A Comparative Study of the Compilation of Classical Chinese Literary History between China and the Anglophone World

Peina Zhuang andYawson Edward Joseph

College of Literature and Journalism, Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

ABSTRACT
This paper discusses and compares the compilation features of Chinese literary history both at home and in the Anglophone world. Throughout the one hundred-year’s long history of compilation; first, from self-exploration to the later turning to others for reference, until today’s continuous innovating has not been without failure, but the efforts towards an unrealizable “perfect literature history” have never ceased. The compilation and research of literature history generally presents a spiraling upward trend, presenting the overall characteristics of “gradual change,” or the so-called “keeping the right and showing the new” by Yuan Xingpei. Comparatively, the compilation process of the English versions of literary history displays an obvious stage-by-stage feature, making it fractured and independent from each other. Thus, both sides can learn from each other. For instance, compilation in the Anglophone world can draw on the domestic versions in order to substantiate the historical materials and promote in-depth analysis.

KEYWORDS
history of Chinese literature; concept of literature; concept of literary history; comparison

CONTACT Peina Zhuang  alison19831208@163.com College of Literature and Journalism, Sichuan University, No. 234 Room, Wenke Building, Wangjiang Campus, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

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1930s that gave rise to the first upsurge in the compilation of literary history, the collective compilation mode that advocated catering to the needs of the people, nationalities and classes with ideological characteristics in the 1950s and 1960s, all the way down to the proposal of the slogan of “rewriting literary history” in the 1980s. The past three decades since the coinage of this slogan have especially witnessed "heated discussion on this topic in the academic community with an improved ‘theoretical consciousness’ and an expanded ‘horizon for problem’" (Chen 273), which has changed into a dizzying level in number, frequency, and scale of publication of compilations with new content and genres, thus leading to the second upsurge of domestic literary history writing.

During this period, the literary history continued to maintain a strong momentum in terms of the number of publications, and the compilation scale was far larger than that of the previous literary history. For example, four volumes of the history of Chinese literature compiled by Yuan Xingqi, twelve volumes of the general history of Chinese literature compiled by Zhang Jiong, and eighteen volumes of the chronicle of Chinese literature edited by Chen Wenxin, all of which have adopted the cooperative form, occupying experts and scholars in various fields, and thus ensuring the breadth and depth of the contents of the multi-volume literary history.

What’s more, it has also witnessed the more diversified compilation genre. In addition to continuing the adoption of the earlier popular modes based on chronology, biography and others, scholars pay more and more attention to the mode of constructing literary history by stylistic division, such as The Transformation History of Chinese Literary Style in the Past 100 years (1999) that divides the whole book into five volumes: novel, poem, drama, prose and criticism, a case similar to the recent Victor Mair’s Columbia Chinese literary history. So “separately, each volume is also a history of fiction, a history of new poetry, or a history of modern prose, etc., but the ‘logical structure’ and the thought expounded are quite different from the earlier compiled history of fiction, new poetry or modern prose, telling us things that the same kind of literature history has not talked about before or are impossible to discuss in the past paradigm” (Dong 160). However, the above unique writing style of literary history reflects the change of the concept of literature prior to this period. Compilers pay more and more attention to a literary history on its own rather than as a reflection of society and culture. That is, literary history is “the history of literature.”

In addition, the introduction of a unique perspective in literary history compilation may be found with those compiled by Zhang Peiheng and Yang Yi. Zhang’s A New History of Chinese Literature takes humanity as the clue for the development of literature, holding that the charm of literary works lies in arousing the readers’ emotions and endowing them with aesthetic enjoyment by means of certain artistic forms, both of which cannot do without considering the development of humanity: “The most fundamental driving force for the continuous enrichment and improvement of artistic forms is the continuous development of humanity. The consequent enrichment, delicacy, intensity of feelings and the sharper conflicts between emotions require and promote corresponding adjustments in expression forms” (Zhang and Luo 15). Although scanning the development of literature by way of humanity sometimes limits its discussion, its analysis based on the awakening degree of individual consciousness in different periods offers new inspiration, providing another possibility for the construction of Chinese literature
history. Yang Yi, on the other hand, turns to the long ignored spatial dimension in the compilation of literary history and puts forward the concept of “literary geography,” in order to investigate “the experience process of our national community formation in literature by way of adopting a broad concept of literature” (Yang 129), which can be divided into four aspects of regional culture, family culture, the writer’s life track, and the transfer of cultural center. All these aspects are rarely discussed in the compilation of the current literary history, which may provide a new direction for the future compilation, so as to substitute the feature of the single planarized time dimension by one with three dimensions and on-the-spot sense.

Finally, there is an emphasis on the attribute of “history” and the exploration of the law of “history” in the compilation of literary history, putting forward that literary history encompasses not only the display of writers’ works, but also the search for the relationship between these works: “The literary history is a science of history and its object is the regularity in the development of literature . . . Some compilers and researchers of literary history do not distinguish the research objects and scope of literary history from those of literary works. They limit their research to the four aspects: the background of the times, the life of the writers, the ideological nature of the works and the artistry of the works” (Fan 117). It is not a real literary history, for which some scholars have further elaborated the differences among literary theory, literary history and literary criticism in order to clarify the nature and scope of the concept of literary history.

On the whole, the compilation and research of domestic literature history in this period has the following characteristics. First of all, it pays attention to the reproduction and balance of the two important dimensions of literature history, that is, literature and history, in order to avoid a one-sided situation. For example, we should not neglect the research and comment on literary writers’ works because of the overemphasis on the law of “history”: “It is not convincing to emphasize only the study of ‘law’ and ‘integrity’ of literary history, and even to exclude the study of writers, works, schools, literary history chronology from the study of Chinese literary history” (Deng 278). After all, the so-called law of literature is based on the collection and analysis of a large number of historical materials such as literary works, while the lack of analysis of writers’ works with the goal of identifying the law does not belong to the category of literary history in a strict sense.

Moreover, it adopts a dialectic view concerning objectivity and subjectivity. For example, Liu Dajie’s edition of literary history, influenced by Lanson’s view of literary history, declares at the beginning of the work that the book truly reflects the development process of Chinese literature, and the word ‘truly’ implies his pursuit of scientific objectivity in the compilation. Nowadays, scholars pay more attention to the construction and diversity of literary history from the perspective of the editors’ subjectivity, but such diversity is not equal to randomness, but has a lot to do with the nature of “literature” itself in a history: “The diversity of literary history works is partly due to the integration of several interrelated qualities of literary works: the outermost layer is the form of language combination, i.e. style; the display of image and scene; certain meaning and thoughts encoded in the image and scene; and the most uncertain is the meaning produced in reading . . . Literary historians will consciously or unconsciously focus on the evolution of a certain level in constructing a literary history” (Yuan 34), which leads to the creation of general literature history, dynastic history, thematic history, etc. Even if it is only the general history of literature discussed in this paper, it will be individualized
because of different writing styles, choices of historical materials, perspectives, levels of emphasis, and acceptance of the meaning of the works, which eventually make it unique in the history of literature.

Finally, although there are some differences in the selected works in the compilation, they are similar with a high coincidence rate of selected writers and works and tend to be stable on the whole. The differences lie in the chosen perspectives and narrative methods. In addition, the translation and introduction of literary history has attracted a certain degree of attention, paying attention to the translation of not only the Chinese literary history compiled by foreign scholars, but also representative domestically compiled ones. Zhang Peiheng’s literary history has been translated into Japanese and English, which has changed the unequal one-directional status of translation for a long time from foreign languages into Chinese, so as to truly realize the two-way reference and study of literary history compilation. In particular, the Japanese version of literary history has been translated into Chinese again and again, which had a profound influence in the compilation in the 1950s’ period. However, at present, most of the authoritative domestic literary histories are large in length, and their translations and introductions cannot be completed overnight, which may constitute an objective reason for the lack of translation of domestic literary history to foreign countries.

Throughout the one hundred-year’s long history of compilation, that is, first from self-exploration, then the later turning to others for reference, until today’s continuous innovating, the efforts towards a “perfect literature history” have never ceased. The compilation and research of literature history generally presents a spiraling upward trend, presenting the overall characteristics of “gradual change,” or the so-called “keeping the right and showing the new” by Yuan Xingpei. The innovation of literary history is not based on completely abandoning or denying the traditional practice of literary history compilation, but on the basis of integrating the compiler’s own view of literary history. As an example, take the periodization of literary history with its “limited” innovation while inheriting some development. The representative works in the early and middle period of domestic compilation roughly divided the literary history into the ancient, the middle ancient, the modern and the contemporary periods based on the development of literature itself so as to replace the standard of division mainly by dynasty. Such a mode is applied to the compilation of literary history again after the different adjustment in the new period. For example, Zhang Peiheng’s work divides the literary history into the ancient, the middle, the modern, and contemporary periods. The middle age is further divided into the beginning, the expansion and the innovating periods, and the modern age, into the germination, the frustrated, the revival, the wandering and the transformation stages. The thought of “the close connection between the development of humanity and the development of literature” is always adhered to in the literary summary in each period. Yuan Xingfu’s dual perspective of “three ancient ages and seven sections” is another modification of periodization on the basis of dynasty division. Therefore, the new period tends to use a variety of perspectives and methods while at the same time taking the advantages of chronology, biography, narrative and so on – an intangible heritage left to future generations after years of practice in the previous compilation. Moreover, with the development of the compilation, the study of literary history as an object has attracted more and more attention. The history compiled by Dong Naibin is a summary review and refinement of the compilation history. However, the process of
writing the history of literature in the Anglophone world, despite a hundred years’ history, presents a totally different picture, featuring “sudden change” compared to the process domestically.

Although the English compilation in each period has its own merits, it has been directly or indirectly dominated by western literary criticism, which even influenced the compilation by the Chinese people at that time. Giles’s Chinese literary history is an attempt to construct the literary history of other nations in the context of the gradual enhancement of western national consciousness and the prevalence of historicism in the 19th century, deeply influenced by Taine’s theory of race, age and environment. His history presents the characteristics of the broad concept of literature and consideration of marginal literature, which were also found in Huang Ren’s history. Huang’s history is one of the earliest published literary histories in China, which has received higher praise than other editions at the same time: “Under the background of the input of western modern humanities and national literary history academic system, which kind of Chinese literary history is the most pioneer in the modern transformation of literary concept, literary history concept, literary history narrative position and literary history research method, so as to play a more active role in the construction of early literary history. Undoubtedly, among the three earliest works of literary history, Huang Ren’s history of Chinese literature is the most representative” (Chen 49). At that time, his “concept of the world and the thought of homogeneity” undoubtedly had an obvious pioneering significance, and the emphasis on opera and novel in the compilation and also the inclusion of character and calligraphy were quite similar to that of Giles. Huang’s concept of literature and the historical view are not produced out of nothing, but is the result of drawing from the resources of western literary criticism combined with the characteristics of Chinese literature itself. The definition of literature and the unified standard of “truth, goodness and beauty” are mostly from the discussion on literature by Oda Shano, whose ideas were influenced by western literary criticism. Therefore, Oda Shano plays an “intermediary” role of transmitting western literary theory in Huang’s formation of related concepts in his compilation. Furthermore, Huang Ren also examined the influence of the theory of evolution introduced by Yan Fu on the development of Chinese literature.

There are two kinds of literary history compilers in the 1950s’s period: sinologists and Chinese American scholars. To some extent, the literary history compiled by the latter was influenced by the mainstream trend of thought in domestic literary history. For example, Chen Shouyi clearly points out the important role of Hu Shi’s literary view in his compilation in the foreword. Zhu Ziqing regarded the literary history compiled by Hu Shi, Zheng Zhenduo and Liu Dajie as the most unique and representative ones in this period. The prominent features of the latter three literary histories mainly include: emphasizing the role and position of folk literature in the literary history, such as Hu Shi’s praise of vernacular literature and his view that vernacular literature is the center of Chinese literature; attaching importance to external influence in the development of literature, such as Zheng Zhenduo’s view that Chinese literature is deeply influenced by external literature, especially Indian literature; setting great store in the social and political background in the development of literature. For example, Liu Dajie connected the development of Tang Dynasty poetry with “selecting officials from scholars by poetry.” All these are reflected in the compilation of English versions of literature history, such as the analysis of Tang popular literature in Chen’s version, the emphasis on opera
and Sanqu in Liu’s version, and the introduction of social background in the first section of each chapter in the history of literature in Lai’s version. These three scholars were deeply influenced by Western evolutionism, experimentalism and folklore. For instance, Hu Shi’s compilation of literary history presents the obvious tendency of literary evolution and experimentalism. He specifically categorizes literary evolution into four levels of meaning in literary evolution and dramatic improvement: “one generation has one generation of literature; literary evolution is gradual and needs time; the issue of ‘heritage’ in literature; and the progress of one literature only after contacting with other literature, that is, the external influence in literature” (Hu 116), in order to support the proposition that vernacular literature should be the center. That is, the compilation should have a concept of literature evolution abandon the dead characters that do not belong to this era, and advocate for vernacular literature. And because of its gradual nature, literature evolution sometimes needs human intervention to accelerate its process and encourage literature revolution. Moreover, influenced by the theory of experimentalism, Hu Shi emphasized the innovation effect and external form of literature, that is, the direct effect of literature revolution, which is also the underlying reason why he highly praised vernacular literature: “He is only concerned about the ways, procedures and methods of literary revolution, and their practicability and operability. It is due to this pragmatism methodology that he believes in the change of language as a literary tool as the breakthrough of literary revolution, and that the establishment of the authentic status of vernacular is the primary issue of literary revolution. In this sense, Hu Shi’s advocacy of vernacular writing is not so much to construct a literary theory as to provide a practical plan for the construction of new literature” (Jin 82). Therefore, the dual cultural identities of the compilers in the Anglophone world made them influenced by the representative trend of the compilation in domestic literature history, which was also under the impact of the representative theories of western science and literature. But such an impact was more indirect and circuitous compared with the reference of western history and scientific achievements in the compilation in the early period.

Entering the new century, the compilation of literary history presents a new picture due to the development of Sinology, the richness of materials and the popularity of the Internet. On the basis of summarizing the characteristics of the compilation of Chinese literary history before, the construction of Chinese literary history in the Anglophone world in this period tries to break through the usual framework of literary history, especially focusing on the reading horizon and needs of western readers with a compilation style different from that of domestic literary history: “In other words, one of the main purposes of Cambridge’s history of Chinese literature is to question the categories that have been used for a long time, and to write a new history of literature that is both innovative and persuasive” (Sun and Owen 2). This new literary history attempts to break the practice of dividing literary history by genre and build a “culture of literary history.” Behind this lies the effort to build a new literary history under the influence of western material culture, deconstruction and new historicism, the result of which is a different history from the previous English versions not only in style arrangement but also in content emphasis. Whether it has achieved the expected effect or not, at least it presents a new possibility of presenting the history of literature to the readers. The writing of literary history can never reach the literary history itself. Every new attempt to compile literary history provides readers with a possibility to understand and appreciate
literary history from different perspectives, and thus to appreciate its different features, which is even closer to literary history itself.

Although there are great innovations in the compilation concept of the recent English versions of literary history, the construction of Chinese literary history in the Anglophone world falls behind the domestic compilation on the whole. First of all, although quantity is not an important basis to measure the compilation process of literary history, the large gap between the two is enough to form a certain difference. More than a dozen English versions is incomparable to the number of more than 1600, and the specific length of certain Chinese literary history compiled domestically far exceeds that of foreign ones. The Cambridge version can be regarded as a masterpiece in the Anglophone world, but is insignificant in the face of a dozen volumes. The so-called qualitative change caused by quantitative change is also applicable to the compilation of literary history to a certain extent.

Secondly, the compilation process of the English versions of literary history exhibits an obvious stage-by-stage feature, making it fractured and independent from each other. Due to the large span of time and less mutual influence and reference, the styles and emphasis of literary history in different stages are quite different. That is why the innovative practice of “cultural Tang” in the Cambridge version of literary history is greatly praised, a testament that there is a sudden change in the lack of inheritance between the concept of literary history among each English version, as opposed to the “gradual change” in the compilation of domestic literary history. The author of this paper names the compilation of the recent English versions of literary history as “innovating period” just out of its comparison with the early and middle period. If it is compared with the writing of the domestic literary history, it is still in the primary stage, either in the number, length, characteristics or the attention in this regard. If we refer to the domestic compilation, the concept of “cultural Tang” has been practiced in the history of Chinese literature for a long time. For example, Zhang’s history places the literature of the Tang Dynasty under the period of expansion and differentiation in the middle ages. Some domestic scholars have also noticed the dissemination and circulation of texts in the history of Chinese literature, an important highlight of the history of the Cambridge version. Therefore, the construction of the English versions can absorb the achievements of the domestic compilation so as to promote the development of its horizontal “historical data” selection and the promotion of its in-depth analysis and discussion.

At the same time, the compilation of domestic literary history can also receive some enlightenment from the English versions. Although the cataloguing of the development of Chinese literature in the context of “the other” is sometimes not as deep as that of domestic scholars due to the insufficient possession and analysis of historical materials, but their distance from the research object makes them bold and innovative in analysis of specific issues. For example, in the selection of literary works, there are great differences between the English versions of literary history. Those personal achievements that are not enough to enter into the history are also included due to their key roles in the culture of literary history, a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of the former domestic compilations, thus showing readers a brand-new picture of writers in the history of literature, and making the analysis of specific problems more targeted. And this is an important aspect of cross-cultural comparison, dialogue and elucidation in the compilation of literary history.
Note

1. It is the classification method in the most important Chinese cataloguing book, *Imperial Catalogue*, dividing all books into four categories.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The article is part of research project (No. 18XJC751004) and research project (No. SC19EZD001) and the discipline cluster of the Chinese Language and Literature and the Global Dissemination of Chinese Culture.

Notes on contributors

*Peina Zhuang* is an Associate Professor in the College of Literature and Journalism in Sichuan University, China. Her research interests include comparative literature, comparative poetics, cultural studies and translation studies. Recent publications include “On Translation of Literary Terminology as Cultural Sign: with focus on translation of literary terms in History of Chinese Literature” *Cultura. International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* (2017), and “The Current Situation and Future of Variation Theory” (国内比较文学变异学研究综述: 现状与未来), *Journal of South-Central University for Nationalities* (2015).

*Yawson Edward Joseph* is an undergraduate student majoring in teaching Chinese as a foreign language and his research interests include Chinese language and culture, and language teaching.

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