

The Writing of the Pre-Qin Scholars in the History of Literature for a Hundred Years

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Abstract

This paper selects the most typical works of the history of literature since the Chinese began to write the history of literature, and explores the writing situation of Pre-Qin prose in each work. From the beginning of the 20th century to now, with the deepening of the understanding of literature and other reasons, people's evaluation of the Pre-Qin scholars has also changed from the important parts of classics to the wonders of the literature, and their proportion in the history of literature has changed from a sudden reduction to a gradual stability.

Keywords

Pre-Qin scholars; the history of Chinese literature; writing.

1. Introduction

The concept of "the history of literature" originated in the west in the mid-19th century and began to influence China in the late 19th century. Since the 20th century, the influence of the history of literature on literature major has been increasing. Up to now, it has become a compulsory basic course for college literature major, and there are numerous books on the history of literature. The writing of the literary history of the Pre-Qin scholars also changes constantly.

2. The Pre-Qin Scholars in Various Literary History

The first work about the history of Chinese literature, *The History of Chinese Literature* written by Lin Chuanjia, has a very broad definition of literature, which is roughly "including the meaning of the word and is the same as the document". Although it is quite different from the current opinion, it represents many scholars' understanding of "literature" at that time. Examining the contents of the work that are most consistent with the "literariness" thought by the modern academia, we can find that the Pre-Qin Scholars account for more than half of the book. Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Xunzi, Han Feizi, Guanzi, Liezi, Shang Yang, Gongsun Long all have detailed introduction and summary of their respective characteristics. After the Qin and Han Dynasties, the articles become very short. The characteristics of valuing most things in the past and rejecting what is modern are very obvious.

The History of Chinese Literature written by Huang Ren finished later than Lin's version and is quite different from the latter. In terms of the definition of literature, Huang Ren thought that "when the ancients talked about literature, they all believed that literature was based on the six classics", which is questionable. "'Six Classics' are books that explain the truth, but only *The Classic of Poetry* and *The Classic of History* belong to literature." This shows that at that time, Huang Ren had consciously excluded those parts in the classics, history and works of the thought in the Pre-Qin period that did not meet his definition, which is his improvement over Lin's version.

Huang's work focuses on the discussion of the Pre-Qin scholars in the fourth part. There is only one section, but it is the same length as that of other times. His views on the literary

status of the Pre-Qin scholars are different from the present opinions. He believed that the articles represented by the scholars in the Pre-Qin were the embodiment of the heyday of Chinese literature and the biggest achievement of literature. For this reason, his introduction to the six classics and Confucianism was far more than that of other scholars, while his introduction to the historical biographies and prose, which are regarded as very important parts by modern people, was rare. If we use today's perspective to evaluate the prose of Pre-Qin scholars, the literariness of the six classics cannot be compared with *Mencius* and *Zhuangzi*, but this arrangement reflects that to some extent the existing concept of "ZongJing MingDao" is still quite influential, so that the proposition of not valuing most things in the past and rejecting what is modern in the introduction didn't be implemented.

Later, Hu Shi's *Vernacular Literary History* had a disdainful attitude towards both traditional classics and literature, so it completely abandoned the Pre-Qin literature. Zeng Yi, Xie Wuliang and others tried their best to present the concept of literature with the background of the eastward spread of western culture in the form of the organization of western literary history. Although their literary history also had a certain influence, the most influential one at that time was Zheng Zhenduo's *The Illustrated Edition of Chinese Literature History*.

The novelty of Zheng's works lies in the fact that he divided the history of Chinese literature into three sections with the stylistic changes under the influence of foreign cultures: the ancient literature which had not been influenced by external factors before the Western Jin Dynasty, the middle literature which had been influenced by foreign cultures, especially Buddhism culture, from the Western Jin Dynasty to the Jiajing period of the Ming Dynasty, and the modern literature which had thoroughly internalized foreign culture and then grown on its own from the Jiajing period to the early Qing Dynasty.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the history of literature was more literary in writing about the Pre-Qin scholars, such as Liu Dajie's *The Development of Chinese Literary History* and Lin Geng's *A Brief History of Chinese Literature*. As soon as *The Development of Chinese Literary History* was published, it was "quickly promoted as the most systematic and outstanding one in this field, thus establishing the basic paradigm of Chinese literary history". For the first time, the author separated the concepts of artistic characteristics, literary characteristics and literary achievements. He changed the practice of listing materials and linking them up. Even when presenting historical materials, he analyzed their artistry. In the writing of the Pre-Qin scholars, the author no longer listed and introduced all the characters, but connected the writers in series with his works, taking *Laozi*, *The Analects*, *Mozi*, *Mencius*, *Zhuangzi*, *Xunzi*, *Han Feizi* and *Lyshi Chunqiu* as the basic links of literary history. This is the progress of literary concept.

Different from *The Development of Chinese Literary History*, Lin Geng's *A Brief History of Chinese Literature* paid more attention to "the inner spiritual power of literature, the mystery of literary creation and the evolution and development of the literary forms and methods of expressing life experience and emotion". Although it also emphasized the use of historical perspective and methods to collect historical materials, examine historical facts, put them into the compilation, but its originality lied in its commitment to pursuing the root of literature history and "writing 'the heart' for the history of literature". Based on this, it was more concise in the writing of all the Pre-Qin scholars: only *The Analects*, *Mencius*, *Zhuangzi* and *Han Feizi* were selected.

After the founding of The People's Republic of China, the writers of literary history changed from individual to collective. Until now, the right of compiling literary history has never been fully returned to the individuals. Comparing the pioneers of the collective writing -- *The History of Chinese literature* compiled by the 1955 class of the Chinese Department of Peking University, *The History of Chinese literature* edited by the Literature Research Institute of Chinese Academy of Sciences and *The History of Chinese literature* edited by You Guo-en and

others with the most popular literary history textbooks at present, such as *The History of Chinese Literature* edited by Yuan Xingpei, we can easily find that in addition to the content of writing under the influence of ideology, scholars have basically finalized the definition of the Pre-Qin scholars -- Mencius, Zhuangzi, Han Feizi must be discussed, while *The Analects*, Laozi, Mozi and Xunzi can be discussed selectively. As for other scholars, they can be mentioned at most.

3. The Characteristics of the Writing Changes of the Pre-Qin Scholars in Literary History

It is not difficult to find that from the beginning of the 20th century to the present, the writing of Chinese literary history has two characteristics: first, the authors have changed from individualization to collectivization; second, the acceptance of western concepts presents a dynamic trend of change -- from the initial reconciliation in the controversy to the later one-sided attitude, and then to the present mutual integration. In this case, the writing of the Pre-Qin scholars also shows distinctive characteristics.

1. The proportion and the length of the articles have changed from a sudden reduction to a gradual stability. At the beginning of the compilation of the history of literature, they were very long. With the more editors, the more clearly people define the literature, the narration of the Pre-Qin scholars returned to the normal level and is relatively stable. From Huang Ren to Zheng Zhenduo, Liu Dajie, Lin Geng and many other versions, when it comes to the Pre-Qin scholars, it's just about Confucius, Laozi, Mozi, Mencius, Zhuangzi, Xunzi and Han Feizi. Occasionally there are other scholars, but they are not important.

2. Narrative discourse has changed from respecting the classics and worshiping the Taoism to being a wonder in the literary field, occasionally influenced by political discourse. If the proportion of length reflects the importance of the Pre-Qin scholars, then the narrative discourse reflects the author's perspective on the Pre-Qin scholars. It can be seen from Lin's version that Lin Chuanjia ignored the literariness of the scholars' works but took them as part of classics and works of the thought in the Pre-Qin period. After Liu's *The Development of Chinese Literary History*, the authors look at the scholars from a literary point of view and mention the value of their philosophy and thought. In the 1950s and 1960s, influenced by the concept of the times, the classes and struggle elements were inevitably incorporated into the narrative discourse, which was most obvious in You Guo-en's version.

3. There are still great differences in the proportion of literary history between the scholars. Confucianism, Taoism, Mohism and Legalism, which were once prominent schools, are of great length, while others are rarely mentioned. What's more, the proportions of the four schools are different. Mencius, Zhuangzi and Han Feizi are the largest. Confucius and Xunzi are the second, and the others are smaller.

4. The Reasons for the Writing Changes of the Pre-Qin Scholars in Literary History

There are at least three reasons for these characteristics:

1. Under the background of the eastward spread of western culture, the cultural tradition of "ZunJing MingDao" gradually disappeared in the 20th century. The introduction of western literary and cultural concepts challenged the traditional literary concepts, that is, the thought of ZunJing MingDao. This more clearly defined the concept of literature and the contents which focus on philosophy, history, sociology were excluded. Therefore, the writing length of Confucius is not as long as that of Mencius and Xunzi.

2. The change of political environment affects the evaluation of the scholars. The most obvious is the literary history from the 1950s to the 1970s. In the 1950s, the criticism of Confucius and Confucianism was far less severe than that in the 1970s, when the government criticized Lin Biao and Confucius. So was Legalism.

3. As the embodiment of philosophy, the works of various schools are different in their literary expression, so they have received different attention in the selection of literary history. There is no doubt that *Mencius* and *Zhuangzi* are the most literary ones of all the works. Therefore, no matter what the authors' ideas are, they can't be eliminated. *Xunzi* and *Han Feizi* take the second place, so they are generally not deleted. *The Analects of Confucius* is less literary, but it can't be deleted easily because it reflects the original form of philosophical prose -- quotations, which has the function of tracing the source in the history of literature. In contrast, *Laozi* and *Mozi*, which are equally weak in literariness, are more difficult to win the favor of writers of literary history.

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