

BOOK REVIEWS

The Literature of Leisure and Chinese Modernity. By Charles A. Laughlin. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008. Pp. x + 242. \$55.00.

The ambition of this book is to stake a claim for the prose essay to be featured alongside fiction, plays and poetry in the history of May Fourth literature (1920s and 1930s). The essay form suffers relative neglect in the histories of all literatures I am familiar with, but Professor Laughlin's argument is that this neglect is particularly unjust in the Chinese case, because certainly in quantity and arguably in achievement, the essay overtops other genres of literature in this period. "Literature" is the keyword here, for Laughlin's attention is fixed on that type of essay which has literary merit, meaning the kind that first of all demonstrates a way with words, then shows the human qualities of personality, imagination and humour, and deals with life as it is lived. For this kind he adopts the term *xiaopinwen* 小品文, which for him represents a "literature of leisure." He excludes the expository, scholarly and polemical types of essay that might also be classed as *xiaopinwen*. So out goes *zawen* 雜文, one of the mainstays of modern short prose, as *zawen* would count as polemical.

Laughlin is well qualified to carry out the task he has set himself. He has the academic pedigree of having studied at Columbia University and taught at Yale University, has a very good command of modern Chinese, can write well, and proves himself capable of sensitive reading of compositions. Added to that, he has researched his subject extensively. But he faces formidable difficulties. To cross this ocean of literature he can only float a number of conceptual rafts, exchanging one for another as he goes along. Moreover, he has to consider attractability and respectability in his own university environment, which nudge him in certain directions. Thus "literature of leisure" promises more as a title than, say, "the familiar essay" would, while "Chinese modernity" balances that apparent lightness with the suggestion of firm rooting in cultural significance. The question arises, though, whether either signpost points in quite the right direction.

In terms of signposts, the most eye-catching one in Republican China itself was set up by Zhou Zuoren 周作人. His view can be encapsulated in two judgements made in 1928: "Modern prose is like a river buried in the sand which has been dug up many years later. It is an old river, but it is also new"; and "The source of the new Chinese prose is, as I see it, the confluence of the essays (*xiaopinwen*) of the Gong'an school and the English." Laughlin gives Zhou's view a lot of space and, one presumes, credence. It enables him to extend his enquiry back to the tradition, to embrace not only the Gong'an school but also all kinds of literature written to entertain, predominantly that of the Ming-Qing period, commonly classed as *xianqing wenxue* 閑情文學 ("literature of

leisure” is a rendering of that term). Zhou’s sign also points forward, for further down the line Lin Yutang 林語堂 followed Zhou in celebrating the *xingling* 性靈 (individual genius) doctrine of the Gongan school, and Lin’s magazines in the 1930s greatly expanded the market for *xiaopinwen*, at the same time colouring in the picture of *xiaopinwen* as a “literature of leisure.” It is a plausible kind of continuum.

In this scenario we have the elements of tradition and modernity set alongside each other, and both can be enlarged upon as major themes. But we need to backtrack and test the strength of this supposed continuum. Was the connection between the modern essay and the Gongan school stronger than its connection with the Anglo-American essay, which it replaced in Zhou’s perspective? We may recall that in Zhou’s pioneering article of 1920, entitled “Mei wen” 美文 (*Belles-lettres*), he commended by name Addison, Lamb, Irving and Hawthorn (“Figures well known in China”), as well as other more recent practitioners of “*belles-lettres*,” but no Chinese writers. So why the change in stance? One obvious reason is that in its initial stage the New Literature looked abroad for inspiration, but once its cadres were more sure of themselves, it was to be expected that they would want to find forebears in their own history to relate to. Again, it was normal that whatever other values of the past might be repudiated, Chinese artistic sensibilities would persist and continue to resonate with modern writers. To a great extent that aesthetic was embedded in the Chinese language; so appreciation of the use of words would forge a close emotional bond between those who shared that language. Indeed, the affinity with late-Ming *xiaopinwen* that Zhou identified was in respect of *fengzhi* 風致 and *qiwei* 氣味, that is tenor, manner and temper. However, Zhou conceded that modern writers thought differently. That is a very big difference. Granted, the starting point of both the Gongan school and modern essayists was the same, namely that the essay was a medium of self-expression and the author should speak for himself; but in what they had to say, their range of topics and how they conceived of the essay form, they were very far apart. Most modern essayists’ discourse derived from the Western model, not the late-Ming model. The plain truth is that the essay as conceived in modern times was *not* a kind of *xiaopinwen* in the traditional sense. Collections of Ming-Qing *xiaopinwen* typically comprised travel pieces, letters and prefaces, and primarily conveyed emotional responses, with little control by the rational mind. They were also typically exhibitionistic, written to entertain a small coterie and to show off to friends.

If Zhou Zuoren was only making the point that the occasional essay (shall we call it) was in vogue in the Ming-Qing period and also in vogue in the 1920s, and that there were similarities in the attitudes of the writers in both periods, there would be nothing to question. But if the implication was that the later product actually *read* like the earlier product and bore distinct marks of that ancestry—that would be a very doubtful proposition. Zhu Ziqing 朱自清 had a definite view of the matter: he wrote in 1928 of Zhou’s own essays, “no matter from the point of view of thought or expression, where can they be found in the essays of those [late-Ming] dilettanti?” It is not clear to me what Laughlin’s view is; in any case he refrains from making comparisons on his own behalf, wisely enough.

Neither, more regrettably, does he go into the other source of the modern Chinese essay that Zhou admitted, the English essay, a much more valid comparator, even when it cries out for cross-reference, as in connection with Liang Yuchun 梁遇春 (discussed pp. 119–22).

There is another gap in Laughlin's narrative, namely the climate of the times. Zhou Zuoren was very vocal about what caused him to retreat from the public arena towards the end of the 1920s; Zhu Ziqing was explicit too, and Lin Yutang was equally frank, just to mention some of the big names in this story. The reason given was that any suspicion of the wrong kind of politics was liable to land the writer in bad trouble, and that, Zhou said, was an important parallel with the late Ming. *Xiaopinwen* was perhaps for late-Ming literati a choice, but it was also a refuge, and for the moderns likewise. Now Laughlin's is a fairly small book, with only 181 pages of main text, and one can understand why he does not discuss either the English essay or the political climate at any length, as they would take him too far afield, yet the latter factor was crucial to the proliferation of *xiaopin* that he makes so much of, *xiaopin* being understood here as that kind of composition which does not grapple with political or national issues.

Another determining factor for the proliferation of *xiaopinwen* in the 1930s was the economic one: the mushroom growth of magazines that paid contributors fees which even those on university salaries relied on, and to other writers not so employed were essential to survival. Xu Qinwen's 許欽文 article of 1936 entitled "Guanyu xiaopinwen" 關於小品文 offers an interesting sidelight on this. Magazines, he says, though numerous, were short-lived, and might leave contributors unpaid. Hence writers spread the risk by writing more, more shortly, and for more outlets: on one day he himself wrote "five or six *xiaopinwen*." Laughlin quotes from this article, but does not mention this point.

The above considerations would have gone to broadening the scope of the enquiry into *xiaopinwen*, while Laughlin is principally concerned with the aesthetic of the genre: to that extent they are extraneous. However, there is reason to take issue with him on the way he talks up his subject in his Introduction. Talking up one's subject may be obligatory in the present academic climate, but it carries the danger of giving false impressions. Laughlin's presentation illustrates the vogue for the notions of "critique" and "alternative." Thus the "legacy of leisure literature" is "a *critique* of Confucian moral rigidity" (p. 3, my italics); and, referring to the late Ming, "the cultivation of a meaningful private life and its expression in literary form became an *alternative* objective to the service to realm and emperor represented by the civil service examination system" (p. 2, my italics). "Rigidity" hardly needs a case to be made against it, as the term itself expresses disapproval; but leaving that aside, the inference might easily be drawn that Confucianism *per se* was rigid, that it denied leisure pursuits or private interests. Not so. Confucianism, a social philosophy, was less a restraint on Chinese literati than Christianity, a religion, was on Western writers. Montaigne was a good Catholic, yet he founded the European essay and practically no subject was off bounds to him. Similarly, the great majority of Chinese scholar-officials were well-rounded individuals who enjoyed full social and private lives. Even someone as "rigid" in his Confucianism as Han Yu 韓愈 wrote some highly inventive

comical pieces in his time off. In “Song qiong wen” 送窮文 (Goodbye to penury) he wrote of his “demon” of penmanship: “not cultivating one skill, straying into the odd and absurd, ignoring relevance to current concerns, aiming only to amuse himself”—a good summing up, I would say, of later Gongan school practice. In short, while Confucianism was the background for imperial culture, it was never synonymous or coextensive with that culture.

As for the second quotation above, the civil service examination system was only the gateway to “service to realm and emperor”; it did not represent it. Almost all the authors featured in modern collections of late-Ming prose were degree holders who went through that gate, and many were holders of the highest degree, including the three Yuan brothers who founded the Gongan school. Similarly, they almost all did “serve the realm,” though none rose high in the bureaucracy. In other words, they both served *and* led a pleasurable life of their own. I know of no indication that they were not basically Confucian either, as a group. It is true that in the late Ming, service to the realm became less meaningful and more dangerous because of arbitrary despotism, which no doubt did enhance the attractions of private life.

That is not to deny that the late-Ming writers were more modern than ancient in one vital respect, to wit their taking individualism as a creed. The seeds of that individualism were sown by Wang Yangming’s 王陽明 doctrine of innate knowledge, a doctrine expanded by the radical Taizhou 泰州 school (still Confucian, incidentally), and taken too far by Li Zhuowu 李卓吾, who paid with his life for his eccentricity. Though the Yuan brothers were in a sense disciples of Li, they were tame in comparison. Their “critique” was against the stifling literary culture of backward-looking classicism, represented by the Former and Latter Seven Masters 前後七子. In that regard there was a true affinity with the May Fourth generation, who reacted against the Tongcheng 桐城 school—with the important difference that the Gongan people wrote only for their superior social class, whereas the May Fourth people addressed the public at large.

The above remarks are intended as a “critique” not of Laughlin, whose subsequent analysis is both knowledgeable and intelligent, rather of the conventions of current academic discourse which tempt scholars into incautious generalizations in order to flag up “significance”—a kind of modern “demon” to match Han Yu’s.

The chief difficulty that the author faces in the main body of his book is that of balance. Given the limited space at his disposal, he structures it round certain distinctive traits shared by various groupings of essayists, which prevents him from assessing any essayist’s work in the round. Secondly, having chosen his title, he has to struggle to keep his matter within its bounds. Laughlin explains in his Chapter One, entitled “The legacy of leisure and modern Chinese culture,” that “literature of leisure” derives its concept from many kinds of non-doctrinaire traditional literature, including episodes from novels, but with Ming-Qing short prose compositions at its centre. In its twentieth-century manifestation it was given definition by the sort of essay advocated by Zhou Zuoren, which in essence was what in the English tradition was called the “idle” essay: indeed, Zhou used the term *xu yu* 絮語 (casual conversation) to describe his ideal. But that concept, we discover, relates

to only one of Laughlin's types. In fact, a more appropriate name would have been "art of life," which Zhou put forward as early as 1920 in preference to "art for art's sake" and "art for life's sake," because "art of life" would encompass profound emotions and flights of imagination, which also come within Laughlin's purview. In practice, about the only kind of essay (as opposed to tract) that Laughlin excludes is the *zawen*.

To come now to the question of "legacy," Laughlin refers to the "remarkable interest in late Ming *xiaopin wen* that took hold in the early 1930s" (p. 33). Undeniably Zhou Zuoren started a hare with his promotion of that body of literature, and the hare had a good run, with several anthologies being published and enthusiastic support being tendered in Lin Yutang's magazines, all of which Laughlin fully documents. But to devote so much space to this topic would seem to suppose that late-Ming literature was influential in shaping the modern essay. I would seriously doubt that. Zhou conceded in 1928 that few people had read late-Ming prose pieces, and by 1928 the informal essay was firmly established. So prior to that date no shaping could have taken place. Is the argument then that the essay was reshaped from the early 1930s? Though some of the *xiaopinwen* in those anthologies were brilliantly written, they were very much of their times, and it would be very hard to detect any legacy in the way modern essayists wrote their works. Significantly, late-Ming prose disappears as a topic when Laughlin himself gets round to actually examining modern works. It is possible that the accretion of travel pieces in the 1920s and 1930s was encouraged by traditional example, but that genre was by no means the exclusive province of late-Ming writers. As for the libertarian stance of speaking in their own voices and writing for themselves, the moderns needed no new lessons in that respect: it had already been propounded as the chief virtue of the English essay. To sum up, it is very unlikely that late-Ming literature ever became more than a small part of the cultural heritage that informed the minds of modern Chinese essayists.

So much—probably too much—for preliminaries. Let us proceed to case studies.

Chapter Two takes "Wandering" as its heading and deals with some works by authors who published in the periodical *Yu si* 語絲 (translated here as Threads of Conversation), which was founded in late 1924. They are Zhou Zuoren, Lu Xun 魯迅, Yu Pingbo 俞平伯 and Feiming 廢名 (both protégés of Zhou), and two student contributors, Lu Jingqing 陸晶清 and Shi Pingmei 石評梅 (who were out on their own limb). Laughlin examines three of Zhou's relaxed "gentlemanly" essays under the subtitle of "Intertextual wandering," and one under the subtitle of "Wandering through landscape." The choice is fair enough, because these essays are favourites with readers and are well reviewed here, but possibly regrettable from Zhou's own point of view, because without the platform of his serious essays they would have had less prestige. The Lu Xun selection of "Lun zhaoxiang zhi lei" 論照相之類 (On categories of photography) is more doubtful because, though it does go from one thing to another, it seems to me that the twists and turns are typical of his *zawen* style, a category that Laughlin excludes; and if it wanders, it wanders with intent, building up to a scathing comment on Chinese mores. If Lu Xun was to be brought into the book at all, there was far more relevant

material to draw on: for example, the prose poems *Ye cao* 野草 (Weeds) which were actually published in *Yu si*, his contemporaneous *Zhao hua xi shi* 朝花夕拾 (Morning flowers picked at dusk) and, surprisingly enough, the last three pieces in his *Nahan* 吶喊 (Battle cries) collection, which being sketches based on true-life experience, qualify both as *xiaopin* and as leisured.

As to the character of the *Yu si*, Laughlin maintains: “this magazine’s distinctive contribution to the modern literature of leisure is its cultivation of *wandering*” (p. 59). Though it is a long time since I read through it, that is not my impression. Three out of the four Zhou essays were not published there, and in his contributions to the magazine Zhou was more embattled and directly focused on current social issues than at any other time in his career. A good indication of the character of the magazine is the fact that in the 19 articles of his published therein, Lin Yutang expressed himself very intemperately and controversially.¹ It seems not unreasonable to deduce that he took his colouring from his surroundings, since in later times he was the champion of the “literature of leisure.” *Yu si* was in essence a platform for contributors to go their own way, and all it “cultivated” was this giving writers their head. Most of the “wandering” that Laughlin notices was done either before or elsewhere.

Laughlin is on firmer ground in his next chapter in grouping together Ye Shengtao 葉聖陶, Xia Mianzun 夏丏尊, Li Shutong 李叔同, Feng Zikai 豐子愷 and Zhu Ziqing, as they all taught briefly at the same progressive middle school on the shores of White Horse Lake in Zhejiang province, and, more pertinently, were “particularly aware of the role played by composition in nurturing a person’s character and, by extension, encouraging participation in social change” (p. 78). However, Laughlin tries to bind them more closely together by saying, “The educational and cultural journeys of each of these men are, moreover, inextricably tied to Japan” (p. 79). The attempt to broaden the compass of his study is understandable, but the Japan connection does not resurface in subsequent discussion of their work. Also, the “each” in the above quotation presumably does not apply to two of the five writers listed: Ye Shengtao’s connection with Japan was at best tangential and Zhu Ziqing’s non-existent, to my knowledge.

The question of fiction crops up in the discussion of Xia Mianzun’s work, as it had with Feiming in the previous chapter, and would again later in regard to Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 and the “Beijing group.” Two of Xia’s pieces considered here appear to be short stories (and have been classified as such in anthologies), in that they have a “consistent narrative character” (p. 85) and are not told in the first person. The problem is a genuine one, because some Chinese writers drew no strict dividing line between the two genres, which after all were not native demarcations. In a way Laughlin had prepared the ground

¹ See Hannah Wing-han Yiu, “Lin Yutang’s Passage to Literature: 1895–1930” (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1987).

for their inclusion by stating in his Introduction that “[l]eisure literature in the late Ming was manifested in poetry, a growing variety of prose forms, and in significant sections of vernacular novels that were produced throughout the late Ming and Qing dynasties” (p. 2). This opened his door very wide, making it possible to classify what was presented as fiction as not really fiction, more a kind of *xiaopinwen*.

We next come to the “Analects Group,” dominated by Lin Yutang, who championed self-expression as the role and mission of literature. Chastened by his experience of being blacklisted in Beijing and not wanting to “land in gaol” (his own words) under the Guomindang regime, but still concerned to make China a more tolerable place to live in, in the 1930s Lin took to expressing himself obliquely, by poking fun and advocating humour, through the medium of *xiaopinwen*. Inevitably the active promotion of humour led to a self-amused kind, to drollery, jocularity and quirkiness, which proved popular for a time but had a fairly short life. That is not quite the story that Laughlin tells, but never mind: a “literature of leisure” was certainly the product. The main track that Laughlin follows in this chapter is a series of articles on smoking. He elevates the significance of these articles by tying them in with his theme of “modernity.” Thus: “cigarette smoking carried connotations of Western industrialized modernity” (p. 124); and, after quoting a passage written by Liu Dajie 劉大杰, “The particular negatives Liu details in the passage (loss at love, descent into a painful period in one’s life) metaphorically suggest the loss of power and dignity, and the victimization at the hands of foreign powers that underlie the Chinese experience of modernity” (p. 128); and “since most of the comments and anecdotes described refer to travel, international encounters, and military campaigns, they mark tobacco as a civilized necessity for coping with momentous encounters in the expanding and diversifying modern world” (p. 131). This is a very heavy freight for smoking to carry.

The last chapter on pre-war prose is called “Dreaming: From the Crescent Moon Group to the Beijing School.” This is where Laughlin fully faces and embraces fictionality. In Xu Zhimo’s case, Laughlin notices his anthologized essays, but concentrates on two pieces that “are plainly short stories” (p. 144), viz. “Too thick to dissolve” 濃得化不開 and “Dead city” 死城. “Atmospherically saturated” is how Laughlin describes them. Indeed they are, in the first case with sensuality, in the second with sepulchrality,² verging on necromancy. Both worlds are experienced by a named protagonist who is not the author. To these is attached Xu’s agonized outburst in his preface to his poetry collection *Tiger* 猛虎集, in which he pleads for understanding of his role as poet (pp. 146–47). By this time one seriously wonders if any kind of prose composition that is not “socially redemptive” is excluded from “literature of leisure.”

² This word is not to be found in dictionaries, but one I needed to invent for this occasion.

The Beijing School proper (here represented by Li Guangtian 李廣田 and He Qifang 何其芳, with Shen Congwen 沈從文 in the background) moved the essay onto a more sophisticated plane: “a theory of pure, universal art . . . may be said to be one defining context for Beijing school writing” (p. 151). Li Guangtian’s pieces are pastoral and nativist, depicting country life from the inside. Laughlin gives most space to an analysis of “Flat City” 平地城, emphasizing the spooky tales the old mule driver tells as he drives a cartload of passengers (including the unsettled author) to town through the predawn. Laughlin concludes that “the fragmented, improvised stories, like dreams, draw attention to their own incompleteness and remind the reader that the author has taken him or her beyond the confines of the instrumental rationality that governs realistic, self-consciously socially redemptive narrative literature” (p. 161).

He Qifang’s first prose collection, published in 1936, presents a contrast: while Li Guangtian places himself at the core of rural life, He Qifang keeps real life at arm’s length. He does not strive after authenticity, does not write speech much like speech, does not recall but rather constructs (or reconstructs) mostly shadowy milieux. It is often said of him that he “created prose as if it were poetry,” which is not surprising, as together with Li Guangtian and Bian Zhilin 卞之琳, his fellow students at Peking University, he published the ground-breaking poetry collection *Han Yuan ji* 漢園集 at this time. Laughlin probes “Tower” 樓 (1935) deeply and at length to bring out these characteristics and more besides. Though He Qifang soon abandoned this style and turned to what Laughlin might classify as “socially redemptive literature,” Laughlin is certainly right to dwell on it, because it was truly something special. Wang Dingjun 王鼎鈞 is the only prose writer I know of to successfully continue exploration in this vein.

Laughlin’s final chapter is a summary of developments in Chinese prose literature since the 1930s. Naturally he also has a full complement of endnotes.

To conclude this review, it goes without saying that for those who can read Chinese, a better idea of the state of the essay in the Republican period can be got from native scholars. I personally think highly of Fan Peisong’s 范培松 *Zhongguo xiandai sanwen shi* 中國現代散文史 (History of modern Chinese prose).³ Chinese scholars, however, are on their home ground and have less to explain. Laughlin had to win over readers, most of whom would be academic and few of whom could be expected to read essays for their own sake. To entice them he had to pitch his discourse high, into the realm of national culture and consciousness, which unfortunately is fertile ground for disagreement. For example, I think he makes too much of the opposition of *xiaopinwen* to socially redemptive literature, and of what he understands was the reigning “obsession with China.” Once the reformist zeal of the initial May Fourth movement subsided, which it did quite soon, it seems to me that the spectrum of modern Chinese literature was very

³ Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 1993.

like that of many national literatures of the time. Whatever thoughts authors had about the state of their realm, they also had their own lives to lead and to write about, which even the most politically committed did, often in the form of *xiaopinwen*.

In the end, though, one must admire Laughlin's courage and applaud his endeavour. As a fellow worker in the same field, I felt I could offer only translations and commentary in my book *The Chinese Essay*.⁴ Laughlin set himself a much more venturesome task. Despite my contrariness in this review, his book deserves to succeed in its aim of directing academic attention to the rival claims of the occasional essay in the pantheon of modern Chinese literature.

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A Court on Horseback: Imperial Touring and the Construction of Qing Rule, 1680–1785.
By Michael G. Chang. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007. Pp. xxii + 550. \$49.95/£36.95.

This handsome monograph is a major addition to a growing body of historical research on the High Qing period. Following in the tracks of influential works by Mark Elliott, Pamela Crossley, and other Qing specialists, Michael Chang has undertaken to further our understanding of the Qing imperial tours by linking them organically to a theory of imperial rule. The period most closely analysed is that of the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–1795), but there is considerable information also on the tours inaugurated by the Kangxi emperor in 1684.

In the Introduction the author presents a theory of Manchu and Qing rulership centred on ethnicity and on the Weberian notion of the patrimonial state. In the first twenty-odd pages Chang exposes the theoretical foundations of his work, and in particular the concept of “ethno-dynastic” rulership, which informs much of the later analysis of the meaning of the tours.

In Chapter One the author describes the “ideological multivalence” of imperial touring, on the basis of an extensive survey of historical precedents from the Warring States period onwards. Chapters Two, Three and Four focus closely on the “court in motion.” In Chapter Two Chang illustrates the beginning of the tours under the Kangxi

⁴ Hong Kong: Research Centre for Translation, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1999.