

# Chinese Literature An Introduction

BY IHOR PIDHAINY

ANN ARBOR, MI: ASSOCIATION FOR ASIAN STUDIES; NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017

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Reviewed by Fred Lindstrom

**I**n the early aughts, I found myself at a new school, wondering once again what high school world literature is, why its canon seems so static, and why so many of my colleagues across all disciplines often think of world literature primarily in terms of the immigrant experience.

I was not the only one asking questions. Students arriving from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea pointed out that although they all studied classics of East Asian poetry, close reading of their modern national literature was often not an essential part of the curriculum— with the exception of Lu Xun in mainland China. These students seemed to view the study of fiction as a peculiar Western tradition. They regard English translations of East Asian poetry as naïve; they absolutely howl at Ezra Pound’s translations from *Cathay*. Privately, they express appreciation that we read Amy Tan, but point out that although Asian-American literature may reflect some aspects of East Asian tradition, they see the immigrant experience as profoundly different from their own. They also see our high regard for many translated works of world literature, and not a few have wondered aloud when might they see their literature afforded similar attention in American classrooms.

Assuming one wishes to incorporate Chinese literature in translation in a high school literature class, a teacher faces at least two formidable obstacles. First, it is very likely that they have only a passing understanding of Chinese history and culture, and second, that they have almost no idea how to access reliable translations of Chinese texts. Where does one even begin?

Ihor Pidhainy’s *Chinese Literature: An Introduction*, a slim volume of 110 pages, offers a clear and concise overview of Chinese literature from 1250 BCE to the end of the twentieth century. It is an ideal source for anyone who hopes to explore the literary traditions of China.

Pidhainy, then an assistant professor in the history department of the University of West Georgia, presents a methodically ordered, wide-ranging, and succinct historical review of Chinese literature. Detailed chapter titles and subtitles signal the passage of time, historical developments, and cultural shifts, as well as the appearance of new literary schools and iconic masterworks, and, when relevant, biographical information about individual authors.

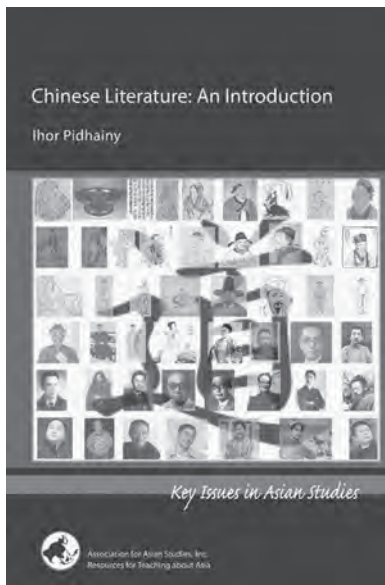
In this text, intended for university students taking a survey course in Chinese literature or as a resource for secondary school social studies or world literature teachers, Pidhainy provides a fast-moving, logical, and tantalizing read. He anchors his project historically, offering a quick yet authoritative historical context for his readers, providing only the clearest, most efficient, and most relevant introductory material. One of the most useful features of Pidhainy’s project, a timeline of Chinese history, appears in the opening pages of his work, to which I referred throughout my reading. As someone with no formal education in Chinese history, I appreciated Pidhainy’s thumbnail sketches, as they reinforced or expanded my understanding of the topic while also stimulating a hunger to learn more.

“Restraint” is a watchword of the text. Reading *Chinese Literature: An Introduction* for the first time, one is never at risk of being overwhelmed, and literature remains the primary focus.

Entries are brief and direct. Each time he introduces a new writer, Pidhainy provides an illustrative quotation from his or her works. These excerpts provide a taste of the writer’s themes and style. For those of us concerned about the quality, spirit, or authenticity of a translation, Pidhainy’s detailed notes for each chapter provide bibliographical information of authoritative scholarly criticism and translations—works that might be appropriate for inclusion on your reading list or your school library.

Pidhainy begins with the history of written language in “the Middle Kingdom.” He explains the roots of the language are Tibetan and Chinese (a detail that might be useful for anyone wondering about China’s policies toward Tibet in the last fifty years) and dispels the misunderstanding that Mandarin script is pictographic. He reminds us that there are over 80,000 characters and that a general reader can get by with 7,000—a detail that never fails to provoke wonderment and deep reflection on the puzzle of language, language acquisition, and instruction.

Pidhainy anchors his survey in recent archaeological discoveries that highlight the way that earliest writing was linked to the practice of divination. He presents helpful illustrations of evidence unearthed only in the 1920s and ‘30s of writing cut into the surface of turtle plastrons or the shoulder bones of



Ihor Pidhainy.

buffalo. These oracle bones vividly illustrate the connection between writing and the divine; they also bring to life the human impulses to both record and anticipate history.

He also emphasizes the impact of technological developments of the language of the Chinese peoples, such as the inventions of paper and printing, the typewriter, and the word processor.

*Chinese Literature: An Introduction* is also rich in illustrations. As might be expected, Pidhainy provides drawings or paintings of the old masters, as well as photographs of twentieth-century writers. More significantly, he provides many illustrations of the texts themselves, emphasizing an essential element of tradition of writing in China, where the technical mastery and personal style of an author's way with a brush or pen is as much a signifier of a writer's skill as her voice and content. Two standouts are reproductions of Wang Xizhi's *Preface to the Collection of Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion* (*Lantingjing Xu*) and the trigrams of the *I Ching*. The first became a model for all serious calligraphers to master, and the second stands in sharp contrast to Wang's flowing, airy text—geometric, rigid as iron, an enigmatic roar.

Pidhainy emphasizes early connections between religion and writing, stressing the influence of Daoism and Buddhism on literature and the purpose of writing. One of his most thought-provoking revelations is that the most exhaustive writing on classical literary theory, Liu Xie's *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, is deeply rooted in a Buddhist worldview. Contemporary readers can see this world surface yet again in modern and contemporary works such as Jin Yong's (Louis Cha) *Legend of the Condor Heroes* or Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*.

Some of the most helpful overviews he presents focus on the early classics of the BCE eras, such as *The Five Classics: The Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing*), *The Classic of History* (*Shujing*), *The Classic of Changes* (*Yijing*), *The Book of Ritual* (*Yiji*), and *The Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqi*), especially as he explains how each influenced later poets. Pidhainy's descriptions are even-handed, yet when he presents a number of texts together, he provides

enough evidence to indicate those that will be most useful to the modern reader.

From the pre-Tang dynasty forward, Pidhainy makes clear that poets and poetry embodied the highest status in literature and the arts. He showcases nature poets of the pre-Tang, the palace poetry of the Liang, and finally the great poets of the Tang: Wang Wei, Li Bai, Du Fu, and Bai Jiyu.

Pidhainy takes special care to draw attention to Li Qingzhao as the first female poet of note. Indeed, one of the great features of *Chinese Literature: An Introduction* is the attention Pidhainy brings to the works and influence of female writers throughout Chinese history, who first flourished in the Ming and Qing dynasties. He returns later in the twentieth century to laud the writings of modern female writers such as the political gadfly Ding Ling, cosmopolitan Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang), and the experimental artist par excellence, Can Xue. Though there are many more female Chinese writers whose work has been slowly emerging in English translation, Pidhainy's introduction to these outstanding writers remains a significant contribution to the text.

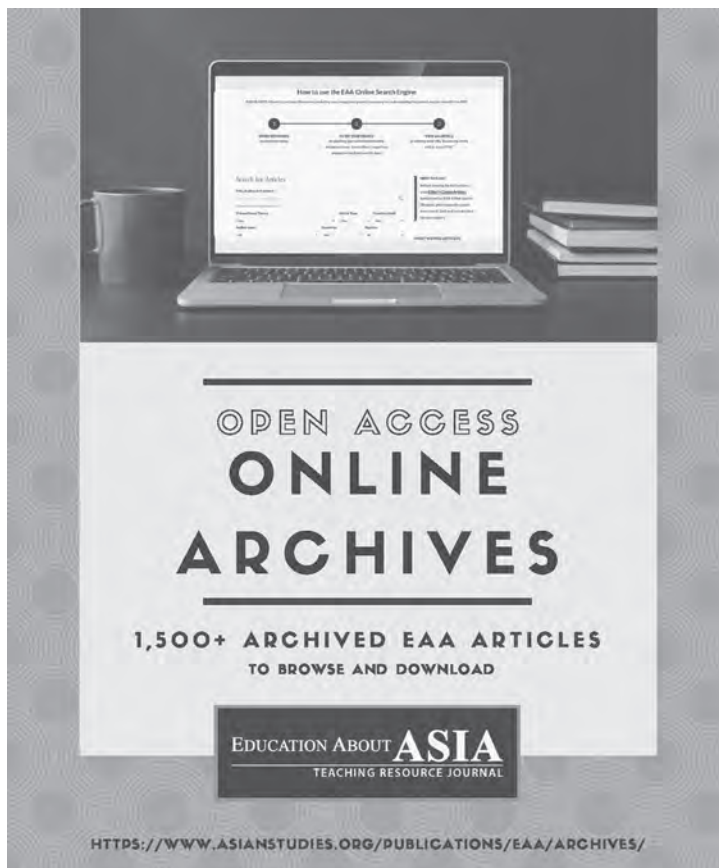
Pidhainy's treatments of the Ming and Qing dynasties are especially rich. It was in the Ming period that novels first appeared, with exemplars like *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin*, and *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. Pidhainy provides a summary of each and then dives more deeply into the iconic *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Journey to the West*, both of which continue to delight modern audiences in China and throughout the world, with new translations appearing with great frequency.

These same periods feature the development of theater in China. Pidhainy introduces *The Story of the Lute*, *The Peony Pavilion*, and *Four Cries of the Gibbon*. One unexpected treat in *Chinese Literature: An Introduction* is Pidhainy's repeated citation of the influence of folklore, especially as it appears in traditional Chinese opera and theater. He also discusses how twentieth-century propagandists coopted the traditions of opera and theater, but highlights the work of playwrights who managed to claw back their medium and their voices using daring, inventive performances to call out the injustices they witnessed. In addition, in the closing pages of his text, Pidhainy muses over the dynamic interplay between novels, theater, and modern Chinese cinema—especially the work of Zhang Yimou. One hopes that he might explore this theme in a future publication.

Not surprisingly, Pidhainy ends his survey with a discussion of the works of the first and second Chinese authors to earn a Nobel Prize for literature: Guo Xingjian, who won in 1989 for *Soul Mountain*, and Mo Yan, who won in 2012 for *Red Sorghum*.

As someone who has been studying modern Chinese novels in translation from the twentieth century to the present, Pidhainy's *Chinese Literature: An Introduction* is an especially useful resource. I find his writing on modern Chinese drama to be especially productive, as he has introduced me to a number of writers and works with which I was previously totally unfamiliar. Likewise, he has revealed to me several twentieth-century Chinese authors I should know more about, and he has finally inspired me to read *The Water Margin*! Find yourself a copy of Ihor Pidhainy's *Chinese Literature: An Introduction*. It is an ideal starting place for anyone who is beginning to explore the marvelous world of Chinese literature. ♦

FRED LINDSTROM is an Upper School English Teacher at Dana Hall School in Wellesley, Massachusetts. He teaches works by Asian and Asian American authors to his students as part of his ninth grade course. As part of his AP Literature and Composition class, he teaches a segment "Women at the Edge." The course focuses on writing by and about women. Students are required to write on a core selection of short stories including Xi Xi's "A Woman Like Me." In a second unit, students are allowed to choose from a list of curated stories, write about those texts, and should time permit, present those stories and their findings to their classmates.



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