

A Thorough Understanding of Literary Geography 《文学地理学会通》, by Yang Yi, China Social Sciences Press, January, 2013.

Yang Yi's book, entitled *A Thorough Understanding of Literary Geography*, published (in Chinese) by China Social Sciences Press in January, 2013, is an important recent contribution to the field of literary geography research revealing his pioneering and creative insights. What is fresh in our memory is the profound ideological proposition of "remapping Chinese literature" raised by Yang in 2001. He said, "I have been harboring a dream to make a fairly complete map of Chinese culture or literature of the past thousands of years. This project will be based upon the in-depth and systematic study of the Han literature and literatures of all minorities in China. The integrity and diversity of the rich and profound Chinese national literature will be directly depicted, and the trait, nature, element, source of Chinese national literature will be pleasantly exposed as well." Over the past decade, he delved into the basic issues of literary geography from the perspectives of essence, connotations and methods revealed in thesis publications, in some major mainland Chinese journals, and through public speaking in Cambridge, Harvard and the University of Macau. At the same time he meticulously scanned and analyzed literary geography in various academic domains – a multicultural approach to the regional history of Han people and minorities; 400 years' "Dissemination of Oriental Learning" since the Italian Matteo Ricci; East Asian culture as affected by the reciprocal influence between China, Korea and Japan; typical case samples of ideologists and litterateurs from Confucius, Lao Zi, Chuang Zi, Qu Yuan 2,500 years ago to Li Bai and Du Fu in the Tang Dynasty right up until Lu Xun and Shen Cong-wen in modern times. Yang's originality rewrote academic history and literary history in many spheres, so his book—published as one of the collected works of Academicians of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences—seems likely to hold its place among the most significant works of Chinese scholarship in this field. I will examine Yang's originality and style from three angles.

1. *Well-grounded Spirit of Independence and Innovation*

Although his works run to over ten million words, the desire for innovation of Yang grows with time. He usually establishes his creative ideas on rich and solid historical materials, connecting ancient with modern times, China with foreign countries, literature with the other humanities. Yang's book presents a three-dimensional research method which concerns the traditional Chinese idea of cosmic structure consisting of "heaven, earth and man." The dimensional interaction of "man" and "earth," "geography" in this case, should be considered in terms of the relationships between Heaven and Earth, and the Heaven and Man Heaven-Earth dimension and the Heaven-Man dimension, "to seek a return to a meaningful function of literature in our lives in the coupling of the three dimensions", "the elements of humanity and literature should be interacted, complemented and interpreted with those of geography so as to get the spiritual fruits in contact with human activity." (p. 5) Speaking in this way, he reminds us that geography – the earth dimension – of literature's occurrence and existence should not be segregated, we have to study the

geographical intervention in literature from the perspective of the whole universe with three dimensions and the large-scale changes in human culture, grasping the key points of the relationship between literature and life from broad connections as well. Yang is not a scholar of rash judgments without sufficient materials and conclusive evidence. He once made a statement, which has been accepted by the vast majority of readers, “The primary principle of literary geography is to connect literature with ‘Di Qi’ (this Chinese idiom refers to the masses, common people).” This term dates back to the Confucian classic *Rites of Zhou* 2,000 years ago, annotated by Zheng Xuan in the Han Dynasty. By using it, he connects literary geography with the ontology of “Qi” in classical Chinese philosophy. By awakening ancient materials with penetrating consideration, Yang excels in making the characters alive and active.

With “integration” and “comparison” in hand, Yang makes previously unseen connections between culture and literature. He compares Li Bai and Du Fu, finding in Li Bai the success of the Yangtze River and Northern Barbarian civilizations, while Du Fu represents that of the Yellow River civilization and ancient scholarly culture. He studied Matteo Ricci, classifying the culture he brought into the Hebrew and Greek systems, exploring the process of its compilation in *Siku Quanshu* in the Qing Dynasty 100 years later. By studying the different classifications of his works in the *Siku Quanshu*, by studying the cultural attitude of Mao Qi-ling through the comparison of different descriptions in *Biographic Sketches of Emperor Shenzong in History of Ming* and *Stories of Foreign Countries*, Yang introduces the thinking of Matteo Ricci into the cultural amalgamation between western culture and traditional Chinese culture represented by *Siku Quanshu*. He ultimately presents us with a highly creative thesis: *400 Years’ Dissemination of Oriental Learning*.

2. *Decoding the Hidden Meaning of Materials Through a Multi-Discipline Integration.*

Yang states in his book that “literary geography is in itself an integration. Apart from the integration of its own four areas – regional types, cultural stratum, ethnic groups and cultural flows, it also interacts with disciplines as literature, geography, ethnology, nationality, customs, history and archeology” (p.38). The integration and interaction of multi-disciplines generates innumerable proliferative effects, it alters traditional modes of research, brings about new academic branches and cultivates new academic growing points. One question Yang addresses is, “who is Zhuang Zi?” For the past 2,000 years this paradoxical question has presented many enigmas. Yang examined *The Historical Records* and finds that Zhuang Zi is not recognized as Song nationality because of his birthplace, instead, nearly 40% of the content is about the story of Zhuang Zi rejecting the nomination by the King of Chu. Examining in detail the evidence of narrative texts and structures, combining with the material bits of surnames in Tang and Song periods (seventh to thirteenth centuries), Yang constructs the evidence chain for “Zhuang Zi being a distant descendant of King Zhuang of Chu.” Throughout he references narrations in *The Historical Records* and documents of the pre-Qin period. Then Professor Yi extracts dozens of cases from *Zhuang Zi* – his Chu dialect, the mention of Chu’s beliefs and his Chu-style funeral – to verify that the book is actually a reflection of Zhuang’s nostalgia for the Chu Kingdom. Consequently, from this interdisciplinary approach, Yang draws the compelling

conclusion that Zhuang Zi is a distant descendant of King Zhuang of Chu, and the Zhuang Zi family were exiled to the Song kingdom due to the political crisis in Chu.

Selecting materials judiciously from the vast amount available is the embodiment of Yang's original, incisive and sophisticated academic insights. He highlights how ancient books reflect the vestiges of ancient lives, harboring the cultural code of many real lives. Faced with even a piece of ordinary material, he can go precisely right to the most valuable core points. The following case is a typical example of perceptiveness and understanding. In the sixth chapter of *Lao Zi*, the character 牝 appeared twice, if examined from etymological perspective, the original glyph of the character is 匕, symbolizing the shape of the female genitalia, just like another Chinese character 牡, the part 土 indicating the shape of the male genitalia. All these pieces of evidence, together with other similar chapters concerning female reproduction in *Lao Zi*, confirm that the birthplace of Lao Zi is in the remote area of matriarchy in the Chu Kingdom, and the memory of his childhood is even reflected in his social ideology of "small country and population". By this perspicacious insight, Yang arouses the vitality beneath the dead materials and makes them talk.

3. *Joining the Ancient and Modern Academic Utterances and Freshness of Writing Style*

Awakening dead materials is further enhanced by the vitality of language. Yang's book is enriched with many new utterances of this vitality which seldom appear in research on classical Chinese topics, and he is skilled at achieving a seamless joining of ancient and modern utterances. His argumentation and diction effectively embody the harmonious integration of such utterances, which proves Yang a master in handling and exploiting academic utterances. Yang makes constant efforts in the exploitation and improvement of academic expression by attaching great importance to this basic element of academic research. His writing turns many abstract concepts into fresh and lively scenes which are true to life. For example, he uses the analogy of "jigsaw puzzle effect" for the regional type of the four spheres in literary geography; "onion-head-peeling effect" for the analysis of cultural dimensions; "tree effect" for division of ethnic groups; and "road effect" for spatial mobility. When he explains the phrase "Yang Yuhuan was plump while Zhao Feiyan was skinny" (this Chinese idiom means two beautiful women are attractive in their own ways), he reveals that the love for the skinny Queen Zhao Feiyan of Emperor Cheng of the Han Dynasty was the northward-proceeding of Chu style, while the love for the plump imperial noble consort Yang Yuhuan of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty was the southward-proceeding of Northern Barbarian style. He accomplishes this insight by scrutinizing the historical record and examining silk painting in ancient books, prose and poems. The elements of the colorful regional ethnic cultures contributing to the national culture are in-homogeneous, which is the so-called "tangram effect": the more different ways of combining the "tangram", the more complicated changes of the cultural tone and aesthetic trend. The long-term extension of these circumstances is integrated into the scope and depth of Chinese culture. Yang is definitely skilled in this explanation, which features freshness, vividness and humorousness, to remove the baldness, obscurity and remoteness that the argumentation of abstract concepts

and theories may result from, and inspire readers' boundless imagination and thirst for knowledge.

In the postscript of the book, Yang states "the academic study of humanities is meant to explore cultural life. The life analysis of cultural classics is a challenge to researchers, and a demonstration of their abilities as well. Such a study, dull as it seems, may become a pleasure of enjoying a banquet of wisdom when one is able to adopt life analysis for his research." Indeed, Yang's major book, which took him over ten years to complete, is proof of the bumper harvest he reaps with pleasure, and we readers feel treated to a lavish banquet cooked with unusual wisdom and brilliant thoughts.

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