *Wenxuan* was memorized and studied through the famous Li Shan 李善 (d. 689) commentary. Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770), for example, seems to have mastered the *Wenxuan* together with the Li Shan commentary, which goes to say that when alluding to a piece from the *Wenxuan* (as Du Fu constantly did), he understood the earlier text through Li Shan's moral interpretation that ultimately rested in the earlier principles of *Shijing* exegesis. This track extends then further: for centuries from Tang times onward, every civil examination candidate had memorized the *Wenxuan*—a knowledge that then also

training in the deciphering and interpretation of legal and historical texts, a necessary qualification for office in the palace bureaucracies of early China." Considering especially the last decade of intense scholarly debate over early Chinese textuality, this seems problematic at least. At the presumed time of the *Analects*, there were no palace bureaucracies requiring the study of written texts; this is an imperial phenomenon. In the *Analects*, the twice occurring *wenxue* refers to the learning of the cultural tradition as it was embedded in ritual practice, appropriate demeanor, and the internalization of the ancient songs and kingly speeches; while this certainly included the learning of texts, it is probably misleading to equate "texts" with "writings," and "interpretation" with "deciphering" (of graphs?). In this context, one may also take exception with the statement in the "Introduction" to the book where the editor declares that writing "was the essence of the *ju* (Confucianists) and their most distinctive characteristic" already in the Warring States period (p. 3). This kind of conventional—and likely anachronistic—wisdom, marked by the ever persistent exaggeration of the status of writing at the expense of all other forms of cultural expression (see also p. 4 of the "Introduction" and pp. 50-51 in Mair's Chapter 1 on "Language and Script") has certainly been challenged over the last decade. While the contributors to CHCL in general have managed to avoid the pitfalls of a post-1800 European definition of "literature," the chapters concerning pre-imperial times are less successful in reflecting upon the actual status of the written word versus the memorized and performed one.

¹⁰ In chapter 11 on "Women in Literature" (p. 207), for example, the *Wenxuan* is noted in passing as "the other major anthology" of the early sixth century, apparently on a par with the *Yutai xinyong* 玉臺新詠 (New songs from the jade terrace), a work of incomparably narrower scope and infinitely lesser importance. The author offers just one brief comment of indignation on the *Wenxuan*, namely, that it "contains not a single literary work by a female author." Happily, this is wrong. One may think of Ban Zhao's 班昭 (49?-120? [CHCL, p. 205, gives 45 as her—quite unlikely—year of birth]) "Fu on the Eastward Journey" ("Dong zheng fu" 東征賦, *Wenxuan* chapter 9, where Ban is listed as Cao Dagu 曹大家) as well as of the "Song of Resentment" ("Yuan ge xing" 怨歌行, *Wenxuan* chapter 27), attributed to Favorite Beauty Ban (Ban jieyu 班婕妤 [or 倏仔], imperial concubine under Han Emperor Cheng 成 [r. 33-7 BCE]). The attribution to Ban jieyu is uncertain, but it was accepted by the *Wenxuan* compiler and others in Six Dynasties times.

¹¹ In chapter 3 (p. 83), the *Liji* 禮記 is erroneously counted among the Five Classics. The *Liji* was elevated to canonical status not before Tang times; the *li* (ritual) canon of Han times (and of the Five Classics) was the text later known as *Yili* 儀禮 (originally probably *Shili* 士禮). In chapter 44 (p. 910), the *Liji* is again wrongly assigned to the earliest stratum of the traditional canon. It is a heterogeneous Han compilation of materials from Warring States and early imperial times.

guided the understanding of Du Fu's poetry by those who composed poetry after him (e.g., in the Song). Inexplicably, neither does the *Wenxuan* itself receive any serious treatment in CHCL nor is Li Shan part of the picture (not to mention later *Wenxuan* scholarship, especially of the Qing period). Li Shan is mentioned only once, on p. 289 in Kroll's chapter on Tang poetry. If the *Wenxuan*—both as the pivotal pre-modern anthology and as a monument of the exegetical tradition—is largely ignored in this way, the same is then no longer surprising for Yao Nai's (1732-1815) 姚鼐 *Guwenci leizuan* 古文辭類纂 (Classified Compendium of Refined Phrases in the Ancient Style) of 1799 that never even appears by title.¹² Never mind that since its first printing in around 1820, an impressive line of prominent follow-up anthologies were published all through the Republican period, many of them appearing in numerous editions. This is to say nothing of the fact that Yao Nai's order of traditional prose genres has been universally accepted, defining the arrangement and understanding of these genres down to the present day.

Despite their varied approaches, and varying degrees of success in introducing their fields to audiences of differing interests and levels of preparation, a number of new insights appear in CHCL. One learns, as we should have known before, just how important Qu You's 瞿佑 (1347-1433) *Jiandeng xinhua* 剪燈新話 was as a model for writing in China, as well as in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. One learns that the Manchu origins of *zidi shu* may have influenced the development of Korean *p'ansori* as well (1030). Richard John Lynn (Chapter 18) points out that, contrary to the conventional view of literary history, the *shi* form, not the *qu*, was the main vehicle for Yuan literary expression. Similarly, by building on his own and others' previous research David Rolston's succinct survey of fiction criticism (Chapter 46) makes a real contribution to scholarly understanding of this type of writing. And Paul W. Kroll in his chapter on Tang poetry shows us how *shi* and *fu* poetry of an entire period can be discussed in a single framework; he also makes the most compelling case for paying close attention to the presence of religious thought and expression in literature.

One can still find chestnuts here, and comments that, with more careful editing, might have disappeared. In Chapter 8 John S. Rohsenow gives a brief history of vernacular fiction, referring to the old notion of "prompt books" as the basis for short stories and to a similarly hypothetical division in subject between vernacular and classical language fiction (for a much more reliable version of this development, see Chapter 34). Mair himself suggests (p. 14) that literati regularly drew upon popular materials, but that "from the medieval period onward, those who were not literate in Literary Sinitic took it upon themselves to write stories, poems, and plays in Vernacular Sinitic." This ignores the high level of education that most known vernacular fiction writers possessed, as well as the *wenyan xiaoshuo* traditions: writers among the most highly literate, such as the *Siku quanshu* compiler Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724-1805), included "popular" materials in their classical language narratives. Mair's comment also ignores the well-supported assertions to the contrary by the fiction specialists who wrote the

¹² A brief allusion to its outline of genres is given in chapter 28 (p. 528). There, Yao Nai's birth year is wrongly given as 1731. He was born on the day corresponding to January 17, 1732.

relevant chapters in Section IV. (See, for example, Wai-yee Li's considered observation [p. 620]: "vernacular fiction became one of the venues through which members of the elite displayed their learning and expressed and defined their ideals, frustrations, and self-understanding.")

One also wonders where the "redolence" of Buddhism (Mair's term) is in the *xiaopin wen* 小品文 of the late Ming (p. 6). Granted, *pin* is the term used to designate a section or chapter in a Buddhist sutra, but is also has to do with evaluation (viz., *Shi pin* 詩品, and see p. 401, the *Tang shi pinhui* 唐詩品彙), and many of the *xiaopin* do have some connection with the evaluation of literati behavior. Curiously, there is only one subsequent reference to this form—its importance in the development of Korean *yangban* 兩班 literature. One imagines that a survey devoted to major *literati* forms would want to have at least a brief introduction to *xiaopin wen*.¹³

Some of the problems here are the simple result of poor coordination. Daniel Bryant suggests (Chapter 20) that there was no noteworthy literary production during the 15th century, despite the enthusiasm about *cihua* of the period expressed by Anne McLaren in Chapter 49. Likewise, Richard John Lynn records in detail the developments in Qing period poetry "on the march to modernity" (p. 428) but makes no reference to the chapters that outline—or explain—that very "march." Anne Birrell praises the mid-Qing novel *Jinghua yuan* 鏡花緣 for its "transgressive and subversive authorial strategies" (p. 214), while Li Wai-yee debunks just that reading (p. 656) in her lengthy survey of the novel; both provide synopses of the text, and neither makes reference to the other. In Chapter 39 on 20th century fiction, Philip Williams simply repeats information presented at least once elsewhere. In pointing out such contradictions (and

¹³ Other errors are at least as serious. Yang Xiong's *Fayan* 法言 (Model sayings), is mistranslated as "Discourses on Method" (pp. 233, 921). Ban Gu 班固 (32-92) is declared to have drawn on the *Chu ci* commentator Wang Yi 王逸 (d. 158) for his comments on the *Li sao* 離騷 (p. 922)—unfortunately, Ban was long dead when Wang Yi compiled the anthology (note also how this tallies with the surprising note that the texts assembled in the *Chu ci* were "nearly unknown" in Wang Yi's times [chapter 44, p. 913]). The "Shifu lue" 詩賦略 (Summary of *shi* and *fu*) in the *Hanshu* "Yiwen zhi" is misconstrued as "Yiwenzhi shifu lue" and mistranslated as "Outline of the Purpose of Literary Esthetics in Poetry and Rhymeprose" (p. 922), apparently understanding the *Hanshu* chapter title "Yiwen zhi" as "Purpose of Literary Esthetics." Cao Pi 曹丕 (187-226) is quoted correctly as saying that "poetry and rhymeprose should be beautiful," but insinuating that he meant to imply "as esthetic beauty will ensure that what endures of a state is worthy of it" (p. 924) is without basis and incompatible with Cao's overall genre discussion of altogether four pairs of genres (with *shi* and *fu* forming just one pair). Zhong Rong's 鍾嶸 (467?-518) *Shi pin* 詩品 (Grading of Poets) is consistently mistranslated as "An Evaluation of Poetry" (pp.118, 260, 898, 927, 932). Zhi Yu's 摯虞 (d. 311) *Wenzhang liebie ji* (not *zhi*) 文章流別集 (Collection of literature distinguished by genre) is mistranslated as "Collection on Development and Change in Literary Genres," and his treatise on literature entitled *Wenzhang liubie zhi lun* (Essay on literature distinguished by genre) is wrongly given as "Discourse on Development and Change in Literary Genres" (p. 925). Xiao Gang 蕭綱 (503-551) is said to have been "notorious for his fervent embrace of literary decadence (*tuifei*)" (p. 926) when, in fact, the term *tuifei* 頹廢 is only a modern Chinese translation of English "decadence" and was never applied to Xiao Gang by the tradition.

repetitions), we do not advocate a single, monolithic reading of the Chinese literary tradition. In fact, we sense a missed opportunity: in cases where different perspectives and interpretations are valid, it would be the virtue of a responsibly organized history of literature to address them explicitly, explain their rationale, and advance the debate.

The problems in organization that mar substantial parts of CHCL go beyond the issue of gaps, redundancies, and internal contradictions. They produce categories of texts and concepts of interpretation that frequently disassemble coherent historical contexts into seemingly unrelated bits and pieces and hence distort the very “history of literature” that they are supposed to contribute to. For example, how is Han historical writing related to Han ideas about authorship, “Classical Exegesis” (Chapter 44), Han and earlier poetry, and expository prose? How is Su Shi’s 蘇軾 (1037-1101) *shi* poetry (Chapter 16) related to his *ci* 詞 poetry (Chapter 15), his *fu* (Chapter 12), his expository prose (Chapter 28), his writings on painting (Chapter 25), and all his other activities mentioned elsewhere—considering that all of these are coming from the same person? In CHCL, the complex, real-life mosaic of Su Shi’s personality disintegrates into some handfuls of randomly dispersed jigsaw puzzle pieces. And returning to the example of “oral composition” (to use a specific term) in the context of *yuefu* poetry, we need to understand how the poetics of early medieval ballads are related (a) to a continuous practice of oral poetic composition that extends back at least into Warring States times, and (b) to the early medieval conceptualization of earlier poetry in the wake of its Han and early medieval commentaries, e.g., as in the case of the *Guofeng*. We further need to consider how the practice of oral composition is or is not historically parallel to the ideology of “balladry and popular song,” and what “tradition” means in “oral-formulaic tradition.”

Likewise, moving on to another example, a history of Chinese literature that includes chapters on “The Supernatural” and “Myth” in the “Foundations” section along with a chapter on “Records of Anomalies” in the “Prose” section (and all of them parallel to the entire “Fiction” section), should not fail to inform its readers on which evidential and theoretical grounds these genres and larger categories are based, and how disparate—or, as it happens, historically coherent—they are in some of their characteristics and actual examples of texts. We certainly welcome, to take Mair at his word, “entirely new prisms that transcend both time and genre,” but we also wish to understand their rationale.

The confusion generated by the organization of CHCL may be illuminated by tracing one of the pivotal genres of the tradition, the *fu* 賦, through the various chapters in which it is discussed. A reading of this sort suggests that the different contributors have not been reading one another; nor has there been any discernable editorial effort to fill the gaps, remove the redundancies, and clear up the contradictions. The first chapter of Section II (“Poetry”) is devoted to “*Sao*, *Fu*, Parallel Prose, and Related Genres” (Chapter 12). Here, following a quick three-page account of the *Chu ci* 楚辭 anthology,¹⁴

¹⁴ Compare this superficial treatment of a truly foundational text of the Chinese poetic tradition to seventeen pages on “Wit and Humor” and eleven pages on “Proverbs.” No sense of balance and circumspection seems discernible.

one is told that the *fu* is essentially a prose genre (and therefore in one chapter with “parallel prose” and “related genres”). Even if this were correct as a general statement, which it is not, why is this chapter then situated in the “Poetry” section? While much can be made of the blurry borders between “poetry” and “prose,” and hence of the question of whether or not one can apply this European literary distinction to the classical Chinese tradition altogether, it is clear that until the advent of the *wen fu* 文賦 (prose exposition) in the ninth century,¹⁵ the *fu* was regularly discussed as deriving from the ancient *Shijing* songs, that is, “poetry” (*shi* 詩) in the narrow sense. This is how the *fu* is presented in Liu Xin’s 劉歆 (d. A.D. 23) account included in the *Hanshu* 漢書 “Yiwen zhi” 藝文志 (Monograph on arts and letters),¹⁶ in Yang Xiong’s 揚雄 (53 B.C.-A.D. 18) criticism of the genre, in Ban Gu’s preface to his “Liang du fu” 兩都賦 (Rhapsody on the two capitals), and on numerous other occasions.¹⁷ While the *fu* certainly differs from the shorter poem in many ways, and while one may regard its affiliation with the prestigious *Shijing* songs in Han times and beyond as largely rhetorical, it remains a fact that Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 467-ca. 522) in his *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (ca. 501) included the *fu* under the rhymed (*wen* 文, i.e., poetic) and not under the “unrhymed” (*bi* 筆, i.e., prose) genres. In the same spirit, the *Wenxuan* 文選, compiled less than thirty years after the *Wenxin diaolong*, opens with a long series of *fu* chapters followed by those devoted to the *shi*. We must be careful not to exaggerate the distinction between rhymed and unrhymed texts, and the attempt to point out the relations between Six Dynasties *fu* and parallel prose is commendable. It goes astray, however, where it takes this relation to define the *fu* altogether and where it fails to acknowledge passages of literary criticism like those just mentioned. Even into Tang times, the *fu* was regarded as the grand form of poetry.¹⁸

¹⁵ Not to be confused with Lu Ji’s 陸機 (261-303) marvelous *Wen fu* (Poetic exposition on the patterns of literature), a text woefully neglected in the chapters on early medieval poetry (chapter 13) and literary thought (chapter 45).

¹⁶ Liu Xin’s has famously defined *fu* as “to recite without singing” (*bu ge er song* 不歌而誦), distinguishing the *fu* from the song on the basis of a different mode of performance.

¹⁷ The author may have been led astray by the fact that late imperial collections like Yao Nai’s *Guwenci leizuan* include the *fu* among mainly prose genres; the same is true for Yan Kejun’s 嚴可均 (1762-1843) magnificent *Quan shanggu sandai Qin Han sanguo liuchao wen* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文 of ca. 1835. These, however, represent Qing views of the *fu*; it would be anachronistic to project their notion of *wen* 文 back into Han and Six Dynasties times.

¹⁸ While this is fully recognized in Kroll’s Chapter 14 on “T’ang Poetry,” Robert Joe Cutter’s Chapter 13 on “Poetry from 200 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.” remains almost entirely devoted to the well-known canon of *shi* verse. Here, references to the *fu* appear, if at all, only in passing—possibly because the author expected the genre to be covered in Christopher Leigh Connery’s Chapter 12 on “*Sao*, *Fu*, Parallel Prose, and Related Genres”? Chapter 13 also excludes discussion of the Shangqing 上清 Daoist chants of Yang Xi 楊羲 (330-386) and instead refers (p. 248) the reader back to chapter 10 (“Taoist Heritage”) where Yang Xi is briefly invoked (p. 177) yet without any mention of his poetry—another obvious instance of the coordination lacking between the individual chapters.

Because of its historical complexity, the *fu* makes for a good case study to put the fundamental structural flaw of CHCL into focus. In his “Introduction” (pp. 5-6), Mair himself uses the *fu* as his prime example to illustrate the many possible facets and historical changes of a single genre. Regrettably, he begins with mistakes. He opines that the early imperial *fu* was “emotion-laden” (p. 5) and that, “while also sporadically composed during the T’ang era” it “was seldom utilized as a vehicle of literary expression again throughout the succeeding ages” (p. 6). The statement about the Tang is directly contradicted by Kroll’s account in Chapter 14. Moreover, as both the statistics from the civil examinations and the large collections of late imperial *fu* demonstrate, the genre never disappeared. Quite to the contrary, the actual number of *fu* written in late imperial China is mind-boggling. Likewise, the idea that the early *fu* was “emotion-laden” flies in the face of the strong criticism the genre has endured throughout the 20th century: generations of scholars have agreed that it is *lacking* in emotion, and that for this very reason, it is without value. (While the lack of emotion is still widely emphasized, recent scholarship has rehabilitated the reputation of the early *fu* on other grounds.) Any one of the better Chinese introductions to the history of the *fu* and its scholarship may be fruitfully consulted on these points.

In addition to the chapters already mentioned, the *fu* also appears in Chapter 45 (“Literary Theory and Criticism”) in half a page of mostly conventional wisdom (p. 921)¹⁹ as well as in Chapter 43 (“The Rhetoric of Premodern Prose Style”) where, without further reasoning, it is again labeled as “prose.” Here, one encounters the pronouncement that Sima Xiangru’s 司馬相如 (179-117 B.C.) *fu* were “not recited to the emperor, but handed up as text to be read” (p. 896). For Western Han times, this is anachronistic at best,²⁰ and reference is due to the correct statement in Chapter 12 (p. 225), that in the case of the Western Han *fu*, “‘presentation’ was recitation” (although this phrasing, on the other hand, might give the wrong impression that all poets recited their own *fu*). At the same time, in Chapter 43 on rhetoric one would have expected an extensive discussion of the *fu*, considering its well-documented relation to the Warring States “persuasions” (*shui* 說) and to Han court speech on political and moral affairs;²¹ yet no word to this effect can be found.

¹⁹ However, even this commonplace account, together with the partly overlapping one in Chapter 12 (p. 233) suffices to rebut the sorry judgment, put forward in chapter 43 (p. 902), that “no writer in pre-Buddhist times overtly states that he formerly maintained one point of view but now believes in another.” As is described in every serious account of the *fu* one may think of, Yang Xiong did exactly this with regard to the *fu*.

²⁰ Perhaps the author based himself on a single passage in *Shiji* Chapter 117, where the emperor is said to have “read” (*du* 讀) Sima Xiangru’s “*Fu* on Sir Vacuous” (“*Zixu fu*” 子虛賦). The passage, which stands in complete isolation and contradiction to everything else we know about the *fu* at the court of Emperor Wu 武 (r. 141-87 B.C.), is one of the many anachronisms that for a long time now have led scholars to question the authenticity of this *Shiji* chapter.

²¹ Throughout the book, *shui* (persuasion) is repeatedly mistransliterated or even misunderstood as *shuo* (explanation or discourse). In Chapter 12 (p. 105), the Chinese word transliterated as *shuo* is translated as “persuasion,” confusing the two distinct Chinese words *shui* and *shuo* (a distinction preserved in Japanese *zei* versus *setsu*). In Chapter 27 on “Early Biography” (p. 517)—a

The basic problem with the account of the *fu* arises from the very structure of CHCL where bits and pieces of information on any given topic are scattered throughout the entire volume: for the *fu*, the “Introduction” advances extraordinary misunderstandings that are then partially corrected in Chapter 14; Chapter 12 reduces the genre to prose and fails to provide an account of its multiple origins in literature, rhetoric, and entertainment; Chapter 13—where the genre should be included under the discussion of early medieval poetry—largely ignores it; Chapter 43 offers just one, quite problematic, sentence on the *fu*; and Chapter 45 forgoes the entire complexity surrounding the genre as one of admonition, persuasion, and entertainment²² to provide the shortest possible, indeed sadly diminished, summary of Yang Xiong’s views. In sum, none of the chapters dealing with Han and Six Dynasties literature contextualizes the historical changes of the genre as part and parcel of larger cultural and ideological shifts, of the development of classicism, or of the gradual emergence of the literary author and its position at court. As a result, no reader of CHCL can possibly get a sense of where this genre came from and how and why it developed the way it did along with other literary and extraliterary phenomena. The confusion about “poetry” and “prose” is symptomatic here: only a sustained *historical* analysis of the *fu* might have been able to sort out the formal changes of the genre *at different times*. There are worlds of difference between the literary practice of the most prolific Western Han *fu* composer, the often frivolous entertainer Mei Gao 枚皋 (fl. 130-110 B.C.), and that of learned Eastern Han scholars like Ban Gu and Zhang Heng 張衡 (78-139). The latter differ from the former in language, in topics, in mode of composition, in presentation, in the nature, purpose, and use of the text, in the status of the author and its relation to the court, and with regard to the vast context of Han classicism—nothing of which can be learned from CHCL. Instead, alongside some valuable insights one finds a flurry of mutually incongruous perspectives, quick platitudes, blatant contradictions, and uncorrected errors. Not only is it impossible to gain a historical understanding of the *fu*

chapter otherwise rich with information and valuable insights—Liu Xiang’s work transliterated as (in the corresponding *pinyin*) *Shuo yuan* 說苑 is translated as “Florilegia (sic) of Persuasions”; correct—if the intended word is indeed “persuasion”—would be *Shui yuan*, corresponding to the standard Japanese reading *Zei’en* for Liu Xiang’s book. (In the same sentence, the translation “New Prefaces” for Liu Xiang’s *Xin xu* 新序 is questionable on two levels. First, *Xin xu shui yuan* may originally have been a single title [“Newly arranged garden of persuasions”]. Second, if taken on its own, *Xin xu* has nothing to do with “prefaces”; instead, it has to be translated as something like “A sequence of new [stories]”). In chapter 28 (p. 528), Yao Nai’s genre category “*shushui*” 書說 (letter and persuasion) is construed as *shushuo* and mistranslated as “letter and discourse.” The mistake is obvious from Yao Nai’s actual selection of pieces under this category.

²² The entertainment function of the early *fu* is often overlooked, although it is repeatedly noted in the sources and fits exactly with the consistently low social status of the *fu* composer at the Western Han court since Emperor Wu’s era. The statement that “entertainment or public declaration did not form a significant part for the purpose of writing” (chapter 43, p. 897) is of course wrong. The early *fu* were decidedly performance texts (*pace* the pronouncement to the opposite on p. 897), as were the ancient songs of the *Shijing* (if one only remembers the famous performance of dancing and singing at the court of Lu 魯 in 544 B.C.).

from any one of the chapters that deal with it; even worse, the reader who actually puts all the pieces together (if there is such a reader beyond the reviewer fulfilling his duties) is left with only confusion.

In finding fault with the presentation of the *fu*, one does not wish to advocate a single, unified account of the genre. As noted above, a multi-layered discussion that opens different historical contexts and conceptual perspectives is precisely the way to go (and fits the editor's expressed goals). Such a discussion would succeed to the extent to which it involves careful communication among the different authors and judicious oversight by the editor; but it falls like a stone where such communication and oversight is missing, and where it is left to the (undergraduate?) reader to make sense of unexplained contradictions. On the whole, the example of the *fu* illustrates well a fundamental misery of CHCL: there is no history in this history of literature. Individual contributors may be blamed for their more extravagant errors; but the larger issue is the idiosyncratic spin Mair puts on its organization and editing.

Apart from organizational issues and obvious mistakes, we would like to address two more problems in this book that purports to be at the cutting-edge: the unreflective use of traditional labels and categories and the strong reliance on what one may call the commonplace version of Chinese literary history. On both issues, the informed reader will find substantial portions of CHCL noticeably undisturbed by recent advances in the field. To begin with labels and categories: how clear are we about terms like "poet-official" (p. 260) or "scholar-writer" (p. 261) in the late third century, and were they in any way similar to "the literati" of Song and "scholar-officials" of later imperial times, as seems suggested by the choice of terms? If not, how did they differ? Why was Sima Xiangru the "court composer par excellence" (p. 231) four hundred years earlier? As far as we can ascertain, none of Sima's *fu* were commissioned; and if there was one "court composer" under the Western Han Emperor Wu, it surely was the entertainer Mei Gao who accompanied his ruler on various occasions and delighted him with impromptu compositions on the spot. Was Sima Xiangru really "elevated to the center of Emperor Wu's court on re-recognition [*sic*] of his literary talent" (p. 231) or otherwise promoted to a distinguished position? Unfortunately not; in fact, not one Western Han *fu* composer gained a high position at court because of his literary merits.²³ In a history of literature, the question to ask, then, is: what does this tell us about the shifting relation between the court and its poets? About the function and status of the poets at court? And how did this change from Sima Xiangru to Yang Xiong (whose *fu*, however critical of his own ruler, seem without exception to have been written on imperial command)? Whatever the period of Chinese literature, it seems always convenient to apply labels like "poet-official" or "court poet." It is far more difficult—and virtually unseen in CHCL—to fill such empty shells with historically specific sociological content (as a serious history of literature would be obliged to do). In this context: was there really such a thing as a "twelfth-century art historian" (p. 479)? Polemically put, where did he get his degree? And Yang Xiong was certainly many different things—for example, a

²³ Here, one may also wonder whether the *fu*, early on, really enjoyed the status of "official court genre" (p. 233; the problem is the undefined word "official").

composer of *fu*, an imperial librarian, and a philosopher—but was he ever a “statesman” (p. 921)? Likewise, was the great scholar, statesman, poet, historian, philosopher, and literary as well as musical thinker Shen Yue 沈約 (441-513) merely a “lay Buddhist poet” (p. 931)? Is it possible to discern any set of meaningful and consistent criteria behind such designations?

A second type of label, no less problematic, that is applied in a number of chapters concerns ideological positions. It seems that “Confucian” (or even “Confucianist”) is used, broadly, for every person associated with the state or the traditional societal order, with the study of the classics or with a certain set of traditional values; occasionally, one gets the feeling of somebody being the registered member of a Confucian church.²⁴ In this simplistic picture (which we really should, and by now can, stop teaching to our undergraduates), Daoism is then the opposite: the frame of mind of anybody not too strenuously interested in office but, as the undergraduate reader may put it, more “into nature” (compare, for example, the superficial employ of these terms throughout Chapter 45). The abuse of such labels extends not only to ideologies and individuals but also to texts, where they quickly, and predictably, collapse in confusion: in the “Introduction,” the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 is labeled “legalistic” (p. 10); in Chapter 43, it is an “eclectic compilation” (p. 896). As quite a few recent studies have shown (see especially Michael Nylan’s extraordinary work), and as is indeed rightly emphasized in the chapter on “Taoist heritage” (pp. 192-93), this kind of labeling is conventional but fruitless, and misleading more often than not.

A third type of label concerns the literary terminology itself. What is the ever-present “lyrical” in the Chinese tradition—anything more than a reference to relatively short poetry? What exactly are “poems in folk style” versus “popular-style poetry” and “folk poems” (Chapter 45, p. 929)? And what would be “epic” about the narrative of the *Mu tianzi zhuan* 穆天子傳 (Chapter 29, p. 545)? Is every *fu* a “rhapsody” (because of its implications of performance, a term particularly felicitous for the Western Han *fu*, but for the same reason also better limited to it)? Is every *yuefu* a “ballad,” as the term is universally translated in CHCL? While it is true that these labels remained stable in the Chinese tradition, a good history of literature would have to historicize and differentiate them, breaking down the illusion of continuous genre identity (another aspect where CHCL fails on its own terms).

The other side of what one might call “the commonplace version of Chinese literary history,” in many respects intertwined with the problems of labeling, is less easily described in detail (because that would entail the retelling of long passages of text). Too many chapters are not exactly “packed” (Mair) with new and precise information but repeat at length general observations that have been available for decades while

²⁴ Consider this line: “Su Shih was a Confucian, but he loved the writings of Chuang Tzu, knew the Buddhist canon well, and included references to both traditions in his poetry. He was a liberal in the old debate about books” (chapter 16, p. 351). “A liberal”? And in which “old debate about books?” The nonsense of such a statement becomes obvious through a simple question: How many Tang and Song “Confucians” were there who did not know the Buddhist canon, or did not enjoy reading Zhuangzi?

neglecting a host of new questions that have indeed emerged from more recent scholarship. In sizable portions of CHCL, far too much is taken for granted without further examination, that is, phenomena such as the circulation of texts, the notion of authorship, the often elusive performative nature of texts, the institutions that foster and censure the production of literary works, the identity of the literary audience, the role of religion in literature, the scope and venues of text circulation at specific times, the relation between classical learning and literary production, and—indeed first of all—the definition of literature within its ever changing specific cultural and historical context. On such issues, the failure of much of CHCL is troubling, and one may think twice before handing the book to friends working in other literary traditions.

Finally, a comment on the romanization scheme used here. Surely everyone who invested energy in this massive project hoped that it would stand the test of time. To that end, then, it would only seem logical to be *forward-looking*, rather than conservative, in such an important question. It may well be that many of the contributors over age 40 or so were first introduced to Western language studies and translations of Chinese via the medium of the Wade-Giles system. And perhaps it may be closer to the IPA (but who uses that except linguists?) than other romanization schemes. Even so, when one surveys the scholarship produced over the two decades on *all* periods and forms of Chinese literature, not just early texts, the great majority uses the *Hanyu pinyin* scheme, which is now the United Nations standard, recognized even in the latest version of *The Far East Chinese-English Dictionary* published in Taiwan. So, too, does the recent revision of Columbia's widely-used *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. Likewise, the Library of Congress and by now most university libraries have made the transition to *Hanyu pinyin* as well. Students in universities around the world see *pinyin* in their language texts, and the increasing number of Chinese nationals in our field have all been familiar with it since elementary school. Why put this barrier between the contents of the *History* and its potential novice—and scholarly—users? Michelle Yeh, in her survey of modern poetry, was forced to transliterate from *pinyin* the names of many poets already known internationally by their names in that spelling.

Theoretically at least, a history like this should go into libraries of institutions that have only elementary language instruction—which will generally be offered by PRC natives who may not be familiar with Wade-Giles romanization and will certainly not be teaching it. To me (Hegel), disregarding this likelihood suggests lack of concern for the bulk of this *History's* readers. It doesn't make any difference to people my age, or to those literature specialists who use secondary materials written with Wade-Giles romanization—we are all familiar with it ourselves. But why confuse students who have traveled to Xi'an and have never seen a map with "Sian" on it? Explaining that you mean "Hsi-an" will not help in this regard, since that never was commonly used. Nor will the syllable by syllable "Romanization Schemes" (which only lists the two, after all), buried at the back of the book. I fear that students not already familiar with the Wade-Giles system will avoid using this *History*, which is truly unfortunate, given the wealth of information it contains in its best chapters.

One final frustration in this regard: even the Wade-Giles system is not used consistently or regularly. *Yimin* becomes *yi-min* and not *i-min* and the name Bai becomes either *Po* or *Pai* at whim (*Po* Chü-yi, and Li *Po*, but *Pai* P'u, despite previous scholarly references to the famous Yuan poet and playwright as *Po* P'u). How simple, and easily justified, it would have been simply to use—consistently—*Hanyu pinyin* as the romanization scheme here! Its avoidance, and its modification, seems as idiosyncratic as the use of the opaque “tricents” (p. 558, for example) in place of the term *li* that has been widely used in scholarly literature for many decades. Both decisions seem to be Mair's attempts to change conventional usage to canonize his own choices, as are his linguists' references to “Literary Sinitic” instead of the more generally comprehensible “classical Chinese” and the indisputably correct but unfamiliar “topolect” for the differing spoken Chinese languages.

In conclusion, one is drawn to make comparisons between this and other reference books that have appeared in English recently. The two most obvious are the two-volume *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, edited by William H. Nienhauser, Jr. (1986 and 1998) and *A Guide to Chinese Literature*, by Wilt L. Idema and Lloyd Haft (originally published in Dutch as *Chinese letterkunde* in 1985, translated and revised by the authors and published by the University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies in 1997). The former does not include modern writings and is arranged like an encyclopedia. Even so, it does have lengthy general essays that address historical trends in major categories of writing. The Idema and Haft volume, although it generally follows a chronological organization, does use “new prisms” to organize its sections to address forms that appeared before the invention of paper, from then until the spread of printed books, and from then until the introduction of Western printing methods. For context, it includes introductory chapters on the “concept of literature,” language, writing, and education, social organization and the social places occupied by literature, and the didactic and political roles for literature up to about 1990. The former totals around 1600 pages; the latter a concise 473. The *Indiana Companion* has been faulted for errors in its first edition (corrections are listed in the second volume), but it provides detailed information on authors and texts that CHCL only mentions in passing. Idema and Haft concentrate on overviews, but they, too, provide synopses of major examples of each form. Both provide useful surveys of secondary material (Idema and Haft devote 140 pages to bibliography, Nienhauser's Vol. 2 has over 300 pages), and the *Companion* is still very useful for its extensive references to primary sources not specifically identified in CHCL. Clearly CHCL is more up to date, in at least some of its essays. And to that extent, it can be very useful. However, it cannot replace, because it does not duplicate, the strengths of these two major reference works.

Furthermore, to measure CHCL against other general studies of the Chinese tradition—and works that are *not* marketed with the label of “history of literature”—is one thing. Its problematic organization—that, ultimately, is responsible for virtually all the problems noted above—becomes more fully apparent if one compares CHCL to histories of literature as we know them from other traditions. There, the genre of literary history has often been the place of the finest scholarship available: a place

where authors rise above and beyond their chosen specializations in order to provide a balanced, comprehensive, and reliable survey of disparate phenomena; a place that accommodates a vast number of texts and genres that become related to one another in a historically meaningful way and recognizable in their change and development over time; a place where the history of texts becomes intertwined with history writ large: the history of cultural, political, social, economic, and religious change; a place where we learn how synchronic and diachronic forces and institutions shape the appearance of texts and genres both individually and as an overall system of literature. Unfortunately, CHCL is not such a place. It is a potpourri of chapters good and bad, disorganized, disjointed, and poorly edited. A number of individual chapters must be given to students as competent, occasionally brilliant, summaries on specific topics. Other chapters should be accompanied by careful instruction, distinguishing what is valuable and reliable from what is idiosyncratic, superficial, or just startlingly wrong. As a whole, however, a history of literature this book is not.