

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Da-xing Zeng (2017) *An Introduction to Literary Geography*. Beijing: The Commercial Press. 478 pp., RMB48.00 yuan (paperback), ISBN 978-7-100-12586-4.

This book, the first introductory work of literary geography in China, has justified literary geography as a discipline running in parallel with literary theory, literary criticism, and literary history. Zeng argues that literary geography is a subdiscipline of literary studies rather than an interdisciplinary field (Hones 2015: 1-5), or a subfield in geography in that the theories and methodologies of geography are adopted to solve problems in literary studies instead of problems in geography (Brousseau 1994: 333-53).

Zeng points out that literary geography is to literature, what historical geography is to history, geolinguistics to linguistics, geonomics to economics, botanical geography to botany, military geography to military science. Zeng says in the preface that the book 'is intended to set up a primary theoretical framework for literary geography as a secondary discipline for the first time in China'.

The book has consequently structured the disciplinary knowledge of literary geography, covering such topics as the academic history of literary geography, the research object, research methodology, geographical influence upon literature, geographical distribution of writers, geographical space in literary works, literary landscapes, literary regionality, and critical literary geography. In my personal view, the highlights are mainly as follows.

Firstly, the influence of the geographical environment—involving natural and cultural environments—on literary production are explored in depth. The second chapter argues that natural and cultural environments help to shape the temperament and personality of writers, impact upon their selection of literary themes and literary geographical spaces, and contribute to the construction of their literary styles. The mechanism of geographical influence upon literature is delineated as: natural or artificial geographical objects (*Dili Wuxiang*) and geographical events (*Dili Shixiang*) influence the life consciousness of a writer which further influences a writer's temperament and personality and shapes the writer's literary creation. Life consciousness is defined as ontological thoughts about life (origin, growth, and death). Zeng derives this generative mechanism from *Wen-hsintiao-lung* which holds that 'Literature is generated from the basic workings of the universe' (Stephen 1992: 186).

Secondly, Zeng points out in the third chapter that the place of a writer's growth is more important than his or her birthplace, ancestral homeplace, and place of migration because the writer's youthful memories have shaped his or her outlook and values. Static and dynamic, long-term and short-term distribution of writers are discussed in the chapter, and the methods used to determine the statistical standard of a writer, to define a writer's place of growth, and to describe the distribution of writers are detailed. Zeng's discussion is filled with examples from his own research, revealing that the geographical distribution of Chinese writers of all ages assumes a vine-and-watermelon structure, the

vine being the Yellow River, Yangtze River, and Zhujiang River, the watermelons being the plains along the rivers. Most interestingly, Zeng's statistical analysis of *A Dictionary of Famous Chinese Litterateurs* by Zhengbi Tang (1981) shows that after the Invasion by the Wu Hu (307-13) writers in South China outnumbered writers in North China for the first time in history. Among 561 writers with definite birthplaces out of a total of 569 during the period of the Eastern Jin, the sixteen States, and the Northern and Southern Dynasties, 430 came from South China, and only 131 came from North China. After the Jin–Song Wars (1126-1127) writers in South China continued to outnumber writers in the North—among a total of 715 writers with definite birthplaces, 517 came from South China, and only 198 came from North China. His statistics serve as evidence to support the idea that the cultural centre in ancient China began to shift from the Yellow River basin to the Yangtze River basin after the Invasion by the Wu Hu.

Thirdly, literary regionality is discussed with great originality in this volume. A literary region is defined as a literary space with relative stability specific to a natural district and a corresponding culture, which involves such elements as writers, literary families, regional literary schools or literary societies, literary works, literary landscapes, which form an interrelated whole on account of their relatively consistent literary characteristics. A literary region, like a cultural district, has its own centre, boundaries, and transitional zones. Writers and readers in the same natural and cultural environment are relatively consistent in their pursuit of literary aesthetic taste. It is this relatively consistent taste that constructs the individuality and heterogeneity of a literary region. A literary region is geo-spatially distinct and diachronically continuous. The temporal differences in literary dissemination and the differences of literary works in different times are often reflected in the spatial differences between literary regions. The boundary of a literary region is dynamic and transitional, and the prototypical core characteristics of a literary region diminish towards the transitional zone. The obscurity and dynamism of literary boundaries result in the differentiation and integration of literary regions in different historical times. In addition, eleven Chinese literary regions and their features are systematically discussed.

Most important of all, in my view, the eighth chapter comprehensively discusses the research methods of literary geography adopted by Prof. Zeng himself and other scholars—place-centered methods, on-site investigation methods, geospatial methods, region-differentiation methods, methods of comparing literary regions, and geo-image methods. The place-centered method, the fundamental research method of literary geography in China in Zeng's opinion, is defined as verification of literary places—the place where a literary work was written; the place where a writer was born; the place where a writer wrote his works; a place where a genre originated; a place where a literary school rose to prominence; a place where a literary landscape is located; a place where a literary region is centered or is bordered and so on. By applying this method, cartographical technology, historical exploration of archives, and field trips are often jointly employed. On-site investigation methods, such as field investigation, involve an investigation into the place where a work was written. The place may be a mountain-river landscape, or the real world the writer described in his works, or the environment a writer lived in (Jian 2006: 1-5). Geospatial methods are employed to study geological spaces based on geological phenomena and geological events—mountainous or hilly space; space of plains; marine space; rural space; urban space; prairie space and so on. Region-differentiation methods are used to

find different literary regions and their differences. Comparative methods of literary regions refer to a further horizontal comparative study of literature in different literary regions. The geo-imaging method is adopted to study the real or virtual geo-images which have abundant implications because of previous descriptions by writers.

This volume is slightly weak in terms of its few examples from Western literature and its few references to studies of literary geographies outside of China on account of the authors' expertise in Chinese literature and his lesser knowledge of foreign languages. Generally speaking, however, the book is a landmark in China's studies in literary geography, and its advocacy and persuasive argumentation for disciplinary independence are convincing and hence of great significance to the development of literary studies from a geographical perspective which partly compensates for the past neglect of spatial research in relation to Chinese literature.

Works Cited

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