HOW TO READ CHINESE PROSE

A Guided Anthology

ZONG-QI CAI
editor

How to Read Chinese Prose

HOW TO READ CHINESE LITERATURE

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A GUIDED ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY ZONG-QI CAI

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CONTENTS

PART IV: THE MING AND QING DYNASTIES

* This text is also featured, accompanied by modern Chinese translation and extensive annotation, in *How to Read Chinese Prose in Chinese: A Course in Classical Chinese* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

THEMATIC CONTENTS

1. NARRATIVE GENRES

1.1 Historical Writings (*shi* 史)

SUPPLEMENTAL READINGS FROM HRTCPROSE–CCC

Commentaries

- Diplomatic rhetoric (C1.1; ☞ *HTRCProse-CCC*, L02)
- Family conflicts and their political consequences (C2.1)
- Arguments for and against centralizing power (C2.1)
- Woman and conflict of loyalties (C2.2)
- Woman as victim or historical agent in *Zuo Tradition* (C2.2–2.5)
- Strategic calculations on the battlefield (C2.6; ☞ *HTRCProse-CCC*, L01)
- What is good governance? (C2.8)

Commentaries

- Historical origins of Tang and Song biographical writings (chap. 13)
- Impact of "Tang and Song Poetry and Prose Modernization Movement" on biographical writings (chap. 13)
- Biographical writings as literature (chap. 13)
- Tang biographical writings as metaphor, political allegory, and moral persuasion (C13.1–13.3)
- The playfulness and humor in Tang biographical writings (C13.1)
- The strange and the fantastical in Tang biographical writings (C13.4)
- The cultural shift in Tang and Song biographical writings (C13.5–13.6)
- Song biographical writings as personal narrative and cultural commentary (C13.5–13.6)
- Logical clarity and authorial control in Song biographical writings (C13.5–13.6)
- The art of storytelling in Tang and Song biographical writings (chap. 13)
- Teacher–student relationship (C15.2)

2. DISCURSIVE GENRES

2.1. Recorded Conversations (*yüluti* 語錄體)

Commentaries

- Confucian perspectives on social order (C10.1)
- Confucian critique of Buddhism/Daoism (C10.1)
- Confucian ideas of self-cultivation (C10.1)
- "Chinese" and "foreign/barbarian" identity (C10.1)
- Historical analysis as political critique (C10.3)
- Heaven as mechanistic/moral (C10.2)
- Social functions of expository prose writing (chap. 10)
- The features of the ancient-style expository prose (chap. 10)
- Prose rhythm of Han Yu's "Origin" (C10.1)
- War and peace (C10.3)
- Interstate relations (C10.3)
- The use of dialogs and analogies in Liu Zongyuan's "Heaven" (C10.2)

2.4 Eight-Legged Essay (*baguwen* 八股文)

Commentaries

- The development of civil service examinations (C14.1–14.2)
- The establishment of the eight-legged essay as an examination genre (C14.1–14.2)
- Eight-legged essays devoted to the exegesis of the Confucian canon (C14.1–14.2)
- Eight-legged essay and neo-Confucianism orthodoxy (C14.1–14.2)
- The standard structure of the eight-legged essay (C14.1–14.2)
- Playful eight-legged essays as popular literary pastime and parody (C14.1–14.2)
- The criticism and abolishment of the eight-legged essay (C14.1–14.2)

3. DESCRIPTIVE GENRES

3.1 Metaphorical Description (*yuyan* 寓言)

Commentaries

- Zhuangzi's achievement as a writer (C4.1)
- Three modes of discourse (C4.1–4.2)
- Metaphorical words (*yuyan*): fable about roaming (C4.3)
- Goblet words (*zhiyan*): ad hoc comments and random or unpremeditated discourse (C4.3, C4.5, C4.6a–4.6c, C4.8, C4.10)
- Spiritual cultivation (C4.4)
- The concept of the heart (*xin*) (C4.5)
- Weighty words (*zhongyan*): parables and masks (C4.4, C4.6b, C4.11)
- Loss of self (C4, C6b)
- The piping of heaven (C4.6b)
- Nurturing life (C4.7)
- Zhuangzi on fame and punishment (C4.9)
- Zhuangzi on life and death (C4.7, C4.11–4.13)

3.2 Character Sketches (*Shishuo ti* 世說體)

FROM *A NEW ACCOUNT OF THE TALES OF THE WORLD* (*SHISHUO XINYU*):

Commentaries

- Giving free rein to one's nature (C8.5–8.6, 8.9–8.13, 8.16, 8.31, 8.34)
- Wine, music, and *mingshi* (famous gentlemen) (chap. 8)
- Pure conversation (*qingtan*) (C8.17)
- Air and spirit (*fengdu*) (C8.1–8.3, 8.8, 8.18, 8.20–8.30)
- Necessity of rites (chap. 8)
- *Carpe diem* sentiment (C8.12)
- "Catching the essence, instead of the outward appearance"; a new aesthetic ideal (C8.19)
- Ji Kang's music theory (chap. 8)
- "Aid-words" as a prominent stylistic feature of the *Shishuo xinyu* text (C8.17)

3.3 Travel Writings (*youji* 遊記)

SUPPLEMENTAL READINGS FROM HRTCPROSE–CCC

3.4 Accounts of Places, People, and Things (*ji* 記 and *xu* 序)

Commentaries

- *Carpe diem* sensibility in prefaces (C11.1)
- Officialdom and reclusion (C11.2)
- The imperative to serve the state (C11.2)
- Finding contentment in the simple life (C11.5)
- Memory and remembrance in prefaces (C12.2)
- Song dynasty capital life (C12.2)
- Gender and literary identity (C12.3)
- Games (C12.3)
- Women's writing (C12.3)
- Achievements of occasional essay (*xiaopin wen*) (chap. 16)
- Travelogue as marginalized history (chap. 16)
- Gui Youguang as the transitional figure in Ming and Qing prose (C16.1)
- The three Yuan brothers as forerunners of modern Chinese prose (C16.2)
- Hypnotic allure of Zhang Dai's dreamy nostalgia (C16.3)
- Yao Nai and canonization of ancient-style prose (C16.5)
- Xu Fucheng and the demise of classical Chinese prose (C16.6)

4 COMMUNICATIVE GENRES

4.1 Memorials (*biao* 表)

Commentaries

- The origins of the epistolary genre (chap. 7)
- The popularization of paper use and the increase in epistolary writings (chap. 7)
- Differences between official and private correspondence (chap. 7)
- Crafting and diction in memorials written in parallel prose (chap. 7)
- The flaws of excessive formalism in memorials and letters (chap. 7)

- Equal importance of descriptive and affective language in memorials (chap. 7)
- Literary works and governance (chap. 7)
- The model of a loyal minister's advice on governing (Zhuge Liang's memorial) (C7.1)
- Mourning in familial relationships in Li Mi's memorial (C7.2)

4.2 Letters (*shu* 書): Expository Contents

SUPPLEMENTAL READINGS FROM HRTCPROSE–CCC

Commentaries

- Categorizing and appreciating private letters as literary works (chap. 7)
- The impassioned confession of the humiliated (Sima Qian's letter) (C7.4)
- The sincerity of an iconoclast (Ji Kang's letter) (C7.5)
- Affective and persuasive language in Qiu Chi's call for surrender (C7.7)
- Eulogies for departed friends by royal brothers, Cao Pi and Cao Zhi (C7.8–7.9)

4.3 Letters: Descriptive and Narrative Contents

Commentaries

- Landscape descriptions in letters on travels (C7.10–7.12)
- Dialogic nature of letters (chap. 12)
- Literary self-representation in letters (C12.4–12.6)
- Friendship and letters (C12.4)
- Patron–client relations in letters (C12.6)
- Education, women (C15.1)
- Criticism of scholars/officialdom (C15.4)
- Self-fashioning, women (C15.7)

5 FORMS: EXTRATEXTUAL PATTERNING

5.1 Extratextual Patterning: Narrative Texts

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES FROM HRTCPROSE–CCC

5.2 Extratextual Patterning: Descriptive Texts

6 FORMS: TEXTUAL PATTERNING

6.1 Repetitive Patterning

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES FROM HRTCPROSE–CCC

6.2 Aggregative Patterning

PREFACE TO THE HOW TO READ CHINESE LITERATURE SERIES

Welcome to the How to Read Chinese Literature series, a comprehensive collection of literary anthologies and language texts covering all the major genres of Chinese literature. When completed, the series will consist of ten volumes: five guided literary anthologies, one book on poetic culture, and four language companions. Together, they will promote the teaching and learning of premodern Chinese poetry, fiction, drama, prose, and literary criticism.

In particular, the five guided anthologies offer innovative ways of overcoming some barriers that have long hindered the teaching and learning of Chinese literature. While fine scholarly monographs on Chinese literature abound, they are usually too specialized for classroom use. To make that scholarship more accessible, guided anthologies present the highlights of scholarship on major genres, subgenres, and writers through commentary on individual texts as well as broad surveys.

Every reader of Chinese literature is aware of the gap between English translations and Chinese originals. Because most existing anthologies offer only an English translation, however, students often find it hard to see how diverse linguistic elements work together in the original. To remedy this, each guided anthology presents the Chinese text alongside an English translation, with detailed remarks on the intricate interplay of word, image, and sound in Chinese.

So far, scant attention has been given to the relation between sound and sense in English-language studies of Chinese literature. As a corrective, the poetry anthology explains in detail the prosodic conventions of all major poetic genres and marks the tonal patterning in regulated verse and *ci* poetry. Samples of reconstructed ancient and medieval pronunciation are also given to show how the poems were probably pronounced when first composed. For the poetry and prose anthologies, we offer a sound recording of selected texts, read in Mandarin. For the drama and prose anthologies, video clips of traditional storytelling and dramatic performance will be provided free of charge online.

For decades, the study of Chinese literature in the West was a purely intellectual and aesthetic exercise, completely divorced from language learning. To accommodate demand from an ever-increasing number of Chinese-language learners, we provide tone-marked romanizations for all poetry texts, usually accompanied by sound recording. For any text also featured in the accompanying language text, cross-references allow the reader to quickly proceed to in-depth language study of the original.

Designed to work with the guided anthologies, the four language texts introduce classical Chinese to advanced beginners and above, teaching them how to

appreciate Chinese literature in its original form. As stand-alone resources, these texts illustrate China's major literary genres and themes through a variety of examples.

Each language companion presents a select number of works in three different forms—Chinese, English, and tone-marked romanization—while also providing comprehensive vocabulary notes and prose translations in modern Chinese. Subsequent comprehension questions and comments focus on the artistic aspect of the works, while exercises test readers' grasp of both classical and modern Chinese words, phrases, and syntax. An extensive glossary cross-references classical and modern Chinese usage, characters and compounds, and multiple character meanings. Sound recording is provided for each selected text in the poetry and prose companions. Along with other learning aids, a list of literary or grammar issues addressed throughout completes each volume.

To achieve a seamless integration of literary anthologies and language texts, we draw from the same corpus of canonical texts and provide an extensive network of cross-references. Moreover, by presenting the ten books as a coherent set, we aim to help readers cross the divide between literary genres and between literary and language learning, thereby achieving a kind of experience impossible with traditional approaches. Thanks to these innovative features, we hope the series will reinvigorate—if not revolutionize—the learning and teaching of Chinese literature, language, and culture throughout the English-speaking world for decades to come.

Zong-qi Cai

A NOTE ON HOW TO USE THIS ANTHOLOGY

The goal of this anthology is to introduce students and general readers to the rich heritage of Chinese nonfiction prose, a major literary genre long neglected in Western-language studies of Chinese literature.

This anthology features 115 famous texts, representing major prose genres and dynastic periods from antiquity through the Qing, the last of the Chinese dynasties. Presentation of each text is composed of an English translation, its Chinese original, and a critical commentary. Reading this book cover to cover, students will acquire a comprehensive picture of both the historical development of Chinese prose and the prominent artistic features of its major genres. This combination of breadth and depth makes the anthology a fine core text for developing an undergraduate or graduate course in Chinese prose, which is conspicuously absent from current Chinese literature curricula in the Western world.

The 115 texts are organized first by dynastic period, then by genre. To make the myriad genres and texts manageable, I have introduced four broad genre clusters—narrative, expository, descriptive, and communicative—and listed selected texts accordingly in the thematic table of contents. The four clusters' interrelatedness, as well as their symbiotic relationship with certain prose forms, are noted in my introduction.

This anthology (like others in the series) helps readers go beyond translation to understand what is it that has made selected texts canonical in the Chinese literary traditions. To this end, the Introduction presents the notions of extratextual and textual patterning as a broad paradigm for probing the inner secrets of Chinese prose art. This is followed in chapter 1 by a demonstration of how these two types of patterning work in eight texts drawn from different periods and genres. Additionally, the deployment of extratextual and textual patterning in other texts is identified in the thematic table of contents. Within the chapters, four major forms of textual patterning are clearly marked by typographical symbols.

While mainly serving readers who do not know Chinese, this anthology also seeks to assist learners of Chinese. For them, two important pedagogical aids have been introduced. The first is an extensive network of cross-references, in both the thematic table and individual chapters, to the companion book *How to Read Prose in Chinese: A Course in Classical Chinese*. Twenty of the 115 texts are also featured in that language companion, each with exhaustive glossary and grammar notes and language exercises. These 20 texts are marked by an asterisk in the main table of contents. The remaining 95 texts can be fruitfully studied along with related lessons in the companion book. Second, we provide sound recordings (accompanied by tone-marked romanizations for all 115 texts), accessible and downloadable free of charge at **https://cup.columbia.edu/supplemental-materials-for-how-to-read-chinese-prose**.

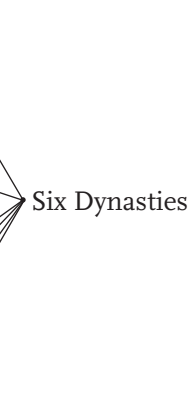
This anthology also offers a good source of supplemental readings for courses in Chinese history, philosophy, or general culture. Prose is the direct, primary medium for narrating historical events, depicting social conditions, and advancing political and philosophical ideas. It is only natural, then, that these 115 texts yield vivid glimpses of major developments in politics, philosophy, and religions as well as literati life throughout Chinese history. Guided by the primary and thematic tables of contents, readers can easily find material closely related to their subjects of study in and beyond literature.

Having benefited so much from readers' feedback on the three poetry volumes through social media, we wish to engage the readers of this book in the same way. We encourage everyone to send in comments and suggestions on our Facebook page (**facebook.com/HowtoReadChinesePoetryZongqiCai**). We will do our best to foster and maintain an informative dialogue on all matters about this and other books in the series and about the teaching and learning of Chinese literature in general.

Zong-qi Cai

MAJOR CHINESE DYNASTIES

Xia	ca. 2100–ca. 1600 BCE
Shang	ca. 1600–ca. 1028 BCE
Zhou	ca. 1046–ca. 256 BCE
Western Zhou	ca. 1046–771 BCE
Eastern Zhou	ca. 771–256 BCE
Spring and Autumn Period	770–ca. 475 BCE
Warring States Period	ca. 475–221 BCE
Qin	221–206 BCE
Han	206 BCE–CE 220
Former Han	206 BCE–CE 8
Later Han	CE 25–220
Three Kingdoms	220–265
Shu	221–263
Wu	222–280
Wei	220–265
Jin	265–420
Western Jin	265–317
Eastern Jin	317–420
Southern and Northern Dynasties	
Southern	420–589
(Liu) Song	420–479
Southern Qi	479–502
Southern Liang	502–557
Southern Chen	557–589
Northern	386–581
Sui	581–618
Tang	618–907
Five Dynasties	907–960
Song	960–1279
Northern Song	960–1127
Southern Song	1127–1279
Yuan	1206–1368
Ming	1368–1644
Qing	1616–1911



SYMBOLS, ABBREVIATIONS, AND TYPOGRAPHIC USAGES

chap. 8	Chapter eight
C8.4	Chapter eight, the fourth selected text
L01	Lesson 1 in *HTRCProse—CCC*
☛	A cross-reference marker Example: (☛ *HTRCProse-CCC*, L1; *HTRCP* ch. 8)
HTRCProse-CCC	Cui, Jie, Liu Yucai and Zong-qi Cai. *How to Read Chinese Prose in Chinese: A Course in Classical Chinese*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022.
HTRCP	Cai, Zong-qi, ed. *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
HTRCPIC	Cai, Zong-qi, ed. *How to Read Chinese Poetry in Context: Poetic Culture from Antiquity Through the Tang*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
Straight underline in a Chinese text	Marking the use of repetitive patterning in a Chinese text, unless indicated otherwise. Example: "知之者不如好之者， 好之者不如樂之者。"
Wavy underline in a Chinese text	Marking the use of parallel phrasing in coupled sentences, unless otherwise indicated. Example: 寂然 凝慮，思接 千載； 悄焉 動容，視通 萬里。
Superscript numbers at the beginning of a line	Marking the use of aggregative patterning in a Chinese text, unless indicated otherwise. Example: [4]歲月不居，[4]時節如流。[4]五十之年，[4]忽焉已至。[4]公爲始滿，[4]融又過二。[4]海內知識，[4]零落殆盡，惟會稽盛孝章尚存。[6]其人困於孫氏，[4]妻孥湮沒，[4]單孑獨立，[4]孤危愁苦。[6]若使憂能傷人，此子不得復永年矣！

How to Read Chinese Prose

Introduction

The Literary and Cultural Significance of Chinese Prose

In Western-language (Sinological) studies of Chinese literature, an extraordinary lacuna has eluded the attention of most scholars: the absence of any comprehensive anthology of artistic, nonfiction prose (hereafter just prose). In China, prose is an independent literary genre privileged (with poetry) over fiction and drama. Compounding this neglect, all general anthologies of Chinese literature in translation, to date, have relegated prose to the margins. Monograph studies of Chinese prose are practically nonexistent. The rich heritage of Chinese prose art has been reduced to mere samples of famous prose works in unguided translations. Thus, as a first step toward restoring prose to its rightful place in Sinological literary studies, we created this comprehensive guided anthology.

CAUSES FOR THE NEGLECT OF PROSE IN SINOLOGICAL LITERARY STUDIES

To embark on a serious study of Chinese prose art, it seems appropriate first to reflect on both the extrinsic and intrinsic causes of the genre's long marginalization in the West. We need a clear idea of the obstacles that must be overcome.

Of various possible external causes, one seems to stand out: the near-universal neglect of prose as a genre in Western literary scholarship, regardless of origin. Essentially a branch of Western academia, Sinological literary studies is naturally informed and guided by Western critical concerns, paradigms, approaches, and methodologies. So the Sinological marginalization of the prose genre inevitably has much to do with general trends of Western literary scholarship. Since its establishment as a discipline in the early twentieth century, English studies has largely lost sight of the art of prose. For instance, most major nineteenth-century British and American nonfiction prose writers have focused on content over form. Whether it is American transcendentalist authors like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau or English authors like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his Victorian successors Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, and John Ruskin, emphasis has almost always fallen on what they say, rather than how they say it. The powerful originality in content has given these nineteenth-century prose writers a decided edge over authors from an earlier period (from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century) who worried about form as much as content, eventually leading to a loss of interest of prose as a form of art.

In fact, the genre Western literary scholars call artistic prose goes all the way back to classical antiquity, and it is not surprising perhaps that the fullest awareness of

it as a genre should still be found in classical scholarship. But it was also a thriving genre in the Renaissance and continued thus virtually to the end of the eighteenth century. Everyone knows the great French essayist Michel Montaigne, but artistic prose was equally an English genre. So we think of the Age of Samuel Johnson, who in his time was famous for his Rambler essays. Earlier, in the English Renaissance, we have such sermon writers as John Donne or, later, Jeremy Taylor. English prose writers also made forays into many other fields as well—witness Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, or Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*. All these writers were well aware of the *topoi* or topics derived from Greek and Latin literature in antiquity and of all the rhetorical ways and means by which these topics were expressed. Nor did they worry overmuch about originality. On the contrary, being in agreement with respected orators like Cicero (i.e., borrowing from him) was thought to be a very smart move. Even the great German critics of the Romantic period, such as Friedrich Schlegel and August Wilhelm Schlegel, who discussed classical literature were already aware of it. That awareness of artistic prose as a genre continued to grow in nineteenth-century German classical scholarship, culminating in the magisterial study by Eduard Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa* (*Antique Artistic Prose*), from which Western literary scholars now derive the name for this genre. So to understand these writers, it is necessary to contemplate the rhetorical ways and means they themselves were often concerned about. And if we do that, we might then find ourselves on the road to recovering the cultural values that lay behind artistic prose as a genre.

The same if not more promise holds for Sinological literary studies. In China, prose studies fell into neglect around the same time (first decades of the twentieth century) and for a rather similar reason: disdain for the concerns of the prose form. If traditional Western appreciation of literary artistry was trumped by a quest for originality, traditional Chinese prose forms were denounced and jettisoned as conveyers of feudal thought during the New Culture and May Fourth movements.

The neglect of Chinese prose cannot be attributed to external causes alone. Among intrinsic obstacles to Sinological studies of prose, the most noteworthy is perhaps the dearth of distinctive form markers. This difficulty may be best illustrated through a comparison with the readily recognized forms of Chinese poetry. All Chinese poetic forms display distinct configurations with an array of ostensible markers: line and composition length, stanza division, end-rhymes, and parallel phrasing. Most of these form markers come through nicely in English translation, enabling translators and readers alike to break and parse lines in ways faithful to the originals.[1] In my view, this essentially faithful presentation of original poetic forms provides a solid foundation for general appreciation as well as in-depth inquiry into Chinese poetic art. By contrast, lacking such form markers, Chinese prose writings tend to translate all the same so that only their contents separate an ancient Chinese text from a modern one. Such translational homogenization of Chinese prose is no doubt a major factor in the apathy this literature has long received in Sinological scholarship.

UNDERSTANDING CHINESE PROSE GENRES

To mitigate the homogenization of Chinese prose, we have undertaken two major endeavors in preparing this anthology. The first is to introduce readers to a rich diversity of prose genres developed from antiquity through the Qing dynasty. In traditional Chinese literary criticism, prose genres are named and defined according to their specific content, function, or context of composition, thus leading to the proliferation of several hundreds of genres. These genres have not been codified with a vertical genus-species scheme and are therefore overwhelming and confusing even to seasoned scholars of Chinese literature. To help readers view the contours of Chinese prose, I have devised a new fourfold scheme for codifying Chinese prose genres. In the thematic table of contents, I have classified the 115 selected texts under four broad genre categories—narrative, discursive, descriptive, and communicative—each of which features three or four of its most important genres.

Four major narrative genres are introduced in the order of their appearance. We begin with *Zuo Tradition* and other pre-Qin histories (*shi*), presenting excerpts known for their vivid portrayal of famous historical figures through dialogs and actions. Next, in Sima Qian's *Grand Scribe's Records*, we observe a morphing of such character sketches into full-fledged official biographies (*zhuan*). Coming to Tang and Song times, we witness the rise of less formal biographical accounts (*zhuanji*), some real, some allegorical, and some fictive. In writing these biographical accounts, Tang and Song prose masters seem to have been more interested in conveying their Confucian views and beliefs than revealing the inner lives of biographical subjects. Once we have grasped this point, we can understand why most of their biographical subjects are not figures worthy of historical memory like those depicted by Sima Qian. Steele inscription (*bei*), a genre that became rather popular starting in Tang and Song times, represents a return to formal biographical writing, although in a highly condensed form.

Discursive genres are primarily media of advancing and expounding abstract ideas. In this anthology, readers will observe the emergence of four distinctive discursive genres, revealing a trajectory from oral speeches to highly formalized essay writing. The earliest discursive genre is that of recorded conversations (*yulu*), as exemplified by *Analects* in which Confucius articulates his moral ideas through conversations with his disciples (C3.1–9). Then, in *Mencius*, this conversational genre evolves into a prototype of argumentative essay (*yilunwen*), as Mencius habitually expands his replies and speeches into short essays (C1.4; *HTRCProse-CCC*, L07; C3.10). When its conversational framework was dispensed with, this Mencian prototype would become a full-fledged argumentative essay (*yilunwen*). Such a metamorphosis is clearly evident in *Xunzi* (C3.11–12). Many argumentative essays written during the Warring States period and the Han dynasty still retain vestiges of conversation: writers often engage an intellectual opponent as an interlocutor in a debate. With the exit of debating interlocutors, other essays become less argumentative than expository. In these essays, writers dispassionately and objectively expound

a concept or theory from multiple perspectives. Such expository prose flourished during the mid– and late–Six Dynasties period, during which the newly developed parallel prose form was exploited to illuminate dynamic bipolar relationships crucial to the elucidation of a theory. Examples par excellence are Zong Bing's (375–443) analysis of the spirit in landscape painting (C9.2) and Liu Xie's (ca. 465–ca. 522) analysis of the creative process (C9.4). Best known for their accomplishments in narrative and descriptive genres (chap. 11, 12), Tang and Song prose masters were not particularly fascinated with formal expository writing even though some of them left behind influential expository essays in the nonparallel ancient style (C10.1; *HTRCProse-CCC*, L25–27). The last major discursive genre is the examination essay, popularly known as the "eight-legged essay," emerging in the mid-Ming dynasty. This genre is in many ways an amalgam of the other three discursive genres. First, the author is required to speak in the voice of a Confucian sage, thus reminding us of recorded conversations, the earliest discursive genre. This genre's debt to the argumentative and expository genres is even more prominent. Its phrasing is typically that of the ancient nonparallel style prevalently used in pre-Qin and Han argumentative and expository prose. In the meantime, its paragraphing style, noted for its mandatory use of six or eight parallel legs (paragraphs), harks back to the Six Dynasties expository prose in the parallel form (C14.1).

Descriptive genres are devoted to depicting nature scenes and events of the human world. In China, full-fledged descriptive genres emerged considerably later than narrative and discursive genres. Although vivid and sometimes extended descriptive passages appear in early pre-Qin texts, nature is hardly an object of exclusive interest in major pre-Qin historical and philosophical writings. For instance, in *Zhuangzi*, we find detailed and vivid descriptions of fauna and flora, but they are primarily metaphorical words (*yuyan*) as called by Zhuangzi's disciples, intended to convey philosophical ideas (C4.2). For all intents and purposes, they should be treated as a prototype of a descriptive genre. Then, in *A New Account of the Tales of the World*, written about six hundred years after *Zhuangzi*, we see another prototype, this time focused on human characters. This book comprises hundreds of stand-alone character sketches or rather character entries, usually just a few sentences each, focused on the transcendent conduct, behaviors, and manners of famous Wei–Jin figures (C8.1–34). The Six Dynasties witnesses the rise of the full-fledged descriptive prose genre—depiction of landscape, real or fictional, as the site of aesthetic enjoyment (C9.2), utopian imagination (*HTRCProse-CCC*, L23), or religious contemplation. Tang and Song times are perhaps the golden age of Chinese descriptive prose, with a full blossoming of not only landscape-focused travel writings but also *ji* and *xu* genres that depict various aspects of literati's semiprivate or private lives (chap. 11, 12). It is largely in these descriptive genres that the Tang and Song prose masters earned their literary eminence. Descriptive genres continued to flourish in Ming-Qing times, achieving new breakthroughs in broadening thematic scope, amplifying lyrical intensity (C15.1, C15.4), and capturing aesthetic pleasure of sensory impressions (C16.3; *HTRCProse-CCC*, L33).

Communicative genres include two broad types of epistolary writing: formal correspondence between officials and their rulers, and informal correspondence between friends and family members. The former consists of many subtypes defined based on the specificity of occasions, functions, and addresser–addressee relationship. Of these types, memorials (*biao*) are considered to have the greatest literary value thanks to the lyrical intensity with which many writers argue for one cause or another. For this reason, three famous memorials are included in this anthology (C7.1–3), even though our focus is on informal letters (*shu*) between friends and family members.

Examining the selected memorials and letters, it is not hard to see what distinguishes Chinese epistolary prose from other genres: its communicative framework, made up of a letter writer's self-effacing, stylized pleasantries that open and end a letter. This communicative framework ultimately could be traced to the dialogic framework of pre-Qin recorded conversations. With the addressee being physically absent, however, a letter writer no longer faces the exigency of ongoing questions and answers and can put down whatever he or she wants, whether an exposition of ideas, a description of nature scenes, or an account of events. Consequently, letters are the most versatile of all prose genres because they can effectively perform, albeit in a miniature form, narrative, discursive, and descriptive functions, as indicated in the thematic table of contents (4.1–4.3).

UNDERSTANDING CHINESE PROSE FORMS

To further mitigate the translational homogenization of Chinese prose, we have undertaken a second endeavor: to make manifest the hidden form markers of Chinese prose. Chapter 1 is devoted to codifying manifold Chinese prose forms based on the employment of extratextual and textual patterning.

Extratextual patterning refers to an author's *global* organizing act, unaided by any textual device, of selecting, cutting, and integrating diverse material in a way that best conveys his or her thematic conception. It may be in some way compared to a kaleidoscopic integration of fragments into an aesthetically pleasing whole. A brainchild of the author, extratextual patterning does not allow further categorization but always can be vicariously experienced by a perceptive reader. To discern and describe a prose master's invisible, cerebral extratextual patterning behind a seemingly disjointed text is an abiding endeavor in traditional Chinese prose criticism. By contrast, textual patterning refers to a largely *local* act of organizing individual words into larger units of lines, sentences, and paragraphs. It has been employed for a broad array of purposes—to enhance the sensory impact of scene description, to amplify the emotional intensity of self-expression or communication, to enhance the persuasiveness of an oratory, and to facilitate an argumentative or expository process. Textual patterning could be quantitatively verified and classified. In my view, textual patterning consists of four major types: repetitive (pre-Qin times), aggregative (Han and Wei–Jin periods), parallel (Qi–Liang period), and parallel-repetitive (Ming-Qing times). As marked by the parentheses,

these four patterns emerged in a clear historical sequence. But after its emergence, each type continues to be employed and refined in subsequent times.

The ubiquity of extratextual and textual patterning in Chinese prose is beyond question. Most of the 115 selected texts in this book employ extratextual patterning, textual patterning, or a mixture of both and are accordingly classified in the thematic table of contents. To help readers better recognize and appreciate prominent prose forms, I have clearly marked the use of textual patterning in individual texts—using straight underline for repetitive patterning, superscript numbers for aggregative patterning, and wavy underline for parallel patterning.

INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF CHINESE PROSE GENRES, FORMS, AND THEMES

As we read through the 115 selected texts, we will see an unusually high degree of interconnectedness among prose genres, forms, and, to a lesser degree, themes.

As we look at "Forms: Extratextual Patterning" in the thematic contents, we cannot fail to see that narrative genres almost exclusively employ extratextual patterning. Contrary to our common association of narration with linear sequence, the most acclaimed of Chinese narrative texts are those that deftly utilize extratextual patterning to organize diverse narrative elements in a kaleidoscopic fashion. By exploiting the gaps between narrative elements, writers aim to subtly reveal their understanding of pivotal human factors behind the unfolding of historical events. This symbiosis between narrative genres and extratextual patterning seems to stem from and in turn enhance the human-focused feature of the Chinese narrative tradition. This defining feature figures prominently in pre-Qin historical texts and eventually leads to a proliferation in subsequent times of biographical writings in varying forms. Going hand in hand with this profuse use of extratextual patterning is a notable avoidance of textual patterning in most narrative texts except in isolated citations of oratory speeches.

In discursive genres, the balance between extratextual and textual patterning is just the reverse. The inherent linear nature of reasoning renders irrelevant any use of kaleidoscopic *global* extratextual patterning. Most full-fledged discursive writings naturally follow a beginning-middle-end process, and therefore there is little need for global organization. In most circumstances, a writer needs to enhance the transition within this tripartite structure with various connectives. By the Ming and Qing times, the beginning-middle-ending structure has become so internalized by writers and readers alike that obtrusive use of connectives largely disappears in eight-legged essays. In proportion to the decreasing need of global patterning, *local* textual patterning within paragraphs becomes ever more pronounced in discursive genres, as a means of advancing political and philosophical theories, illuminating bipolar relationships, and achieving maximum rhetorical impact. In discursive genres, we see a crescendo moving from repetitive patterning in pre-Qin argumentative essays, through aggregative and parallel patterning in Six Dynasties expository prose, toward the merging of parallel and repetitive patterning in the Ming-Qing eight-legged essays. In terms of themes, discursive genres are no doubt

a good place for readers to get acquainted with Confucian, Moist, Legalist, and other philosophies. The marking of textual patterning in selected discursive texts should make it easier for readers to follow the thoughts of Chinese thinkers.

As compared with narrative and discursive genres, descriptive genres are more malleable and syncretic regarding the use of patterning. In depicting a nature scene or a social occasion, a writer may opt to exclusively use extratextual patterning (C11.1–2) or textual patterning (C12.1–2) or to blend the two (C11.3), all with an impressive effect. Consequently, descriptive genres do not display the kind of close genre-form symbiosis evident in narrative and discursive genres. Descriptive genres also exhibit the same border-crossing capabilities in thematic alignment. While primarily used to convey sensory perceptions and emotional response to scenes, occasions, and events, descriptive genres also readily take on discursive functions by means of analogy or allegory (C4.3, C4.13).

With the communicative framework removed, memorials and letters are practically discursive, descriptive, and narrative writings writ small. So what has been said about the interconnectedness of genres, forms, and themes in the other three genres applies to letters as well. One point worthy of mention is a personalization and lyricization when discursive, descriptive, and narrative contents are put in the letter form. Readers may see, for instance, how abstract philosophical ideas get transmuted to burning existential issues in Sima Qian's and Ji Kang's letters (C7.4–5). It is to this magic power of personalization and lyricization that epistolary genres owe their enduring value.

THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CHINESE PROSE

In addition to its symbiotic integration of genres, forms, and contents, Chinese prose displays an even more important cultural specificity: its embodiment of culture at large. In promoting a new prose form, critics almost invariably make grandiose cosmological claims, enshrining it as the essence of the Dao. This line of reasoning is strictly adhered to by prominent prose critics of all persuasions and in all eras, from Liu Xie and Xiao Tong in the Six Dynasties to the Eight Masters of Tang–Song prose, the Ming–Qing critic Fang Bao, and many others. Their effusive claims for prose are far too numerous to cite here. Moving down to the less rarified ethico-sociopolitical plane, we never cease to hear arguments for or against certain prose forms couched in the strongest of glorifying or condemning terms. As time passed, forms were by turns lionized as the epitome of cultural accomplishment and condemned as decadence leading to the fall of dynasties. The dramatically changing fortunes of parallel prose are a classic case in point. At different times, polemic arguments for or against certain prose forms ushered in broad new literary and cultural movements, such as the Tang–Song Ancient-Prose movement.

Endowed with so much cultural significance, it is little wonder that traditional prose forms became a prime target of attacks during the New Culture movement and the May Fourth movement in the early twentieth century. Deemed preservers of feudal thought and obstacles to language reform, all three dominant classical prose forms—ancient-style, parallel prose, and the eight-legged essay—were

relentlessly castigated and resolutely jettisoned. The eight-legged essay was rendered obsolete by the abolition of the civil service examination in 1905, leaving the other two prose forms to bear the brunt of hostile attacks by revolutionary-minded intellectuals, who deftly galvanized broad support through the famous name-calling of Qian Xuantong (1887–1939). He railed against "the evils of the Xuanxue [studies of parallel prose] and the curse of Tongcheng [school of the ancient-style prose]."[2] Vernacular Chinese, presumably untainted by traditional prose forms, has ever since been adopted as the standard prose form. As if to mark this triumph of natural, untutored vernacular prose, the term *sanwen* literally meaning "loose writing," and although it originally designated nonpatterned writing as opposed to parallel prose, it has since been elevated to name the prose genre in its entirety.

But traditions die hard and some even have a way of coming back. Thanks to the revived appreciation of traditional culture since the 1990s, traditional Chinese prose forms have staged an amazing comeback both as a means of literary composition and as a subject of scholarly research. Today, the ability to write in traditional prose forms is taken to attest to one's erudition and literary talent. In the academy, the study of prose, known as *wenzhang xue* (studies of literary compositions), has become one of the most popular areas of research. Considering these recent developments, in addition to prose's intrinsic literary and cultural significance, it seems opportune now to bring prose into the purview of Sinological literary studies and introduce its splendid art to English readers.

Zong-qi Cai

NOTES

1. Poetry boasts a sophisticated taxonomy of formal differentiations based on line syllabic counts (e.g., pentasyllabic poetry, heptasyllabic poetry), tonal regulations (e.g., regulated quatrains, regulated verse), poem lengths and so on.
2. Chen Yongbao, ed., *Qian Xuantong wusi shiqi pinglunji* (*A Collection of Qian Xuantong's Commentaries Written During the May Fourth Movement*) (Beijing: Dongfang chuban zhongxin, 1998), 1.

PART I

Overview and Pre-Qin Times