

# ***From "Objective Record" to "Poetic History Interpretation"- Stephen Owen's Discussion of the Tradition of "Nonfiction" in Chinese Literature and the Theory of Poetry and History***

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**Abstract:** In his work "Chinese Traditional Poetry and Poetics: The World's Signs", Stephen Owen establishes a poetic theory of the "non-fiction" tradition in Chinese literature. This theory and the Poetic-Historical Theory demonstrate mutual interpretation across three dimensions: At the authenticity level, the "empirical truth" of non-fiction and the "recording spirit" of poetic history achieve dialectical unity; at the narrative level, the ideological tendency of using poetry to verify history and document historical events intertwines with the scene reconstruction and dialogue recording in non-fiction; at the reality engagement level, both approaches respond to reality through literature, forming spiritual resonance. Their mutual interpretation provides a cross-cultural dialogue paradigm for classical literary studies, offering insights into reconstructing the concept of "authenticity" and the path of literary localization.

## **1. Introduction**

In the first chapter of *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: The World Sign*, Stephen Owen analyzes Du Fu's "Writing on a Journey at Night" and Wordsworth's "On Westminster Bridge" side by side, and puts forward the theory of "non-fiction" tradition in Chinese literature:

*In the Chinese literary tradition, poetry is generally regarded as non-fictional, with its narratives considered highly authentic. The meaning of such works cannot be fully grasped through literal interpretation alone, as the words in these texts often carry implied meanings. Here, the poet's experience of the world plays a crucial role, as their verses bring to light the events unfolding around them.[1]*

This theory shares profound resonance with China's indigenous poetic historiography in both spiritual essence and theoretical framework, jointly pointing to the intricate entanglement of history and literature in Chinese literature. Stephen Owen's sinological research primarily employs dual perspectives of Chinese and Western contexts to analyze texts, elevating textual interpretation to a conceptual level where valuable propositions are distilled. However, due to cultural background differences between East and West and personal characteristics, his textual analysis contains certain misinterpretations. Therefore, we must interpret foreign cultures through the unique lens of Chinese literature. Both Owen's "non-fiction" tradition theory and poetic historiography in Chinese literature

are grounded in "authenticity" as their cornerstone and aim for "realistic engagement," forming cross-temporal dialogues at the levels of narrative strategies and cultural genes. By analyzing their convergences and tensions, we can provide new perspectives for dialogue between "non-fiction" and poetic historiography, offering insights for the exchange and integration of Chinese and Western literary theories.

## 2. The Connotation of "Nonfiction" and the Poetic History Tradition

The Western Sinological community's understanding of China's "non-fiction" literary tradition resonates deeply with the indigenous "poetic-historical" tradition, creating profound cross-cultural resonance and theoretical tension. This interplay reflects both traditions' shared inquiry into the relationship between literature and reality. Rooted in Chinese intellectuals' life philosophy of "promoting humanity through Dao," the "poetic-historical" tradition maintains its non-fictional essence while coexisting with the spirit of "benefiting all under heaven." Meanwhile, Western Sinology provides an external perspective to revitalize this tradition's modern relevance. Their mutual interpretation constitutes a cross-cultural dialogue on the proposition of literary authenticity and real-world engagement.

### 2.1 Other Stones: The Echo between "Nonfiction" in Western Perspective and Chinese Poetry History

The Western Sinological community widely acknowledges that "non-fiction" forms the bedrock of Chinese poetics, a perspective deeply rooted in China's indigenous tradition of poetic historiography. In 1966, Yoshikichiro Yoshikawa first articulated this concept in his work "Understanding Chinese Literary History", noting: "Chinese literary history has evolved differently from other civilizations. At least until recent times, it remained distinct. What was traditionally considered central to literature was not the fictional works that other cultures had long cultivated... In essence, neither poetry nor prose required active fabrication" [2]. This resonates with the Chinese tradition of "poetry recording historical events" through cross-cultural resonance. In 1985, Stephen Owen formally established the "non-fiction" poetic tradition in "Chinese Traditional Poetry and Poetics: Global Manifestations", whose core principles echo the characteristic of Chinese historical poetry-capturing events while transcending them. Pu Qilong aptly observed in "Reading Du Xinjie": "Historians record transient events, while poets reveal transient moods. The magic of poetry lies precisely where historical narratives fall short" [3], which perfectly captures the unique value of Chinese poetry beyond mere historical documentation. This insight aligns remarkably with Owen's emphasis on Chinese poetry as "a factual account of human consciousness encountering and responding to the world within historical time."

The literary concept of "poetic history" originates from Meng Qi's "Shi Shi Shi". When analyzing Du Fu's poetry, Meng Qi observes that it "reveals profound truths while concealing subtle details, leaving nothing unexpressed" [4]. This encompasses both the veiled portrayal of political secrets and the profound articulation of life's hidden pains. Such authenticity transcends superficial facts, resonating with Stephen Owen's exploration of "the encounter between human consciousness and the world." Simultaneously, the creative essence of "inspiration arising from real-world events" within the poetic tradition-such as Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi's New Yuefu School's assertion that "literature should reflect the times, and poetry should address events" -focuses on "contemporary affairs concerning political gains and losses." This aligns with the localization of "personal experience" in non-fiction theory, both serving as literary mediums for deep engagement with reality.

## 2.2 The Tension between the Meaning of "Nonfiction" and the Tradition of Poetry and History

Stephen Owen argues that "nonfiction" refers to works that contain no metaphors, fantasies or other elements. It is the author's narration of "personal experience" and "genuine feelings", which are literal, experiential and historical in nature. This definition not only fits with China's poetic and historical tradition, but also has certain tension.

Qian Zhongshu's critique of the "poetic history" concept in his preface to "Selected Poems of the Song Dynasty" offers profound insights: "Historical records may describe events in detail, but poetry refines and condenses them into more concentrated, specific, and vivid expressions, creating powerful and enduring effects. Conversely, if poetry lacks such artistic refinement and becomes merely tedious, crude narration, it remains nothing more than rhymed archives... Thus, the view of poetry as historical record is a one-sided perspective." [5] This critique reveals that Chinese poetry transcends non-fictional historical documentation through artistic refinement—a dimension inadequately addressed by Stephen Owen's "nonfiction" theory. While Chinese poetry incorporates imaginative fiction, its composition is deeply rooted in real-life experiences, demonstrating strong realism or historicity. As Ma Yifu observed: "Poetry expresses aspirations through emotions... When expressing feelings, it encompasses both historical and metaphysical elements. The traces of gains and losses constitute history, while the origins of emotions give rise to poetry." [6] This insight aptly captures how poetry's integration of "history" and "metaphysics" combines realistic documentation with transcendental emotional and conceptual expressions, making China's poetic-historical tradition richer and more complex than Stephen Owen's "nonfiction" theory suggests.

Specifically, the "history" in "poetic history" does not mechanically replicate objective facts. Instead, it embodies the poet's political consciousness inspired by an "abnormal political ecosystem," with its essence rooted in the "humanistic concern and critical spirit that confronts real-world crises and the pains of the era" through "inspiration from observed events." For instance, Yuan Bai's New Yuefu (New Ballads) advocates "accurate and truthful narratives," emphasizing verifiable content in poetry while echoing the "historical authenticity" of non-fiction. However, their creative practice of "revealing intentions through conclusion" enhances critical impact via artistic techniques like "satirical contrast," creating tension with Stephen Owen's fixation on "literalism." Poetic history serves not only as art but also as a "collective ideological endeavor." This dual nature determines that China's poetic historical tradition remains grounded in "non-fictional" reality while transcending theoretical boundaries through artistic expression and spiritual depth, manifesting a richer theoretical framework.

## 3. The Source of "Nonfiction" and the Theoretical Foundation of the Tradition of Poetry and History

The theoretical framework of Stephen Owen's "nonfiction" theory and the formation of China's poetic-historical tradition can be explored through two dimensions: external and internal. Externally, the divergence and resonance between Chinese and Western cosmological perspectives and literary aesthetics form the logical starting point. Internally, the profound engagement of historical consciousness provides their spiritual core. This dual-dimensional theoretical foundation not only reveals the deep connections between the nonfiction tradition and the poetic-historical tradition in terms of cosmic origins, real-world engagement, and historical participation, but also establishes fundamental grounds for cross-cultural dialogue between them.

### 3.1 Seeking Outward: The Generation of Chinese and Western Cosmology and Poetic History Tradition

In his work "Wenxin Diaolong: On the Origin of Dao", Liu Xie profoundly observed: "The virtue of literature is immense. What coexists with heaven and earth? The interplay of black and yellow, the division of square and round forms, the overlapping of sun and moon to mirror celestial patterns; mountains and rivers shimmering with splendor to outline terrestrial contours-these constitute the manifestation of Dao. At dusk, all living things, plants and animals, embody this literary essence." He further stated: "The mind gives rise to speech, speech establishes civilization, which is the natural order of Dao" [7]. Liu Xie posited that literature serves as the visible expression of Dao, where Dao represents both the cosmic origin (the Dao of all things) and the humanistic foundation (the Dao of sages). This establishes a generative model: cosmos-mind-literature. Therefore, when interpreting "non-fiction," we must approach it through cosmic and literary perspectives, discovering its uniqueness within comparative analysis.

Yuwen Su 'an conceptualized the cosmos as an organic whole, emphasizing interconnectedness and harmonious coexistence among entities-a perspective that resonates with traditional Chinese cosmology and provides philosophical foundations for the formation of the poetic-historical tradition. As Zhang Xuecheng stated in his commentary to "Chronicles of Han and Liu", "A literary collection constitutes a personal history; family histories, national histories, and the history of an era will also serve as evidence". This holistic cosmic view connects individual literary creation with historical documentation, forming the concept of "literature as history" that aligns internally with Yuwen Su 'an's theory of "non-fiction" emphasizing the inseparable bond between literature and history. The Confucian "manifestation theory" reinforces this foundational commonality. Confucius' cognitive model of "observing their causes to understand their effects, examining their stability" emphasizes the inherent connection between inner states and external expressions. Liu Xie's assertion that "emotions manifest through words, and principles reveal themselves in writing" extends this internal-external correspondence logic to literary creation: poetry serves both as a natural expression of poets' genuine emotions and as an implicit reflection of contemporary realities. This creative philosophy of "manifestation" rather than "fictionalization" not only provides indigenous justification for Yuwen Su 'an's "non-fiction" theory-rejecting metaphorical constructs and emphasizing literal authenticity-but also constitutes the spiritual core of the poetic-historical tradition's principle of "poetry embodying historical events while transcending them," enabling deep dialogue between these two traditions through the theoretical framework of "mutual verification between literature and history."

From the perspective of literary aesthetics, Stephen Owen compares Chinese literature's "non-fiction" with Western literature's "fiction," using fiction as the criterion to distinguish between Eastern and Western literary traditions. Chinese poetry emphasizes expressing poets' inner experiences and emotions rather than abstract concepts. Specifically, classical Chinese poetry refers to an intrinsic truth rather than abstract conceptual meanings. This intrinsic truth is not merely a metaphysical transcendence of external manifestations but also a manifestation of reality. In contrast, Western literature since Plato has justified poetic existence through imitation of the real world and pursuit of the ideal realm. Precisely because Western literature is fundamentally imitative, artistic creation itself becomes fictional. Consequently, the theoretical divergence between Chinese and Western poetics has been increasingly magnified, with literary works gradually distinguishing themselves primarily through imitation and representation. Thus, the "non-fiction" tradition theory ultimately adopts fiction as the standard to differentiate Eastern and Western literatures.

In the comparative study of Chinese and Western cosmology and literary aesthetics, Chinese philosophy emphasizes that truth resides in the present moment and physical space, which has shaped Chinese poetry's focus on documenting and reflecting contemporary reality, forming a poetic-

historical tradition. In contrast, Western thought prioritizes the pursuit of conceptual realms, leading to literary works that lean toward fictional creation. This fundamental divergence led Stephen Owen to define the Chinese and Western literary traditions through "fiction" versus "non-fiction." Within this framework, China's poetic-historical tradition builds upon historical foundations while emphasizing artistic transcendence through "the transmission of inner history beyond historical records," achieving an artistic elevation beyond mere documentation.

### 3.2 Inward Exploration: Yuwen Suoan's Historical Consciousness and the Spiritual Core of the Tradition of Poetry and History

According to Stephen Owen, history has lost its true face, but we can get closer to the real history through reading. He said in *Remembering: The Reappearance of the Past in Chinese Classical Literature*:

*To truly comprehend the past, one must reflect on the continuity of civilization-considering what can be passed down to future generations, what cannot, and what remains comprehensible during transmission. Only within secular traditions does human action attain enduring value and meaning (ensuring the "self" achieves immortality). This essential nature of the "self" -first articulated in Taoism and later in Buddhism-has been given illusory forms through their interpretations.[8]*

Stephen Owen's historical consciousness is profoundly embodied in his "non-fiction" theory, which posits that literary history is constructed through numerous works of non-fiction. This resonates with the Chinese poetic tradition of "using poetry to verify history" and "complementing historical records with verse." Zhang Xuecheng's assertion that "a literary collection constitutes a personal history" views individual writings as integral components of historical documentation-a perspective that aligns with Yuwen Suo'an's philosophy of treating literary works as historical records. When analyzing Du Fu's "Night Thoughts on the Journey," Yuwen interprets it as "a unique factual account of human consciousness-engaging with and interpreting encounters with the world within historical time." This emphasis on poetry's "historical nature" elevates his "non-fiction" theory beyond mere textual fidelity to reality, positioning literary works as vivid evidence of individual participation in historical construction. As he noted, Chinese poetry "reveals events in the world," and the cumulative effect of countless such revelations forms a symbiotic relationship between literary history and historical development.

However, in his work "Truth and Method", Gadamer observes: "An author's thoughts can never serve as a valid measure of an artwork's significance. Even when examining a single work, discussing it solely from its own perspective-without considering the ever-evolving reality of experience-still carries inherent abstraction." [9] This insight reminds us that neither Stephen Owen's "non-fiction" theory nor China's poetic-historical tradition should be understood through the lens of the work itself or the author's intent alone. We must also account for how these works have been continuously interpreted and enriched throughout their historical transmission.

## 4. The Renaming of "Nonfiction" and the Interpretation of the Tradition of Poetry and History

The re-examination of Stephen Owen's "non-fiction" theory and the poetic-historical tradition fundamentally constitutes an interpretive practice bridging Chinese and Western literary contexts. This dialogue ultimately leads to a more authentic understanding of Chinese literature's "authenticity": it transcends mere historical replication or abstract artistic fabrication, instead existing in a dynamic equilibrium between the "weight of history" and the "ethereal quality of poetry".



#### 4.1 Criticism of "Nonfiction" and the Inspiration of the Poetic History Tradition

Academic skepticism toward Stephen Owen's "nonfiction" theory has been multifaceted. Zhang Longxi contends that his framework overemphasizes cultural disparities between China and the West [9], while Shi Dongdong critiques its one-sidedness [10]. These perspectives reveal the theory's limitations. Within China's poetic-historical tradition, Qian Zhongshu's critique of the "poetic-historical" concept and Pu Qilong's emphasis on poetry-historicism differences provide indigenous insights into understanding such theoretical constraints. The dialectical thinking inherent in this tradition not only acknowledges the documentary function of poetry in recording historical events-evidenced by Yuan Bai's New Yuefu ("New Ballads") for their "accurate and truthful" approach-but also emphasizes artistic transcendence through "transcending physical imagery," as exemplified by Wang Fuzhi's "present-moment perception" theory advocating the fusion of emotion and scenery. These perspectives offer a rational framework for evaluating the "nonfiction" theory. While Owen's analysis of Chinese literary realism proves enlightening, his tendency to absolutize "nonfiction" risks narrowing the rich tensions between historical documentation and poetic expression, as well as authenticity and artistry in Chinese poetry. Only by returning to the indigenous context of poetic-historical tradition can we affirm its theoretical value while avoiding oversimplification of Chinese literary characteristics[11].

In a word, the tradition of poetry and history not only recognizes the recording function of poetry to history, but also emphasizes its artistic transcendence. This makes us be able to recognize the reasonable generalization of the realistic characteristics of Chinese literature when we look at the theory of "nonfiction", and avoid absolutizing it and ignoring the complexity and artistry of Chinese literature.

#### 4.2 The Thought of "Nonfiction" and the Modern Interpretation of the Poetic History Tradition

In historical documentation and intellectual studies, there exists a fundamental methodological principle: researchers should not equate subjective assumptions with the authentic thoughts of historical subjects. As individual cognitive processes operate within complex psychological, sociological, and contextual frameworks, overreliance on speculative conclusions risks excessive interpretation[12]. Therefore, scholarly inquiry must prioritize textual objectivity-the explicit viewpoints and propositions articulated through written records. These textual evidences form the bedrock of all interpretations and serve as logical starting points. When examining Stephen Owen's "nonfiction" theory in relation to China's poetic-historical tradition, scholars should first ground their analysis in the texts themselves, then integrate historical context and cultural background for comprehensive interpretation.

In his work "Chinese Literary Theory: Translation and Critique", Stephen Owen proposed the "Chinese Epistemology" [13], exemplified by the Confucian text from "The Analects of Confucius: Government": "When one examines a person's actions, observes their origins, and discerns their motivations, where can they hide? Where can they hide?" This philosophy emphasizes the inherent connection between internal and external realities, forming the foundation of a non-fiction literary tradition. The Chinese poetic tradition's distinctive features-where "literature mirrors history," "poetry records historical events," and "transcends historical narratives"-demonstrate this epistemological framework in literature. Ye Xie's "On Poetry" articulates: "We (the four talents) measure against them (three principles, events, emotions)" [14], with his creative philosophy rooted in this epistemology. Poets grasp "principles, events, emotions" (observing origins) and ultimately transform them through "talent, courage, insight, and strength" (discerning motivations), creating poetry that "carries historical weight" while transcending specific events, becoming spiritual vessels that "weave the cosmos." This dual characteristic of "internal-external verification" and "transcending imagery"

defines the unique character of the poetic-historical tradition under Chinese epistemology. It validates Owen's theory of tracing non-fiction traditions to this origin: both traditions acknowledge literature's intrinsic connection with reality while preserving space for artistic transcendence within this relationship.

## 5. Conclusion

The mutual interpretation between Stephen Owen's theory of "non-fiction" tradition in Chinese literature and the indigenous poetic-historical discourse reveals both their deep resonance in pursuing authenticity, narrative strategies, and engagement with reality, while highlighting the tension between Chinese and Western literary theories on the proposition of "the relationship between literature and reality." The former anchors literature's direct reflection of reality through "literalism" and "empiricism," while the latter achieves dialectical unity between "historical documentation" and "poetic transcendence." This cross-cultural dialogue not only provides dual perspectives for re-examining the concept of "authenticity" in classical Chinese literature: affirming the insights of "non-fiction" theory into China's realistic literary tradition while correcting its absolutist tendencies through the artistic transcendence of the "poetic-historical" tradition. Simultaneously, it methodologically enlightens us that classical literary research must activate traditional resources within local contexts and illuminate its own characteristics through an outsider's perspective, thereby reconstructing the subjectivity of literary theory amidst the tension between globalization and localization. Fundamentally, this mutual interpretation constitutes a cross-temporal dialogue about the essence of literature, offering new theoretical pathways to understand the unique character of "literature-historicism symbiosis" in Chinese literature. Its value lies not only in clarifying historical contexts but also in providing a mirror for contemporary literary creation and research to balance reality engagement with artistic transcendence.

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