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CHINESE LITERATURE IN LCSH (LIBRARY OF CONGRESS SUBJECT HEADINGS): A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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LCSH (Library of Congress Subject Headings) (1) was originally intended as a subject-cataloging tool for the collection of the Library of Congress. Over the years, however, LCSH has been widely adopted by libraries and other information services in the United States and abroad. As early as in 1943, David Judson Haykin noticed the failures of this subject heading list in logic and consistency and attributed them to the way it was used and built up (2). Today, since LCSH has already become a standard subject cataloging tool for many different libraries and their collections, correcting and improving LCSH should no longer be the sole business of LC, but the business of everyone who uses LCSH. From this perspective, this paper tries to explore the failures of LCSH in logic and consistency in the field of Chinese Literature. Since Chinese Literature is such a large subject field, the focus of this paper is limited to problems in the headings for Chinese Literature in different historical periods and form headings for Chinese poetry, fiction and drama.

1. Problems in the headings for Chinese literature in different historical periods

What are the basic principles governing the formation of LCSH? Loise Mai Chan listed “User and Usage” as the first principal and summarized two approaches for this principle, “The first, ......, is to consider (public) usage as the supreme arbiter in the choice of form and language, having priority over logic and philosophy. The second is to develop a system that adheres to logic and strictly formed principles, assuming that a logical and consistent system can be learned by the user””(3). In practice, however, we see neither public usage nor logic in forming the headings for Chinese literature in different historical periods in LCSH. Following are the part of the headings provided in LCSH for Chinese literature in different historical periods:

Chinese literature
  -To 221 BC
  -Ch’in and Han dynasties, 221 B.C.-220 AD
  -221 B.C.-960 AD
  -Three kingdoms, 220-265
  -220-589
  -Chin dynasty, 420-479
  -Liu Sung dynasty, 420-479
  -Sui dynasty, 581-618
  ....
  Five dynasties and the ten kingdoms 907-979
  .... (4).

Comparing these headings with a list of more complete historical headings under “China-History” (5), we can see LCSH simply selected some headings, merged some headings, and omitted others from the list of Chinese historical headings. We should assume that all these
selections, mergings, and omissions were based on public usage and logic, yet there are no obvious convincing reasons there. First, the headings “Spring and Autumn period 722-481 BC” and “Warring States, 403-221 BC”, which formed the first important period in Chinese literature, were omitted from the headings of Chinese literature. Secondly, LCSH kept the headings like “Three kingdoms, 220-254” and “Five dynasties and the ten kingdoms 907-979”. These are all common historical terms for the study of Chinese history, but not for Chinese literature. Finally, the most problematic case is that there is a very famous Chinese Literary period in history, commonly known as Southern and Northern dynasties period, which is "Northern and Southern dynasties 386-589" in LCSH as a Chinese historical heading (6). In LCSH, only the heading “Liu Sung dynasty, 420-479” was selected from the Chinese historical headings for the period to be included as a literature heading, but the more general heading “Northern and Southern dynasties 386-589”, and specifically, the other three important Southern dynasties “Ch’i dynasty, 479-502, Liang dynasty, 502-557, ..... Ch’en dynasty, 557-589” were all omitted.

In any standard Chinese literary textbook or critical work about Chinese literary history, there are always one or two chapters dedicated to the famous literary scenes of Southern and Northern dynasties (7). During the same historical period, Liu Sung, Ch’i, Liang, and Ch’en dynasties formed Southern dynasties. Northern Wei, Northern Ch’i, and Later Chou dynasties formed Northern dynasties. According to Chung-kuo wen hs’ueh ta tzu tien, there are 157 literary figures, 15 literary schools and genres, and 86 famous literary works recorded for Southern dynasties (8). The literary scenes in Northern dynasties were not as prosperous as in Southern dynasties, but there are 34 literary figures and 26 famous literary works recorded for Northern dynasties (9). By selecting only the heading “Liu Sung dynasty 420-479” and omitting others, LCSH has not only violated the principle “User and Usage”, but has created a confusing mess for Chinese materials dealing with this famous literary period in China. Enormous works dealing with the literary scenes of Southern and Northern dynasties, if they do not fit the only heading for this period (“Liu Song dynasty”) can only be cramped under the obscure and over generalized heading “Chinese literature-220-589”. From the user’s point of view, subject access to these works is almost unavailable. Furthermore, LCSH posts a incorrect cross-reference to the selected heading “Liu Sung dynasty 420-479”:

UF Chinese literature-Northern Sung dynasty 420-479
-Northern Sung dynasty 420-479
Use Chinese literature-Liu Sung dynasty 420-479(10)

Historically, the Liu Sung dynasty is the first dynasty of Southern dynasties, and the Northern Sung dynasty usually refers to the first part of Sung dynasty 960-1279. Liu Sung dynasty 420-479 should have no relation to Northern Sung dynasty.

2. Gaps and inconsistencies in the form headings of Chinese poetry, fiction and drama

According to Lois Mai Chan, the literary form heading that represents literary forms and genres occupies an important position and receives special treatment in LCSH (11). However, gaps and inconsistencies exist in the form headings of Chinese literature.
Poetry holds a supreme position in Classical Chinese literature. LCSH does provide a rather comprehensive form-heading list to classical Chinese poetry. There are twenty-nine of them (12). But, unfortunately, Ch’u tz’u, the first known Chinese poetic genre used by the first known Chinese poet Ch’ü Yüan (339 B.C.-ca 278 BC), is missing. This is a “big” gap for the form headings of Classical Chinese poetry. In addition to many famous pieces of Ch’u tz’u written by Ch’ü Yüan, there are Ch’u tz’u works written by many later poets. The study of Ch’u tz’u has been one of the most important fields of Chinese literary scholarship from ancient China until today. There are enormous works written by famous Ch’u tz’u scholars, such as Wang I (fl. 89-158) and his work Ch’u tz’u chang chü, Hung Hsing-chu (1090-1155) and his work Ch’u tz’u pu chu, Chu Hsi (1130-1200) and his work Ch’u tz’u chi chu, Chiang Liang-fu (1902-) and his Ch’u tz’u shu mu. A search of the RLIN database shows that many of the LC records for the above titles have a uniform title "Chu tszu " assigned in the 630 field. This practice is directly against the definition of Uniform title and the purpose of using uniform title defined in AACR2 (13). These titles are not the various titles of Chu Tzu as one work, but studies and interpretations of Chu Tzu as a genre for a group of works. Using Ch’u Tzu’s as a uniform title for these works will mislead users. It is critical for LCSH to correct this and include Ch’u Tzu as a subject heading. The relationship between Ch’ü Yüan and Ch’u tz’u is as important and famous as the relationship between Shakespeare and Sonnets. Could anyone imagine the form headings of English poetry in LCSH without Sonnets?

Under "Chinese fiction", LCSH provides 18 westernized and modern form headings, such as "Fantasy fiction, Chinese" and "Didactic fiction, Chinese", but no commonly known Chinese genre/form headings (14). According to Meng Yao, a famous Chinese scholar in Chinese literature study, the commonly known genres of Chinese fiction include Wen yen (using Classical Chinese), Pai hua (using modern Chinese), Chih jen and Chih kuai (the style of writing legend stories mainly during Southern and Northern dynasties (386-589)), Pien wen (the style of writing for Buddhist stories), Chuan ch’i (the style of writing legend stories mainly during Tang dynasty (618-907) ), Tsa tsu (the style of writing short stories during Sung dynasty (960-1279)), Hua pen (the storytellers' scripts during Sung and Y’uan dynasties (960-1368)), and so on (15). Without all these form headings, LCSH can not provide any effective subject access to the study of Chinese fiction.

In Chinese drama, the form headings in LCSH are also insufficient and confusing. For example, LCSH provides "Ch’ü " as one of the form headings for Chinese drama (16), which is very confusing for its usage. Because Ch’ü can mean Yüan ch’ü (a short music play created during the Yüan dynasty (1260-1386)), K’un ch’ü (a local drama started in the K’unshan area during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), or nan ch’ü (Southern plays), or any singing drama. This form heading is too general, and there are no form headings or cross-references in LCSH for any of the forms of Chinese drama listed above. According to the famous Chinese literary critic Meng Yao, there are over 29 kinds of local dramas, and 23 kinds of historical drama forms (17)in Chinese. Since only 7 form headings are provided in LCSH (18) for all of Chinese drama, overcrowding and confusion under some general or obscure headings like "Operas, Chinese", "Folk drama, Chinese", and "Ch’ü" are inevitable and can severely limit access to related materials.
3. Solutions

No single library or institution can make LCSH fit for every subject, but joint efforts can make LCSH more adaptable. In order to solve the problems of Chinese literature headings in LCSH, I propose:

Actively combine the manpower and knowledge from the Library of Congress and other libraries to improve LCSH and encourage people to contribute the new headings and corrections for Chinese literature in LCSH:

1. Form a special task force, which should include not only librarians but also scholars in Chinese literature study, under the Technical Processing Committee of CEAL to deal with Chinese literature headings;
2. Utilize on-line cataloging utilities, such as OCLC, RLIN, and WLN to collect, study, test, correct the headings of Chinese literature in LCSH;
3. Establish an electronic discussion forum among Chinese catalogers, reference librarians, and scholars, which is dedicated to Chinese literature headings, and plan to meet during the annual AAS meeting;
4. Improve communication with LC, find the best communication method and the proper contact person in LC for collecting, testing, correcting, and adapting headings for Chinese literature.

NOTES

4. LCSH, p. 1074-1075.
5. LCSH, p. 1067-1069.
6. LCSH, p. 1067.
   Liu, Ta-chieh, *Chung-kuo wen hsueh fa chan shih* (Hong Kong : Ku wen shu chu, 1973), chapters 11 and 12.
   You, Kuo-an, *Chung-kuo wen hsueh shih* (Taipei : Wu nan t’u shu chu pan kung ssu, 1990), Sec. 3, chapters 4-8.


