

“What’s Past Is Prologue:” Medieval English Studies in China in Recent Decades (1978-2014)*

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I. From Marxism to quasi-liberalism

In so far as literary studies in recent decades in China (1978–2014), or the so-called “opening and reform” era, have evolved from the preceding Mao era, which valued class struggle and Marxism–Leninism as the guiding principle in education and research as well as in all other aspects of individual and social life, medieval English studies are inevitably tainted by the ideological approach, especially before the advent of the socialist

* The focus of this essay is on mainland China. For the situation in Taiwan, see two articles by Francis K. H. So: 台湾地区英国中古暨文艺复兴文学研究的回顾 1980–2000 (An Annotated Bibliography of English Medieval and Renaissance Studies in Taiwan 1980–2000), The Humanities Research Center, National Science Council, Jan. 2001–July 2002, i–xxvii, 1–122; “A Fledgling Field: Medieval European Studies in Taiwan, 1980–2000,” *Sun Yat-sen Journal of Humanities* 20 (summer 2005): 1–14.

market economy in the early 1990s. For example, in his influential *History of English Literature* published in 1982, Chen Jia connects both Langland's *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* with the "great" peasants' rising of 1381 (49, 57), maintaining that "Pictures of terrible class struggle in late 14th-century England peep through many passages" in the former (48), and that the latter contains "keen social criticism" (58). His viewpoints are similar to those expressed in *A History of European Literature* (1979), an even more influential literary history which asserts bluntly that *Piers Plowman* is the "direct product of the English peasant movement" (Yang, Wu, and Zhao 123). For Chen Jia, "The fact that Chaucer and his two fellow poets Langland and Gower concurred in their ridicule and censure of most of the ecclesiastics is surely no coincidence but a very definite reflection of the moral degeneracy common to the clericals at the time" (58). Although he pays homage to Chaucer's artistic achievements (59-61), more often than not he automatically regards literary works as reflections of social reality and class struggle. Another instance is manifest when he claims that "there are no allegorical personages nor supernatural elements in [*Troilus and Criseyde*] but rather vivid portraits of a pair of passionate lovers in a late feudal and early bourgeois environment" (54). This familiar practice of socio-political analyses through the author's class leanings is later condemned as "vulgar sociology," as a consequence of the deepening of opening and reform. Yet in the 1980s this "Marxist" approach was still readily followed. Han Minzhong's 1985 article on Langland and Chaucer demonstrates her literary sensitivity, especially when she discusses Chaucer's emergent skepticism (45) and contrasts the divergent effects upon the reader of the two poems: *Piers Plowman* is dark, dull, gloomy, and depressive, while *Canterbury Tales* is bright, colorful, lively, and refreshing (34). In her exploration from the angle of class leanings into the reason why the

different impressions are produced, however, Han practically reiterates Chen Jia's points (Chen Jia 48–49, 55–58). Actually Han's inspiration for her article must have originated from Karl Marx's famous suggestion to compare *Piers Plowman* with *Canterbury Tales* (qtd. in Yang, Wu, and Zhao 123–24).

II. Professor Li Fu-ning, father of medieval English studies in China

In point of fact, Professor Li Fu-ning (1917–2004), whom I call the father of medieval English studies in the People's Republic of China, was once severely criticized for his aesthetic and philological approach to Chaucer. In 1957, Professor Li published his long essay "The Adjectives in Chaucer's Poetry" in two parts, tracing the poet's uses of color adjectives and other adjectives and pinpointing their aesthetic effects. The next year an article came out criticizing Li's "dilettantism of capitalist linguistics," and Li's impressive and legitimate treatment was attacked as "formalist and trivial," "dull and pointless," "long-winded, empty, and impractical" (Zhang Zailiang). The root cause of Li's error was designated to be his academic training in the No. 1 capitalist country U.S.A. (Li graduated from Yale) and his ignorance of Marxism-Leninism. The erroneous capitalist tendency in Western literary studies must be thoroughly eradicated in favor of serving the present socialist state, declared the author. This political encounter with aestheticism nearly sixty years ago has long-standing and significant effects in multiple ways: literary, historical, sociological, biographical, and psychological. Interestingly, Professor Li seemed eventually not to be tamed by the criticism. In 1995, he had his article on Chaucer's adjectives reprinted verbatim in his essay collection. In his 1997 book, though he

announces his attempt to apply historical materialism to the study of writers and works in the Preface, he selects a revised version of his 1945 essay as the very first one in the collection, in which he stresses the positive meaning of Shakespeare's representation of human nature as well as Chaucer's truthful portrayal of his age. This symbolic return to the past is symptomatic of the redirection in the field of literary studies in China's recent decades from vulgar sociology to human nature, from Marxism to quasi-liberalism, from monotony to polytonality, from uniformity to heterogeneity, particularly after the official adoption of the socialist market economy in the early 1990s.

Professor Li Fu-ning's persistent efforts and enormous contributions as a scholar, a translator, a teacher, and an administrator qualify him as the father of medieval English studies in the P.R.C. Li graduated from and taught at Southwest Associated University in the war-torn China. Then from 1946-1950 Li pursued his graduate studies in the English Department of Yale University. His mentor was Professor Robert J. Menner, an expert on Old English and Old French. At Yale Li excelled his peers in the courses of Old English, Middle English, Chaucer, and Renaissance English Literature. In 1950 Li returned to teach in Beijing before the completion of his doctoral thesis. Since 1952 he had been teaching at Peking University. As a scholar, he writes extensively on English and Western literature, including medieval English literature. The articles are mainly gathered into two volumes: *Honey and Wax: Reading Notes on Western Literature* (1995) and *Collected Articles on English Literature* (1997). Moreover, Li's *A History of the English Language* (1991) remains a standard reference book on the subject over two decades after its publication in China. In terms of translation, in addition to T. S. Eliot's criticism, Li has translated a number of pieces of Old English and Middle English literature (Li and He 8-111). Professor Li was a great

teacher as well, passionate and powerful, as witnessed by the numerous essays in the memorial book after his decease (School of Foreign Languages). He lives in the memory of those who were lucky enough to know him personally, including me. Professor Li supervised the first doctoral dissertation on English literature in the history of the P.R.C., "Milton's Satan and English Literary Tradition" (1989) by Shen Hong. Additionally, Feng Xiang's M.A. thesis (1984), Yuan Xianjun's Ph.D. dissertation (1994), and Liu Naiyin's Ph.D. dissertation (1996), all supervised by Professor Li, on Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and *Canterbury Tales* respectively, are probably the earliest academic theses on medieval English literature in the P.R.C. The authors of these theses have currently become the major figures in the field of medieval English studies. Feng Xiang translates *Beowulf* (1992); Shen Hong translates *Piers Plowman* (1999), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and many other Middle English poems (2009); Yuan Xianjun translates *Medieval Philosophy* (2010); Liu Naiyin, teaching at East China Normal University, has directed one M.A. thesis and five doctoral dissertations on medieval English literature since 2007. Some years after Professor Li's decease, the third generation of medieval English scholars are emerging in China, signaled by the publication of the revised version of Ding Jianning's dissertation *Possibility of Transcending: Chaucer as an Intellectual* (2010) and Zhang Yating's dissertation *A Study of Motherhood Represented in Literature of Medieval England* (2014; both supervised by Liu Naiyin). While the English Department of Peking University continues to be important for medieval English studies in mainland China with the aid of foreign expert Thomas Rendall, other universities such as Zhejiang University with its impressive team of medieval scholars led by Professor Shen Hong are catching up quickly.

Ⅲ. Contributions of foreign experts

Indeed, contributions from foreign experts should not be neglected. At Peking University, Thomas Rendall has been teaching Chaucer and Dante in recent years; back in the late 1980s, Professor Li invited Yale professor and poet Marie Borroff and another Yale professor Dorothee Metlitzki to visit the English Department and deliver lectures on medieval English literature (Li Funing 2005, 155). In 2004 Professor Malcolm Godden of the University of Oxford presented a series of lectures to the graduate students specializing in medieval English literature at East China Normal University and also chaired the panel of Ding Jianning's dissertation proposal judgment (Ding, Liu Naiyin's Preface, 2; Ding's Acknowledgements, 1). Professor Carol Kaske of Cornell University helped with Liu Naiyin's dissertation project (Liu Naiyin iv), and likewise Professor Vincent Gillespie of the University of Oxford and Professor Helen Cooper of the University of Cambridge rendered aid to both Ding Jianning's and Zhang Yating's dissertation projects (Ding's Acknowledgements, 1-2; Zhang Yating 330). Foreign experts are more than welcome to visit China temporarily or stay permanently for the spread of medieval English language and literature.

Ⅳ. Four features of medieval English studies in recent China

Compared with the Mao era, medieval English studies in recent decades may be described as thriving. In terms of form, these studies are embodied in a considerable number of translations (from *Beowulf* to Robert

Henryson), anthologies, master’s and doctor’s theses (in 2009 alone, three Ph.D. dissertations from a single university are devoted to studies of Middle English literature), journal articles (over 150 on Chaucer alone), literary histories, and monographs (at least four of them in English). In terms of content, these studies cover most respects of medieval English language and literature: language (Old English and Middle English), poetry, prose, English literary tradition, literary history, the Twelfth–Century Renaissance, (courtly) love, marriage, and women studies, translation studies, comparative language, comparative literature, major theoretical approaches (Bakhtin, Lacan, Homi Bhabha, aesthetics, cultural poetics, and historical materialism). Around these studies are related studies in the domains of medieval English/European/world history, Christianity, canon law, philosophy, political thought, art, medieval European/world literature, European literature, which are expected to fertilize and interact with the study of medieval English language and literature. Among the fruits of medieval English studies, those on Chaucer and *Beowulf* are prominent. Seven monographs are focused exclusively on Chaucer; nearly 90 articles on *Beowulf* and over 150 on Chaucer are published; at least 11 M.A. theses, 7 Ph.D. dissertations, and 1 post–doctoral report choose Chaucer as the topic. In terms of translation, like *The Owl and the Nightingale*, *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Le Morte Darthur*, *Beowulf* has two complete translations. Fang Zhong (1902–1991) translates most of the Chaucer canon in prose, including *Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. Both poems have been retranslated in verse form.

The greatest achievement of medieval English studies in China in recent decades is that the general agreement has been reached that the Middle Ages are not a “dark age,” but a rich and vibrant one. Xiao Minghan writes, “More fortunately, I find that the literature in the so–called ‘dark centuries’ is actually much less ‘darker’ than the modernist literature I

have studied. I very much appreciate the medieval attitudes toward life...which are far better than moaning and groaning without any disease, the appreciation of nihilism, and the self-tormenting creation or experience of despair” (II: 712). Some salient features of these studies include: first, translations of primary texts and secondary sources are made to pave the way for critical studies and to popularize and promote medieval English literature among common readers and researchers alike. Quite a few medieval scholars are simultaneously translators. Outstanding examples are Chen Caiyu and Shen Hong. Together with Fang Zhong, they rank among the most important Chinese translators of medieval English literature. Chen’s four volumes of translations and two monographs, along with 17 journal articles, touch upon multiple aspects of medieval English literature. Versed in medieval and early modern English language and literature, Shen takes particular care to translate secondary sources as well as primary texts. He has published four volumes of translations in the field, including an anthology of medieval English poetry by a Taiwan publisher and two volumes on medieval English literature and history. Shen’s 2010 monograph, based on his dissertation, dwells at length on Milton’s indebtedness to the early English literary tradition and constitutes a remarkable contribution to the study of medieval and early modern English literature. Professor Fang Zhong, as a veteran translator, utters the opinion that literary translation should be founded on research. Chen Caiyu makes use of translation as a tool to assist his understanding of the difficult texts. Their experience and practice points to the inseparability of translation and research, which may be illustrated with more examples, but here I omit to mention them.

Second, among other things, translation studies and comparative studies come to the fore. Several journal articles and M.A. theses are about Seamus Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf*. Chen Caiyu discusses the

translation of medieval literary terms such as ballad, romance, lay, and fabliau (1988; Zhu and Chen). This terminology problem proves to be particularly annoying because almost every scholar renders the terms in his/her own manner. For example, we come across as many as 8 translations of "fabliau." Almost incredibly, the same term appears in the same book in 4 different translations (Li Funing 1999, 87, 127, 128). Under these circumstances Chen Caiyu's discussions are necessary and timely. Moreover, the proper strategy to transform English metrical poems into Chinese verses has undergone fierce debates, especially concerning the practice and theory of Huang Gaoxin's translation of English poetry, including *Canterbury Tales*. On the basis of his wide-ranging and rich experience, Huang uniquely advocates the substitution of pauses for feet and the double consideration of the number of characters and the number of pauses in each line (113–14). Fang Zhong's popular translation of *Canterbury Tales* is in prose form. Huang deems this as unfortunate because a large part of the original is lost without verse presentation (54–73). Instead, the translator must take account of form as well content. Furthermore, the original rhyme scheme and metrical form ought to be retained faithfully and meticulously. Fighting against the widespread view that poetry is untranslatable, Huang goes so far as to propose a systematic quantitative criterion for the evaluation of the form of translated poems (321–35). Huang's bold arguments are highly controversial. Some praise, some challenge, and even attack, Huang's translations and translation theory. In my opinion, Huang's minute attention to poetic form, though leading to "architectural beauty," is liable to the danger of becoming too mechanical to be reasonable, and the flow and essence of poetry might be damaged by clinging slavishly to formal uniformity. Huang's double consideration of form and content is not easy to be accomplished in practice. On the other hand, Huang's theory possesses

soundness in its core, especially when a certain degree of flexibility is allowed. If a translator pays little or no attention to the number of characters in every line, the result may be no poetry, but merely prose divided into lines. For instance, though remarkably accurate, Wu Fen's alleged verse translation of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* departs in form so vastly from the original royal rhyme that it is sometimes doubtful whether it deserves the name of poetry or not. The largely irregular line length varies from 4 to 21 characters, and as a rule, only the last two lines in each stanza rhyme with each other. By contrast, the line length in Shen Hong's *Piers Plowman* is amazingly regular (though not uniform), with a majority of the lines consisting of 12 characters. Shen's work attests to the necessity and viability of regularizing line lengths and the number of pauses. Wu Fen should perhaps reconsider her translation in the light of her colleagues' work.

Comparative studies are a popular approach in China, producing works in great amount, range, and variety. Mentioned above is a comparison between Chaucer and Langland. Old English is juxtaposed with Ancient Chinese; the English national epic *Beowulf* is compared with the Miao epic *Zhang Xiumei*; the hero Beowulf is contrasted with the Chinese mythological figure Yi; *Beowulf* is compared with *Xuanhe Yishi* in the concept of kingship (Wang Ji-hui); *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is contrasted with *Don Quixote* in the seduction scene; Chaucer is compared with Qu Yuan; Chaucer as an intellectual is juxtaposed with the traditional Chinese *shi* (Ding 136-46); West European chivalric literature is contrasted with the Chinese martial arts fiction and medieval Arabic literature; the Robin Hood ballads are compared with *Shui Hu Zhuan* or *Heroes of the Marshes*; medieval England, Middle East, and China are compared in terms of literature, religion, gender, and nationality (So); the premodern Western tradition of panpoetry is contrasted with ancient

Chinese poetic traditions (Wang Yun); and so on, so forth.¹⁾ These comparative studies have achieved varying degrees of success, but as a whole they provide a fresh Chinese perspective for medieval English studies. Scholars interested in comparative studies may consider the possibility of establishing a Chinese school of "creative comparative medievalism."

Third, a historical consciousness is conspicuous. Studies of the linguistic, socio-political, historical, religious, and cultural contexts are integrated or juxtaposed with textual analyses. Macro studies as well as more focused work are available. An outstanding monograph by Li Yaochong on medieval European literature, *The Dawn of the Gods and the New Beginnings of European Poetry: Occitan Lyric*, delves into the complicated historical and cultural roots of the growth and development of European literature in the Middle Ages before elaborating the great achievements of medieval European literature. In particular, the author foregrounds the role of humanism in the evolution of medieval European literature. Besides, with a long and glorious tradition of history writing in their culture, Chinese scholars show a special favor and eagerness for the repeated compilation of literary histories, in English as well as in Chinese. Another explanation of this phenomenon is that as textbooks, literary histories are more marketable than monographs.

Fourth, a generic awareness is present. Translations, literary histories, and monographs are frequently organized around generic distinctions, perhaps a heritage from the Soviet influence in the 1950s. On the other hand, however, the particular attention paid to genres also implies the autonomy and subjectivity of literature in the new era. The status of literature is enhanced to be a thing in itself; literature and literary study have developed from handmaids to politics and ideology to independent

1) Here I omit to supply the references for the journal articles, which are readily available in the database.

entities.

V. Concluding remarks

In a word, the accomplishments of Chinese medieval scholars, led by Professor Li, are not altogether insignificant or wholly negligible despite the general lack of international recognition. Admittedly, they still lag behind their Western colleagues or even their East Asian colleagues. In East Asia, Japanese medieval scholars engage themselves in “creative comparative medievalism” and some of them have contributed to the project of the Dictionary of Old English (DOE). Their research works are incorporated into the *International Medieval Bibliography* compiled by the University of Leeds. Their investigations into the textual problems of Malory’s *Morte Darthur* have earned international approval. From 1931–2002, 18 Japanese translations of *Beowulf* are counted; from 1925–2006, 523 articles or monographs on *Beowulf* were published by Japanese scholars. In recent decades Japanese scholars have finished over 10 translations of *Canterbury Tales* in its entirety (Shi). Why are medieval English studies in China not so advanced as in its neighbor, in terms of both quantity and quality? I believe one of the reasons is the lack of institutional support in mainland China. As far as I know, Japan has its Medieval English Society (1984–) with 482 members, and the Society’s journal *Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature* boasts a history of about thirty years (1986–). Korea also has its Medieval English Society with 420 members. Taiwan has its Association of Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance Studies with regular conferences. True, Peking University has established a Center for Medieval Studies, but most of the time it exists solely in name and on paper. Is our panel

discussion the first event organized by the Center since its inception?²⁾ The Medieval English Society of Japan has implemented specific measures—such as awarding prizes and organizing seminars—to encourage and support young scholars' passion for and pursuit of medieval English studies, which is laudable and enviable indeed.

Therefore much room is left for improvement in Chinese medieval English studies. The oft-found lack or inadequacy of scholarly apparatus suggests that inadequate training is presumably the biggest problem lying behind. For example, the new *History of European Literature* has no notes or bibliography, and its indices are rather random and much truncated (Li Funing 1999, 532–38). In another literary history the bibliography is classified for the reader's convenience, yet far from complete (Li and He 234–36). In Wu Fen's translation of *Troilus and Criseyde* line numbers are missing, though she refers to line numbers in her annotations. Citations in some monographs fail occasionally to be documented properly. Xiao Minghan, a very productive and serious scholar in the field confesses that he knows little Old English, Old French, or Latin and that his Middle English is not satisfactory enough. As a matter of fact, during his reading of the original medieval English works he refers constantly to various modern English translations (Preface I: 7). "What's past is prologue;" more professionally trained scholars are expected to carry out more in-depth studies of all aspects of medieval English literature from a Chinese perspective in the decades to come. When his student Liu Naiyin's monograph on Chaucer was published sixteen years ago, Professor Li wrote, "It is my sincere hope that...Middle English studies in China will enter a new stage where Chinese scholars can carry on dialogic interactions on an equal footing with the world's first-rate specialists in this scholarly domain" (Liu Naiyin iii). In view of the status quo of the

2) A panel of Chinese scholars for the 46th International Congress on Medieval Studies, May 12–15, 2011, Kalamazoo, MI, USA.

field I cannot say Professor Li's hope has been fully realized, so this is my sincere hope as well.

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Abstract

**“What’s Past Is Prologue”:
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Decades (1978–2014)**

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If Chaucer was the father of English poetry, Professor Li Fu-ning (1917–2004) functioned as the father of medieval English studies in the P.R.C. The greatest achievement of medieval English studies in China in recent decades (1978–2014), which are embodied in a considerable number of translations (from *Beowulf* to Robert Henryson), anthologies, master’s and doctor’s theses (in 2009 alone, three Ph.D. dissertations from a single university are devoted to studies of Middle English literature), journal articles (over 150 on Chaucer alone), literary histories, and monographs (at least four of them in English), is that the general agreement has been reached that the Middle Ages are not a “dark age,” but a rich and vibrant one. Some salient features of these studies include: first, translations (of primary texts and secondary sources) are made to aid critical studies. Second, among other things, translation studies and comparative studies come to the fore. Third, a historical consciousness is conspicuous. Studies of the linguistic, socio-political, historical, religious, and cultural contexts are integrated or juxtaposed with textual analyses. Macro studies as well as more focused work are available. Fourth, a generic awareness is present. Translations, literary histories, and monographs are frequently organized around generic distinctions, and the particular attention paid to genres implies the autonomy and subjectivity of

literature in the new era. Still, much room is left for improvement. The oft-found lack or inadequacy of scholarly apparatus suggests that inadequate training and the lack of institutional support are presumably the biggest problems lying behind. More professionally trained scholars are expected to carry out more in-depth studies of all aspects of medieval English literature from a Chinese perspective in the decades to come. Finally, contributions from foreign experts such as Professor Thomas Rendall should not be neglected.

Key Words: Past, Li Fu-ning, Chaucer, China, Medieval English Studies

과거, 리푸닝, 초서, 중국, 중세 영어 연구

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