A Guide to Chinese Literature

By Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft

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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 and further reading.

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 example, 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 in 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.

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