

## No Nonfiction: PL2658.E8

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If Confucius were alive today, you would be more likely to find him browsing the nonfiction section at Barnes & Noble than the fiction. In fact, in his collected work, the *Lun Yu* (論語) or *Analects*, it is made clear that he considered telling and writing the truth, observing and researching what is and what has come before, vastly superior to invention. According to Chapter 7, Verse 1, “The Master [Confucius] said, ‘I transmit but do not innovate; I am truthful in what I say and devoted to antiquity<sup>1</sup>....’”(translation by D. C. Lau<sup>2</sup>). The beginning of Chapter 7 Verse 27 states, “The Master said, ‘There are presumably men who innovate without possessing knowledge, but that is not a fault I have. I use my ears widely and follow what is good in what I have heard; I use my eyes widely and retain what I have seen in my mind<sup>3</sup>...’” (D.C. Lau). Because of these remarks, and because the way to fortune and fame in China was to be able to write essays and (sometimes) poetry for imperial exams, Chinese culture came to value poetry and nonfiction above fiction and drama.

The subgenre of nonfiction most appreciated in Confucian China was ahistoriography, but many other kinds existed. For example, collections of miscellanea, not unlike their European counterparts, were popular. They included observations on poetry, antiques, objects d’art, and beautiful scenery<sup>4</sup>. Other forms, further removed from their Western equivalents, were also common. For example, just as China doesn’t have an epic tradition, the West doesn’t have *fu* 賦, a kind of prose poem or rhapsody written in a highly stylized parallel prose, which might be considered a far-distant cousin to the lyric essay or prose poem. Another distant relative, the eight-legged essay, *baguwen* 八股文, a highly formalized prose style that was a crucial component of imperial examinations in the Ming and Qing dynasties, vaguely resembles the five-paragraph theme.

Despite this rich tradition, other than philosophical texts (I counted 33 translations of the *Dao De Jing*) very little literary nonfiction has been translated from Chinese into English. For example, in the Library of Congress, David Pollard’s collection *The Chinese Essay*<sup>5</sup>, the only collection published in English thus far that includes both pre-modern and modern masterpieces of this Chinese literary form, is shelved under the call number PL2658.E8, a number that indicates prose translated into English from Chinese. Searching for works with the same call number I found that out of the 101 entries, only

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<sup>1</sup> 子曰，述而不作，信而好古....

<sup>2</sup> Various translations of the *Analects* are available at <http://www.afpc.asso.fr/wengu/wg/wengu.php?l=Lunyu&no=1>

<sup>3</sup> 子曰，蓋有不知而作之者，我無是也，多聞擇其善者而從之，多見而識之....

<sup>4</sup> Japanese works of a similar genre are better known in English. *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon and *Essays in Idleness* by Kenko, a Japanese monk are two examples.

<sup>5</sup> *The Chinese Essay*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

five were works of nonfiction; the rest was fiction<sup>6</sup>. Of the 20 travel memoirs about China, the only translated work was translated from Tibetan not Chinese<sup>7</sup>. Everything else was written by Anglophone adventurers or missionaries.

So, if the nonfiction tradition in China is so important and rich, why is so little translated into English?

The easy answer is there's no market for it. Another argument is that the content is too obscure, being distanced by both time and culture. David Pollard contests that there isn't much nonfiction in translation because not many people are interested in translating it. He believes this comes from a Western bias against the essay, which suffers from a lack of "prestige" (24). I wonder if it also might have to do with the fact that Chinese nonfiction doesn't always correspond with our expectations for the genre, based on how it appears in English.

This raises the question: Does Chinese nonfiction need to be translated?

I can best address this question with a personal anecdote. This past summer I read an essay written by one of China's most highly regarded contemporary essayists and cultural critics, Yu Qiuyu. It is called "Shanghai People," and as the title suggests the Shanghainese are the subject of this astutely written personal essay. I lived for just over two years in Shanghai and was friends with a lot of interesting Shanghai people, most notably Pangpang, my good friend's boyfriend, who was a rock star hopeful and cultural critic in his own right. I also lived in a converted old Western mansion in downtown Shanghai and shared my kitchen and backyard with an assortment of Chinese families and elderly ladies. I spent a lot of time with all of these people. We ate together, drank together, babysat each others' parakeets. They asked me three times a day if I'd eaten and yelled at me when I burnt things in the kitchen. Someone stole my underwear, and someone else pulled my fuse when I had noisy guests over a little too late. Despite these daily interaction and close friendships, Yu Qiuyu's essay was eye opening.

Why?

I think because an adequate understanding of what China is can only be accessed through various layers of experience. As with any complex phenomenon, there is a need for multiple representations. My China together with the China described by Anglophone writers is only a limited understanding a place with infinite variables. Without access to many different narratives from many different kinds of writers, China – and even Shanghai – can hardly be grasped.

Without a healthy body of nonfiction about China translated from Chinese into English, Anglophone readers will have less of an ability to grasp China and its culture. So why have translators largely avoided this body of work? I have a few ideas.

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<sup>6</sup> This is the link to the Library of Congress search page: <http://catalog.loc.gov/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&PAGE=First>. If you'd like to see my results, please enter call number "PL2658.E8" in an "LC Class Call Number Browse."

<sup>7</sup> For this search I used the link: <http://catalog.loc.gov/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?PAGE=bbSearch&SEQ=20080310174909&PID=23134> and searched for "China" and "travel memoir."

Until recently, the West has classified nonfiction as a second-class citizen and under rather narrow terms (mainly argument-driven essays and memoirs of the notable). This has led to a lack of imagination about how Chinese literary nonfiction might stretch the boundaries of its English counterpart. There has also been, one might propose, a subconscious desire to leave exotic China poetic and foreign, hence the prevalence of English versions of Chinese poetry and tales of the strange. But surely in the current cultural landscape, where there is an interest in the international, and especially China, curiosity to hear China's various voices exists. Perhaps, now, the paucity of Chinese nonfiction in English can be addressed.