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Wilt. L. Idema, *Insects in Chinese Literature*

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multidisciplinary field. Its contributors are justly critical of the inherited “orientalist” approach, and they replace it with a welcome objectivity and scholarly empathy.

MICHAEL G. CARTER
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Insects in Chinese Literature: A Study and Anthology.
By WILT L. IDEMA. Amherst, NY: CAMBRIA PRESS,
2019. Pp. 333. \$120.

The contents of this anthology range from the touching to the hilarious to the decidedly-not-for-the-squeamish. The book has two major sections on insects in traditional Chinese literary writing and in popular literature, with a brief “intermezzo” on narrative prose. The introductory and concluding chapters offer a comparative framework with connections to insect stories and fables in world literature.

The first section on belles lettres pays homage to the traditional Chinese *leishu* 類書, often translated as “encyclopedia.” Like the *leishu*, it presents literary selections topically arranged by insect type. And, as in traditional *leishu*, the topical organization highlights the wide range of themes and symbolism associated with literary insect motifs. Chapters focus on the silkworm; the cicada; the praying mantis and the spider; the ant, bee, and butterfly; the fly and the mosquito; the scorpion, the louse, the flea, and the bedbug; and a final section of works that list and briefly describe a wide range of insects. The works selected range from concise *shi* poems to elaborate *fu* rhapsodies, with an occasional prose essay. The introductory material to each chapter varies in length: some works receive more detailed analysis, others a briefer introduction. The notes in each chapter also contain a wealth of material, including extensive summaries and explanations of insect legends alluded to in the translated works. In addition to the intrinsic interest of the translated works themselves, this section offers a valuable overview of insect symbolism in traditional Chinese literature.

The second section on narrative prose briefly discusses two of Pu Songling’s 蒲松齡 (1640–1715) classical tales about insects appearing in human form, a story of two spider women in one of Feng Menglong’s 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) collections, and an episode from the sixteenth-century *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji* 西游記) in which seven spider maidens attempt to seduce the intrepid monk Xuanzang.

The final section on popular literature is the highlight of the book for this reviewer, with a rich selection of ballads, precious scrolls, and performance texts. This section is organized thematically; its four chapters present popular texts recounting weddings, funerals,

battles and wars, and disputes and court cases. These longer humorous and mock-heroic accounts resemble those translated in Idema’s *Mouse vs. Cat in Chinese Literature* (Columbia Univ. Press, 2019). This volume, however, includes more full translations: twelve complete performance texts in all. A particular delight is *The Song of the War of the Fly against the Mosquito*, in which the fly and mosquito’s layered alliances gradually draw other insects, birds, animals, and immortals into the fray, and the spider’s magical weapons make her the most fearsome opponent of all. This section also contains Ding Yaokang’s 丁耀亢 (1599–1669) prosimetric performance text *The Southern Window Dream*, which will be of interest to those familiar with Ding’s other works (most famously, his sequel to the *Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Xu Jinpingmei* 續金瓶梅)). These popular works are entertaining, ironic, and deliberately parodic. They would make excellent additions to a variety of undergraduate courses on Chinese literature.

Throughout the book, the accuracy of the translations is high, emphasizing the meaning of each word, as in all of Idema’s translations. The introductory material also avoids conventional translations of literary terms that rely on very rough equivalences: *leishu* are “thematically arranged transcripts” rather than “encyclopedias,” for example (p. 15), and *zhiguai xiaoshuo* 志怪小說 are “anomaly accounts” (p. 150). *Xiaoshuo* must not be carelessly confused with “fiction”: Idema explains that the English term “fiction” does not apply to most vernacular prose narratives because the authors usually did not invent their stories, and even when they did, they tried to suggest that the stories had actually happened (p. 7). This summary skims over what we know about the rise of a self-conscious discourse of fictionality in Ming and Qing literature (studied in, among others, David Rolston’s *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary*, Stanford Univ. Press, 1997). On the other hand, such caution is valuable in an anthology like this one, which is likely to draw readers from a wide variety of backgrounds. The defamiliarizing approach to translating literary terms in the introductions will help casual readers steer clear of assuming that a *leishu* is just an encyclopedia or a *zhiguai* just a short story. At the same time, the translations of the works themselves are appealing and instantly accessible.

Insects in Chinese Literature will appeal to many audiences: entomologists and insect lovers will find it delightful, while specialists in Chinese literature will appreciate the copious notes and careful documentation of each text’s provenance. The works included will enrich both the Chinese and the comparative literature classroom. Quirky and eclectic, this anthology is full of unexpected charms.

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