

Literary Information in China: A History. Edited by Jack W. Chen, Anatoly Detwyler, Xiao Liu, Christopher M. B. Nugent, and Bruce Rusk. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. Pp. xxxii + 638. \$90.00.

A solid tome of over 650 pages comprising fifty-eight chapters by fifty-seven separate contributors and weighing 2.5 lbs., *Literary Information in China: A History* sets out to meet a number of important goals. First, this seeks to bring Chinese literary studies up to date with other new reference books on the history of information compiled with reference primarily to European traditions, using the concept of information from engineering and computation to expand the realm of the humanities. To that end, this collection demonstrates how information in China has been conceived, controlled, and transmitted from the early Zhou period to the present day. Its investigations of literary information are thorough although not exhaustive; they are clearly argued and representative of a variety of approaches to this field of inquiry. This volume was not intended to circumscribe or exhaust this avenue to understanding; instead it lays essential groundwork for future research by setting a very high standard for clarity of thinking and awareness of the crucial details of the Chinese literary tradition. Many of its chapters do so by contrasts of premodern vs. modern or Chinese vs. European types of knowledge and the control and management thereof. Moreover, its contributors take great pains to write clearly, fully explaining any technical terms that they use. In this they hope to address readers with no background as well as scholars in various fields of Chinese and information management studies. Its success in these areas should guarantee a place for this volume in every academic library, in the personal collections of China specialists, and on the shelves of historians of information, as well as at the fingertips of Chinese library collection bibliographers.

Literary Information begins with a Preface and an Introduction that explain fully what is meant by information in this context. From the outset, contributors demonstrate that the digital world of the present is not at all unique in being “an information age.” Readers of other times have faced startling new amounts of information that required innovation in its management; perhaps the most obvious examples include as printing spread in China during the Song and then early in the twentieth century as scholars and publishers came to grips with the flood of Western knowledge then being translated into Chinese. In large part, this volume addresses the forms and perceptions that informed Chinese responses to similar perceived floods of information throughout China’s recorded history. The collectively written Introduction describes “information” variously as something that can be exchanged, that which by its structure signifies difference from its context, and the reality of which resides in its recognition by a human mind.

This cognition is largely a function of how the information is organized and managed (example: what a bibliography includes and how it is organized provides “information *about* information,” p. 475; original emphasis). Consequently, the various chapters here explore in illuminating detail just how information was controlled and distributed in a range of formats through time.

Instead of “texts” (that involve the interaction of individual reader and work), entries here examine “documents” that depend for meaning on their contexts in systems of organization; a document is both “a unit *and* a structure of information” (p. xxvi; emphasis mine). Literary texts are thus investigated through their organizational schemes; the content, whether literary, philosophical, or political, is largely irrelevant to these discussions of how information has been structured in written (and, more recently, digital) formats, how it was stored, retrieved, and transmitted through time and across space. In other words, “we focus on the development of the forms by which literary writings are collected and fragmented, how these forms vary in function and practice, and what a history of these forms tells us about the Chinese literary tradition” (p. xxvi).

As one might expect, “literature” here indicates a range of written materials (see p. 501). Literary aesthetics, or even originality, are of little concern here; instead, separate chapters take up such non-primary texts as anthologies, collectanea, commentaries, histories, and reference books produced before the twentieth century—and modern serial publications and internet literature of more recent decades. Essays here situate documents in their contexts: why they were produced, who were the intended audiences, and what organizing schemes they developed. An essential question has to do with the framework in which information was presented. How was the reader intended to find information within a document: their classification and indexing schemes. A number of chapters also follow the circulation and storage of documents. These concepts of information, document, and management do not necessarily correspond to specific traditional Chinese terms, no more than do the essays here correspond to the usual (premodern or modern) divisions into genres or even into separate literary forms. (Even the conception of “literature” is of modern application to the Chinese writing tradition, the editors remind us in their Introduction (p. xxiii). But the editors, and the contributors, take great pains to show how these non-native concepts elucidate the development of China’s rich literary traditions.

One might say that, strictly speaking, *Literary Information in China: A History* is not a “history,” or at least not one history; each of its sections in all three parts are organized roughly chronologically rather than constituting a single, more conventional, historical narrative throughout. Chapters are divided among three major categories: word, document, and collection; entries build logically from the

smallest item of information to the largest. Interestingly, this organization does not necessarily correspond to chronological order of the development of concepts of information and its management. Instead, the logic behind the sequencing of chapters is obvious from the first major division of its entries.

Section 1A (i.e., Part I, Section A) is devoted to graphs, script reforms, indexing systems, and character input. This section begins by analysing individual graphs (*zi* 字, characters), traditionally seen as consisting of form or shape (*xing* 形), pronunciation (*sheng* 聲), and meaning (*yi* 義). Here the basic terminology of descriptive linguistics serves to describe graphs as representing morphemes or units of meaning. This explains the *de* 的 of Modern Chinese as indicating a grammatical relationship rather than constituting a “word” in itself. Chapter 2 moves on to the Han and then to the twentieth century in tracing the institutional changes in script reforms and modern attempts to alphabetize the Chinese graphs. Curiously, the National Alphabet of the Republican government, *Zhuyin fuhao* 注音符號 (colloquially known as the *bopomofo*), is not mentioned in this section but only in reference to Readers’ Guides (p. 192).

Subsequent chapters here take up their further representations in “phonograms” (i.e., the *fanqie* 反切 system, p. 65), multiple Romanized forms, their organization in reference books, and the technology of inputting them into digital systems. In terms of their management, chapters here address the organization of those graphs in communication, including what we might consider as grammar (descriptive grammar—what people actually say/write, not prescriptive grammar, which is “proper” usage). Annotation and commentary bring together information on the graph and document levels. Section 1B addresses lexicons, the abstract representation of characters in rime tables, and various schemes for organizing modern dictionaries; 1C explores textual divisions (sentences, paragraphs, couplets, stanzas, and punctuation schemes) in both verse and prose. Section 1D addresses the development and spread of textual commentaries and modern readers’ guides.

Other parts of this volume are similarly divided to small categories. Part II deals with what has been considered documents through time: Section A with anthologies, B with encyclopedias, and C with histories. Each of these categories of writings selects, manages, and even edits documents of varying lengths, from brief quotations to full texts of poems and the like; they place their chosen documents in juxtaposition, or in some other context in accordance with, one of many criteria: age, genre, form, theme, or function (e.g., pedagogical, religious, and especially political in the imperial compilations).

Part III, the shortest, is “Information Management at the Level of the Collection,” with chapters on libraries and archives (Section A), bibliographies and indices (Section B), and, finally, serial publications (Section C). Some are

repositories of textual, virtual, or both kinds of documents. Most are organized by theme. This section brings home the proposition that a full understanding of information in its original context cannot be separated from an appreciation of how the medium in which it appeared was preserved and circulated; once again, organization schemes become a key element in how information, literary information in this volume, is meant to be utilized and comprehended.

Interestingly enough, this three-tiered presentation of information in *Literary Information* parallels closely that of the “Jiaochoulüe” 校讎略, or “Bibliographical summary” chapter, in *Tongzhi* 通志 (Universal treatise) compiled by Zheng Qiao 鄭樵 (1104–1162). About Zheng’s organization scheme, Stefano Gandolfo comments, “By dividing all fields of knowledge in three levels of increasing precision, the organization had a systematicity that was designed to facilitate the search and retrieval of texts” (p. 492). Although they critiqued Zheng’s choices of main sections, the Qing-period compilers of the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 still adopted his tripartite framework with the granularity in its numerous independent entries on the most specific level. Indeed, *Literary Information* is itself a highly effective model of organized information.

Individual chapters here vary in their approach and involve several academic disciplines. Some provide concise historical surveys; others elucidate one or two instantiations of the format they explore. Chapter 6 traces the development of rime tables; Chapter 38 gives a finely detailed description of the dynastic histories compiled during the Tang and Song. Of this second category, Chapter 16 focuses on the commentaries attached to *Chu ci* 楚辭 and *Wenxuan* 文選. Chapter 22 primarily discusses the *Tangshi sanbaishou* 唐詩三百首 collection. Chapter 26 addresses only two collections of dramatic texts, *Yuanqu xuan* 元曲選 (1615–1616), which presents *zaju* 雜劇 plays as literature, and the 1764 collection *Zhuibaiqiu* 綴白裘, its selections serving as texts about *chuanqi* 傳奇 performance (p. 266). Chapter 31 explores only three major encyclopedias, *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽, *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記, and the *Yongle dadian* 永樂大典. Chapter 54, on modern literary collections, focuses on the work of Wang Yunwu 王雲五 (1888–1979).

Literary Information is heavily laden with important insights, some of which we may well have known but now, in this new context, must see differently and as more central to our understanding of Chinese cultural traditions. The rules of prosody “increase the informational complexity” of traditional verse (p. 121). Less seriously, Confucius, for the work attributed to him in editing classic texts, is “the patron sage of literary information” (p. 207). Twentieth-century anthologies of drama were more about canonizing dramatists than plays (p. 282). Encyclopedias began in Europe after the introduction of printing; *leishu* began in China far earlier

with the increasing use of paper (p. 292). Imperial encyclopedias such as the *Yongle dadian* succeeded in “granting legitimacy to mundane knowledge” (p. 317). Chapter 33 notes that the imperial *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 collection project was a response to the *Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今圖書集成 that sought to avoid the fragmentary nature of texts cited in the earlier compilation (pp. 324–26). The later dynastic histories vary from their predecessors in types of information available to the compilers, making a shift in the nature of the *zhengshi* 正史 (pp. 384–85). Literary histories written in Chinese initially followed the Japanese model but around the turn of the twentieth century, the term *wenxue* 文學 was understood as educational, making it logical for editors and readers to consider “literature” as didactic, for pedagogical purposes (p. 404). Readers of literature are declining in this increasingly technological age—as literary museums increasingly function to simplify the images of major writers (p. 448). Digital indexes and concordances cannot fully duplicate all of the usefulness of their printed counterparts (pp. 514–16). And finally, despite their generally unprofessional practitioners and constant revisions, “web-based serials lack neither literary merit nor social relevance” (p. 574).

Most of these separate essays are the work of noted scholars in these several areas, although not a few were written by very promising younger scholars. All entries are primarily based on the most recent research and interpretation and every one is highly informative. The five editors ostensibly collaborated on the excellent Introduction, and each one participated in crafting the very helpful introductory remarks for each of the three parts of this volume and for its many sections. These brief explanations and the chapters are remarkably seamless in style and organization, as if produced by a single hand. Although individual essays vary in approach, each is an important contribution in its own right. Sufficient overlap in definitions and frequent cross-references allow reading individual chapters in any sequence or one at a time. Both techniques would be informative, although reading through the entire volume is tremendously rewarding as a way to comprehend how information was conceived, recorded, and transmitted in the enormous body of documents that constitute Chinese literature through time. *Literary Information in China: A History* is an excellent reference book; its separate indexes allow quick access to all personal names and to the documents, publications, and electronic resources mentioned throughout its text. In summary, this compilation richly deserves wide attention; it seems destined to inspire, or perhaps to provoke, a wave of new research using its insights.

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