

Ming Studies Interview: Professor Wilt L. Idema

Tian Yuan Tan [TYT]: It was about twenty years ago when I was first introduced to the journal of *Ming Studies* in a graduate seminar you taught at Harvard. How do you see the roles of *Ming Studies*, then and now? More broadly, as you had also been the editor for journals such as *TP* and *HJAS*, what roles do you think a journal can play in shaping an academic field?

Wilt L. Idema [WI]: When I started out in Chinese studies in 1963, most journals were quite general in coverage. There were already a few periodicals in contemporary Chinese studies, but many journals covered all of Asia or most of it. If they didn't do so, they might cover all of East Asia or all of China. As the field developed we have seen the development of more and more journals that focused on one period or one discipline. Often these new journals started out as very simple affairs, and they often had the advantage of offering graduate students and young faculty an easier venue of publication than the awe-inspiring established journals. Over the years almost all of these newsletters and bulletins developed into fancier undertakings, reflecting the growth of the field they served. By providing their practitioners with a venue for publication, these journals enhanced the visibility of the field or discipline they served and helped younger scholars to build up their bibliography, which in turn helped their chances of obtaining tenure. The more bureaucratic universities have become in their demands for tenure, the more important the existence has become of journals that welcome articles in new and growing fields.

It is my impression that it is more often historians who specialize in Ming studies than people in literature, as people in literature rarely limit themselves to a single period, and if they do work within a given period they often find that that period rarely is limited to a single dynasty. The Ming dynasty is a good example: the first century of Ming literature, especially in the field of vernacular traditions, may very well be viewed as a continuation of the Yuan, while the literature of the last century of the Ming continues into the early decades of the Qing. Actually, many people will think of the seventeenth century when they hear the phrase "Ming literature". No one wants to deny the interactions of court, politics and culture, but in late imperial times many aspects of literature cannot be directly tied to institutional developments.

TYT: Your vast areas of research clearly go beyond the scope of Ming studies. Looking back at your career, how did you begin your academic journey into Ming studies? Your earlier works focused largely on vernacular literature with pioneering works such as *Chinese Vernacular Fiction: The Formative Period* published in 1974 and *The Dramatic Oeuvre of Chu Yu-tun (1379–1439)* in 1985. Can you take us back to the contexts of writing these works and share with us your goals and visions at that time?

WI: Chinese studies in the aftermath of WWII were quite different from what they are now. Contemporary China studies were so good as non-existent. Fairbank worked mostly on the Sino-Western relations of the 19th century and it would take decades before modern and contemporary China studies as practiced in the social science departments would achieve their present dominance. The state of the field in the Western study of Chinese literature in the early 1950s becomes painfully clear from James Hightower's *Topics in Chinese Literature*, but in the US Chinese language teaching became organized in Department of Chinese Language and Literature on the model of other language and literature departments. That, and the popularity of "Chinese Literature in Translation Classes" would greatly stimulate the study and teaching of Chinese literature. In Europe, Chinese studies in some countries such as the Netherlands, had been of direct contemporary relevance from the moment they were established as they trained officials for the colonial administrations in East Asia, but were rapidly losing that relevance as the colonies one after another became independent and as China itself increasingly isolated itself from the outside world. Unsure of its social function, European academic sinology came to focus even more on China's early past than it had done before. Many sinologist of that time believed that modern Chinese literature was only a pale imitation of Western literature, and my teachers were only too happy to leave the study of modern and contemporary Chinese literature to scholars from Eastern Europe. In that context the study of the vernacular literature of late imperial China was an exciting and very modern field. Following the lead of the Chinese scholars of the May Fourth Generation, scholars in the West too started to study the short story and the novel, and by the time I entered Leiden University to study Chinese, scholars such as Cyril Birch, C.T. Hsia, and Patrick Hanan had started to publish. It was also a field in which passions could run high: participants in the annual Junior Sinologues' Conferences of the 1960s each year could look forward to the fierce confrontations of Jaroslav Prusek and Piet van der Loon.

It took European sinology quite a while to catch up with the disciplinary fragmentation of Chinese studies that increasingly manifested itself in the USA. At Leiden, our training mostly consisted in the reading of texts. We read our selections from the Four Books with the commentaries by Zhu Xi and our selections from the *Hanshu* with the commentaries by the finest Qing dynasty scholars. That instilled in me a life-long focus on the minutiae of the text as these were scrutinized by these commentators. When turning from these classical texts to the vernacular texts I was immediately struck by the changeability of these texts that manifested smaller and larger changes with each edition—changes that were too fundamental to be explained away as simply the vagaries of textual transmission but that could only be explained by deliberate editorial changes. I have never believed in an organic growth of popular texts. I have always believed that in the case of written texts, whether manuscript or print, there is always a final editor who decides what he wants to keep or throw out and that therefore in the case of vernacular literature, especially for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, each edition is a different text. If one, as the vulgar Marxist scholarship of the time was wont to do, wants to read the text as a reflection of the author and his times, one has to be quite specific about the edition one uses, its authorship, and its time of composition. One of the things the reading of commentaries had taught me was that even small details can have major implications in the interpretation of the text. In case of the vernacular short story, for instance, it should make a huge

difference whether these texts were written in the Song or in the Ming, and in the unlikely case they had been written in the Song whether we were reading the original composition or a later revised edition. It is very unlikely that I would have published my *Chinese Vernacular Fiction* the way I did if I had been better aware to the full extent of Patrick Hanan's work on the dating of the vernacular story in his *The Chinese Short Story: Studies in Dating, Authorship and Composition* (1973). Hanan's work on the vernacular story was much more solid and detailed than mine, and the reliability of his findings was proven in most remarkable way when the final page was discovered of an early (Yuan dynasty?) printing of a short story that was also included in Feng Menglong's collections: in that early printing the ending had come at precisely the spot where Hanan had indicated the beginning of a later extension.

During my year at Kyoto University (1969-1970) I was introduced to the reading of Yuan drama by Professor Tanaka Kenji. When back in the Netherlands I published a collection of Yuan plays in Dutch translation together with Dirk Jonker, we based ourselves on the editions in the *Yuanqu xuan* of 1616/1617. But when I later collaborated with Stephen H. West on *Chinese Theater 1100-1450, A Source Book*, and we translated plays on the lives of actors, I became intrigued by the different editions of Yuan drama, mostly from the Ming, and was surprised by the extent to which the same play could differ from one edition to the next. Shying away from the texts in the *Yuankan zaju sanshizhong* as "incomplete" and "difficult", I was surprised that hardly anyone had paid attention to the plays of the Ming prince Zhu Youdun (1379-1439), the first to print his plays with the complete dialogues. As far as *zaju* is concerned, the first century of the Ming is very much a continuation of the Yuan—even in adopting *zaju* as court drama, the Ming was very much imitating the Yuan. The rare scholars like Zeng Yongyi (Tseng Yong-yih) who had published on Zhu Youdun, tended to see Zhu Youdun very much as a forerunner of the "southern *zaju*" of the sixteenth century and beyond, whereas Zhu Youdun's work struck me much more as a uniquely rich source on the vernacular drama of the period 1250-1450. I had originally written that manuscript for inclusion in the Twayne World Author Series, but when I had finished the manuscript, that series had folded, so I revised my text for inclusion in *Sinica Leidensia*.

TYT: In many ways, your research on Ming drama includes not only writers of and works written in the Ming, but there is also a clear emphasis on Ming editions of earlier drama. This has significantly changed the way we understand 'Yuan *zaju*' and firmly established the need for researchers to consider Yuan drama in their existing printings mostly produced in the context of the Ming. Can you say more about your approach towards studying dramatic literature in the Ming?

WI: Dynasties are not necessarily the most convenient periodization of Chinese literature. Patrick Hanan identified the two centuries from 1250 to 1450 as the earliest period in the history of the vernacular story, and for the history of drama that period may well be extended forward to the beginning of the twelfth century. When we reencounter Chinese literature in the early sixteenth century, its center of gravity has very much shifted (once again) to the Jiangnan region with its flourishing print culture. When people talk about Ming literature, they usually talk about

the literature from the late sixteenth century to the late seventeenth century, if not two then at least one generation beyond the collapse of the Ming. The information we have on the development of drama and fiction almost all comes from the Jiangnan literati. For regions outside Jiangnan we often have no information at all. Even for the Jiangnan region our information on drama is extremely one-sided. We know a lot about the ways in which wealthy literati tinkered with drama, but hardly anything about the local and popular forms of theater. We should of course be grateful for the materials we have, but we should also be aware that it more often speaks to exceptions than to the common practice in society at large outside elite households. We know that *zaju* continued to be performed at court and up to the end of the sixteenth century new plays were composed that followed the musical rules of the genre, made use of the large troupes available in the palace, but had to heed the prescriptions of the censors. At the same time old and new plays were printed as literature for reading, which imposed its own demands. Authors outside the court were of course at liberty to write *zaju* in the palace style or to follow the model of the printed editions, but they were also at liberty to adapt the genre to the developing conditions of the stage or the study. To call all of these works *zaju* as if they belonged to a single genre with comparable performance venues and audiences is stretching the term perhaps too broadly.

In the case of plays that were originally composed in the Yuan, there are only thirty works that have been preserved in Yuan (including early Ming?) editions, that would appear to be based on the role text of the leading performer (and as such actually can be quite complete). Then we have court manuscript of adaptations for performance at the palace, and print editions intended for perusal in the study, in some cases in several editions. As Zheng Qian already stressed, there is no point in collating these editions because the differences between them are not the result of accidental mistakes in transmission, but deliberate changes in view of different aims and different intended audiences. When Stephen H. West and I published our selection of Yuan plays in Yuan editions, we also included renditions of the late Ming editions of the same play when available to show the extent of change. Insisting on the process of repeated editing of Yuan plays is not intended as a denial of the literary quality of an anthology like the *Yuanqu xuan*, but to show to what extent it presented Ming versions of Yuan plays, edited for the reading pleasure of an educated audience. Precisely because it met its aim so well, the *Yuanqu xuan* could remain the most popular anthology for centuries.

TYT: From your chapter on "Prosimetric literature" in the *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (1986) to the "Prosimetric and verse narrative" chapter in *The Cambridge history of Chinese Literature* (2010), would it be appropriate to say that you felt a need to promote the study of these lesser-known literary genres in the Chinese tradition?

WI: From my high school days, when my classes in Latin and Greek exposed me to the works of Ovid and Homer, I have been fascinated by epic poetry and other genres of narrative verse. Throughout my later years I have continued to read epic poetry, and in case of translations, I

have always preferred verse translations to prose translations. When working on vernacular fiction I have from early on been puzzled by the insistence by many scholars on its “oral nature” without any considerations of the conditions and genres of actual performance. Of course Zheng Zhenduo had published his *Zhongguo suwenxue shi* and shown his enthusiasm for China’s many genres of verse narrative and prosimetrical literature, but that work for long has had only a limited impact on the mainstream treatment of Ming and Qing literature. After 1949 popular literature had to be oral literature, and *suwenxue* was too often dismissed as a depository of superstition and feudal morality. In the eyes of too many intellectuals this extremely rich and varied literature “had no academic value”. Fortunately, these attitudes have changed in recent decades. At least more and more texts have become available, and more and more studies appear. So now it is also much easier to study these traditions outside China, I think we should include them in our vision of Chinese literature, along with the rich materials on oral literature as it has been reliably recorded in the last century. It was my privilege to be invited to planning sessions first for the *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* and later for *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* and in both cases I argued strongly in favor of inclusion of chapters on *suwenxue*, and in both cases my colleagues agreed on condition that I would write the chapter that I apparently considered so important. Once I had written these chapters and wanted to teach classes on the genres I discussed, I discovered of course that very little of those materials had been translated, and so I started to do so myself. So yes, I feel an urgency to promote the study and appreciation of these lesser known but once quite popular genres, and I consider myself very lucky in having been able so far to place my translations of these works with supportive publishers.

TYT: Translation is a major part of your publications and your contributions have been recognized by national translation awards such as the prestigious Martinus Nijhoff Vertaalprijs in 1992 in the Netherlands and, more recently, the Special Book Award of China in 2015 in PRC. In the last few years, your translations have also become a subject of study in Asia. Are there particular traits in a text that you look out for when considering which Chinese works to translate or how to render them into a different language?

WI: I would not spend so much time on translations if I did not like doing them. I like the texts I translate because they often tell a moving story in a fascinating way. Each of these texts is a literary work on its own, even if they tell a well-known story once again. I have not hesitated to translate multiple versions of the same story, because each version, depending on time, region and author, presents a new and different take, utilizing the specific formal features of the genre that is used. By juxtaposing multiple versions of the same story I hope to impress my readers with the individual creativity of each of these works. I very much liked the reaction of Durand-Dastes in his review of my *Meng Jiangnü Brings Down the Great Wall: Ten Versions of a Chinese Legend* (2008) that he had at first feared that the book would be quite boring but that he had actually been surprised by the variety of these versions--to which many more versions could be added of course. By now I believe I have translated at least six different versions of the

romance of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, each of them different in plot and emphasis. I think many of such stories are shortchanged if one believes that they only have one correct version and one correct interpretation. I cannot help myself from smiling when I again encounter a scholar who voices his or her surprise that the version of the romance of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai he or she has collected in the field does not end with their transformation into butterflies but continues with their resurrection and their transformations into models of male and female virtue. For my translations of works of prosimetric narrative I of course would like myself to base on original manuscripts or early editions, but in some cases I have also translated versions that have been edited or composed since 1949, even when it is not always clear to what extent such editions may have been edited. I think it is important that our students learn to distinguish between pre-1949 versions and post-1949 versions, and to be aware of the type of editing “folklore” text may have been subjected to. So in the case of the Huangmei opera *Tianxian pei*, I published translations of both the pre-1949 version and the post-1949 versions side by side, together with a selection on documents on that revision. Again, I do not object to editing and revision, and as long as texts remain part of the performance repertoire, editing and revision may be unavoidable. No harm is done as long as earlier versions are preserved and made available, and as long as the revised version is not touted as the true version. Fortunately, the new generations of scholars of China are far more aware of the value of publishing texts without “raising their level”.

I translate both into Dutch and into English. In some cases, I have translated the same work into both languages. But I quickly learned that it did not work for me to retranslate the Dutch version into English. In all cases both the English and the Dutch version are directly based on the Chinese original, and the second version will of course include any growing insight that may have developed in the intervening period. Gustaaf Schlegel, the first occupant of the Chair of Chinese Language and Literature at Leiden, once told the assembled orientalist that the Dutch language was uniquely suited to the translation of Chinese, but I do not subscribe to that view—each language comes with its own benefits and challenges. As someone who was born and raised in the eastern part of the Netherlands speaking the local dialect, I sometimes wonder to what extent standard Dutch is really my native language. Teaching and living in the US may have improved my command of English, but also made me more aware that it definitely is not my mother tongue. For most of my English translations, I have therefore collaborated with friends such as Stephen West and Beata Grant. I did most of my translations of prosimetric narrative on my own because in the beginning I did many of them quickly for classroom use, without considering publication. But when it came to the publication of these English translations I have produced on my own, I have always relied on my copy editors to ensure that my English was not only grammatical but also idiomatic. So far more reviewers seem to fault me for my pursuit of accuracy than for my unnatural style, even if some of them point out this failing.

When producing my translations I try to bring out as many of the formal elements of the original as possible. Prosimetric narratives come in a great variety of formats. We now have access to sufficient examples of prosimetric works from the Ming dynasty, to see that each genre handled the alternation of prose and verse in its own distinctive way. In *cihua* the prose sections alternate with sections composed in rhyming seven-syllable lines, and I have tried in my renditions to give

these lines also in English translation a (roughly) equal length. In *daoqing* texts, prose alternates with songs to various tunes, and in my renditions I have attempted to reflect the variety of longer and shorter lines in the originals. In narrative precious scrolls of the Ming dynasty, such as the two texts collected in my forthcoming *The Pitfalls of Piety for Married Women*, the texts are divided into chapters that each are made up of an allometric opening song, a short passage in prose, a couplet made up of two lines of seven-syllable verse, a passage in lines of ten-syllable verse, a “hymn” (mostly made up of four-syllable lines), and, in conclusion, a quatrain made up of five-syllable lines. For me one of the challenges is to bring out the difference of each of these sections on the page. Often, the only way to do so is by typographical means. Some of my reviewers have asked for the use of rhyme, but since my earliest Dutch translations I have abandoned any attempt to use rhyme. We all know a few examples of successful rhymed translations of Chinese verse, and if I would be asked to do a musical version of *Xixiang ji*, I too would want the songs to rhyme, but in general the use of rhyme in the English renditions of Chinese verse has been rightly abandoned by most translators.

Criticism, author biographies and literary histories all have their role to play in introducing readers to a literary tradition that is not their own, either because it belongs to the past or hails from a different country. None of us is born with an inborn capacity to understand the works that make up such a foreign tradition. But translation, I believe, plays a paramount role in introducing such works, especially if these translations come with the appropriate materials to introduce the text. The more works are translated, the more they will explain each other, but for the time being works from premodern Chinese literature will continue to need either a solid introduction or a good teacher. Narrative works are in a way privileged: quite often they are detailed enough to create their own world, so that even a person who is not deeply versed in the culture concerned can be sufficiently charmed to empathize with the characters in the story and so enter a world that is not his or her own. Narratives also have a tendency to encompass a much wider swath of social experience and personal emotion than most other genres, and so confront the foreign readers with a much broader view of that other culture. Apart from an informed reading of the original, reading a translation may well be the most direct and diverse encounter with a work in another language.

[TYT: You mentioned the forthcoming book on Ming dynasty women and precious scrolls. Can you tell us more about your work on women literature and popular religion which are also major areas of your research?](#)

WI: This engagement with a different culture in all its variety in its own words is also one of the attractions for me of women’s literature of late imperial China. When I started out as a student now more than fifty years ago, New Criticism was all the rage. There is nothing wrong with close reading, but it tended to be limited to a small number of canonical works that repaid the critic’s hard work. Since the 1970s literary studies have been swamped by wave after wave of theory, but for all the gains these waves may have brought, they also have, I am afraid, greatly

affected the popularity of literary scholarship with the general public and its appeal to the student body at large, as often the theoretical fireworks were considered more important than the creative work that was scrutinized. One of the earliest challenges of the dominant discourse in literary scholarship of the 1970s has been literary feminism that reacting against the male-dominated canon demanded that sufficient attention be paid to women as subjects and objects in literature. It took a while before this approach also made itself felt in Chinese studies, but since the 1990s it has been here to stay. One of the most important aspects of this approach was the rediscovery of the quantity and quality of the literary production of women in China, especially in the late imperial period. Whereas too many of the great poets of the Ming and the Qing produced reams of poetry commemorating their public activities as bureaucrats in an allusion-studded language, their sisters and their female friends left small collections of verse in which they commented on their private activities and personal feelings in a direct and simple language.

The study of women poets is, understandably, a field that is very much dominated by women scholars, and I probably would not have entered the field if I at the time had already been teaching in the US. Still teaching at Leiden in the 1990s, I set out to provide my countrymen with an anthology of pre-modern Chinese women's literature, which continued to grow and grow as I became better acquainted with the materials. The volume that was eventually published ran to over 540 pages, and I titled it *De onthoofde feministe: Leven en werk van schrijvende vrouwen uit het Chinese keizerrijk* (The beheaded feminist: lives and works of writing women from imperial China). "The beheaded feminist" first of all referred to Qiu Jin (1875-1907), who, I thought, could serve as a symbol for all those women in traditional China who could not develop their talents and achieve their ambitions in the patriarchal society of their times. When after I moved to the US it was suggested to me that I might do an English version I teamed up with Beata Grant, who had extensively written about the poetry of Buddhist laywomen and nuns. The resulting volume was titled *The Red Brush* and ran to over 930 pages. It did not have a chapter devoted to the Ming dynasty but included as its Third Part "The First High Tide of Women's Literature" which covered the Chinese seventeenth century, from the Wanli period to the early Kangxi period. Our shared interest in the view of women in Chinese popular religion of the late Qing also resulted in *Escape from Blood Pond Hell* (2011), which looked at two ways by which women could be saved from the fate awaiting them upon death: through the piety of their sons, or by their own piety. *The Pitfall of Piety for Married Women* translates two tales that deal with the family disruption that may be caused by pious women during their lifetimes.

TYT: I am sure many of us are already looking forward to reading this forthcoming book. What other projects are you currently working on?

WI: Presently I am involved, together with Wai-yee Li and Stephen West, in the compilation of an anthology of short plays from the period 1500-1800 which we hope to title *A Topsy-Turvy World*. While the *zaju* of the Ming have often been ignored as derivative, we have been struck by their originality and creativity, both in content and form. As a follow-up on my earlier books on

animals in Chinese literature I am now involved together with Allard Olof, a Leiden Koreanist, in a study of the legend of Prince Golden Calf, a story that is best known from Korea where the tale circulated both in a Chinese and a Korean version. But the tale is also widely known in China in various genres and would also appear to have originated there, if it was not imported from outside. And as a follow-up on my earlier anthologies of local traditions of prosimetric literature, I have started to take a closer look at the “rustic songs” of Pu Songling. Pu Songling may have been born in the final years of the Ming, but he rightly considered as representative of the Qing dynasty. But one of his rustic songs provides a detailed and fanciful as well as mostly fictional account of an episode from the life of the Zhengde Emperor of the Ming dynasty: his amorous escapades during his trip to Datong and Taiyuan.

TYT: Before we conclude the interview, could you share with us your thoughts on the future of the field of Ming studies? How do you see it developing in the coming years?

WI: In retrospect I can only consider myself lucky. I entered Chinese studies when the universities were expanding, and the humanities very much were part of that expansion. Chinese studies not only shared in that general expansion, but also benefitted from the growing awareness of the importance of China, especially from the 1980s on, when many schools started to add Chinese studies to their program. Since the beginning of the present century, the tide seems to have turned against the humanities in general, and as China turned from an opportunity into a challenge, the public mood towards Chinese studies has turned too, so the continuing expansion of Chinese studies of the last fifty years seems to be grinding to a halt. What is not of direct relevance to business or politics or does not promise students a profitable career, encounters heavy weather. Even if students are interested in Chinese history, they seem to prefer more recent periods: to many of our students the Republic is ancient history indeed.

All these external circumstances may well work against Ming studies right at a moment when the internal circumstances are excellent, especially when it comes to the last century of the Ming and the Jiangnan region. The printing boom of the late Ming has produced more books and on a greater variety of subjects than earlier centuries but also than the eighteenth century. And what is more, these books are nowadays more easily available than they ever were through massive reprint series and the ongoing digitalization. Also, when I was student I was taught that China had no archives, but China does have archives, and those often go back to the middle of the sixteenth century. The same conditions may not apply to the first two centuries of the Ming, despite tantalizing suggestions that the printing boom may have started much earlier than supposed. Personally I still hope that our knowledge of the prosimetric literature of the period will be expanded by new discoveries in the coming years. Archaeological discoveries are fine, but actually my hope is that more materials will come to light once the librarians of China will find the time to comb through the piles of uncatalogued materials.

Of course as teachers we have to make sure that our students can use the materials. This means that we have to make sure that our departments continue to offer programs in Classical Chinese

and that students at universities not only learn abbreviated characters but also the traditional characters, and that nobody is allowed to tell them that Classical Chinese is a difficult language. Yes, depending on the field the vocabulary and the cultural references may present daunting problems, but the language itself always remains simple and clear, and the quality of the reference works (also available online) has been greatly increased. It is not the language that should scare the student interested in the field, but the volume of fine scholarship from China. I myself wrote my dissertation during the years of the Cultural Revolution when practically all scholarly publications from the PRC had folded, and for a graduate student outside China that definitely had its advantages. Now the constant stream of publications may confront one any moment with new publications that may force one to rethink one's research. It has created of course a situation that can only be deemed normal, that China itself is the center and Chinese studies and that our work outside China to a large extent consists of evaluating and introducing Chinese scholarship. That does not mean that our task is simply to echo scholarship from the PRC as some institutions inside the PRC seem to believe. We should make full use of the scholarship produced in the PRC (and elsewhere), but we bring to our study of China our own questions and approaches, just as China does in its study of other cultures. The study of any culture from the outside always will have to be different from its study from the inside. Being on the outside comes with certain disadvantages but also frees one from the limitations that affects scholars who work on the inside, which is why scholarship from the outside may at times be so enlightening. Working on the outside we serve a different audience and cannot avoid a comparative approach. No Chinese scholar writing in Chinese needs to explain that Tang Xianzu wrote opera scripts, but when introducing Tang Xianzu as China's greatest dramatist to a non-Chinese audience one cannot but emphasize the point.