

# A Guide to Chinese Literature

By Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft

MICHIGAN MONOGRAPHS IN CHINESE STUDIES, VOL. 74  
ANN ARBOR: CENTER FOR CHINESE STUDIES  
THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN, 1997  
XI + 301 PAGES + BIBLIOGRAPHY + INDEX

Originally written as a series of lectures, Professor Wilt Idema published a version of this book in Dutch in 1985, and Lloyd Haft translated it into English. The present edition, coauthored by Idema and Haft, is an extensively revised and expanded version of the earlier one bringing the discussion of modern Chinese literature up into the early 1990s. As might be expected in any work endeavoring to address 3,000 years of Chinese literature in 300 pages and 28 chapters, much of the *Guide* reads like a catalogue of famous authors and their works. A detailed table of contents offers the reader a synopsis of the genres, works, and authors elaborated in the text, as well as an outline of the development of Chinese literature.

The *Guide* is an excellent resource for teachers and students in survey courses on Chinese literature. In addition, Part I of the *Guide*, a thorough introduction to the Chinese concept of literature and its role in society, is essential reading for students participating in specialized seminars on the various genres of Chinese literature, traditional or modern. This part occupies approximately one quarter of the main text. Here the authors succinctly contrast Western and Chinese views of literature, describe the social milieu in terms of education and literacy, and summarize the relationship between the state and literature.

The central Confucian literary tradition is portrayed as a hermeneutic circle of patronage and censorship by the state, which eventually leads to the proclivity of readers to find allegorical meaning in every work. The authors explain that literature is thought to be a reflection of the Way (Dao), and thus represents a criticism of contemporary government insofar as it reflects the state of society, be it in order or chaos (47). This section of the text will stimulate a plethora of ideas for research into Chinese literature at any level. Furthermore, the *Guide* should occupy a prominent place on the reading list of graduate students preparing for their comprehensive exams.

The *Guide* is formed of six major parts. Parts II through VI compose a chronological discussion of the history of Chinese literature from the Zhou Dynasty through the 1990s. A glance at the titles for each part marks what the authors view as five general stages of literary development: "Part II: From the Earliest Times to the Invention of Paper"; "Part III: From the Invention of Paper to the Spread of Book Printing"; "Part IV: From the Spread of Book Printing to the Introduction of Western Printing Methods"; "Part V: The Transition to Modern Literature (1875–1915)"; and "Part VI: Modern Literature (1915–1990)." Each part methodically addresses the political history of the

stage, the cultural changes that affected literature, the changing configuration of genres, and then introduces the most important authors and works. Because there is frequently a close synchronic association between the political history and literary forms that emerge over time, the selection of these five stages of development as an organizing principle seems rather unnecessary, particularly considering that there is little attempt to relate the stage of development to the development of a genre or theme in literature. Choosing a standard chronological classification system would not have markedly altered the authors' presentation.

With the exception of Part I, there is very little analysis in the text. However, the occasional discussion in Parts II through VI is consistently balanced in juxtaposition to the literary history and catalogue of notes on the important writers and works. This balance makes the text highly readable despite the minimal space devoted to any particular topic. The assumed audience of the *Guide* is of course a Western one, and thus the authors consciously refer back to the expectations of the Western reader in order to highlight the contrast between Chinese and Western literature. For examples, Idema and Haft point out that the poetic genres *shi* and *yuefu* address a wide variety of themes, from government life, friendship, brevity of life, to the insignificance of humans in the grander cosmos. In contrast to Western literary history, the authors note: "An epic, in the sense of a poem born of a chivalric culture and praising the military feats of heroes, could not arise in China because the Central Tradition always regarded the use of force as inferior to the transforming power of true virtue" (116).

The reader who already has general familiarity with the literary history of China will find the *Guide* a remarkably coherent and comprehensive treatment of the many themes, works and developments in Chinese literature presented in a short space. This work is a natural cross-reference to more detailed monographs like *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*. In fact, the *Guide* supplements this work with the inclusion of chapters on modern Chinese literature. However, like most academic works at this stage of modern Chinese literary studies in the West, the *Guide* does not address extraordinarily popular genres of modern fiction such as Jin Yong's knight errant novels (*wuxia xiaoshuo*).

Although the text lacks the reference notes that would be expected in a more specialized work, every chapter is accompanied by an extensive bibliography of works in Western languages arranged variously by theme, author, or text. The bibliography itself runs to 143 pages. There are no characters within the text proper, but the index is also a glossary of Chinese characters for the names, titles and terms referenced. Used in conjunction with the detailed table of contents, the *Guide* will serve well to direct the reader/researcher through the vast maze of Chinese literature. ■

Paul Foster

PAUL B. FOSTER wrote his dissertation on Lu Xun and the national character discourse in modern China and is presently teaching Chinese in the International Baccalaureate Program at North Atlanta High School.