

# Analysis on the Writing Characteristics of Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature

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## Abstract

**This essay aims to give a better understanding of Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature by Stephen Owen by analyzing the writing characteristics of this book. We can explore one of the fundamental themes in classical Chinese literature, recollection of the past, through the distinctive opinions of the author. We can have a new insight into some classical Chinese poems and some famous Chinese poets through the vivid description written by the author. We can see a good combination of Chinese and Western writing styles as the author uses a natural style of English essay to analyze the classical Chinese poems.**

## Keywords

**Remembrances; Stephen Owen; Writing Characteristics.**

## 1. Introduction to Remembrances and Its Author

### 1.1. A Brief Introduction to the Book

Remembrances is an exploration of one of the fundamental themes in classical Chinese literature – recollection of the past. The book takes us back to the past memories through many typical classical Chinese poems, and shows us the distinctive opinions of the author. It aims to, according to Stephen Owen, “give pleasure in reflection on some memorable texts, as we make our way through the encounter with the past”. This book makes us realize that “memory” is not an “objective thing” unrelated to the subject, but the relationship between “individuals” and “past”. If an “individual” does not have any “recollection of the past” like memoirs, poems and essays, the past is just a blank. The past is not something that anyone can access and get equally, but a complex interaction between men and their memories. The past is what is remembered. What is remembered is what we acknowledge, that is, what “exists” objectively. What is forgotten is what is lost and, no longer exists until men remember it again.

As a book with rich thoughts and art, Remembrances not only retells the past and history of Chinese literature, but also reflects the traditional way of thinking of the Chinese – “review of history”, which has lasted for thousands of years in Chinese culture. The book is a kind of recollection and it analyzes the famous traditional Chinese writers whose articles and poems recollected the past. These chapters are not arranged chronologically or categorically, and the author tries to build a world of reminiscence through novel and well-reasoned description and analysis.

### 1.2. The background of the Author

The author Stephen Owen is a distinguished American sinologist, mainly researching on premodern literature, lyric poetry, and comparative poetics. He earned a B.A. in 1968 and a Ph.D. in 1972 in Chinese Language from Yale University. He taught there from 1972 to 1982. He now teaches in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University. Much of his work has focused on the middle period of Chinese literature (200-1200), however,

he has also written on literature of the early period and the Qing. Owen has written or edited a lot of books, articles, and anthologies in the field of Chinese literature, especially Chinese poetry, including *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911*; *The Making of Early Chinese Classical Poetry*; and *The Late Tang: Chinese Poetry of the Mid-Ninth Century (827-860)*. He has devoted himself to the translation of the complete poetry of Du Fu, which was published as the inaugural volumes of the Library of Chinese Humanities series, featuring Chinese literature in translation. In acknowledgment of his groundbreaking work that crosses the boundaries of multiple disciplines, Owen was awarded the James Bryant Conant University Professorship in 1997. He has been a Fulbright Scholar, held a Guggenheim Fellowship, and received a Mellon Foundation Distinguished Achievement Award (2006) among many other awards and honors. The book *Remembrances* is one of his masterpieces. It is a successful attempt to combine “essay” with the Chinese “Ganxing” (sensibility), which is thought-provoking and delightful.

## 2. Writing Characteristics

On a personal note, there are three characteristics in *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature*. Firstly, the eight chapters of this book are not arranged coherently and logically. The book seems to be a collection of essays which express the various ideas respectively, but all the chapters stick to the only topic “Remembrances”. Secondly, the narrative style of Stephen is like telling stories. He adds many details and his imagination while the interpretations and opinions are original and distinctive with a strong personal style. Thirdly, he combines western criticism style of “essay” well with descriptions of ancient Chinese poetry.

### 2.1. Incoherence of the Chapters

When we want to recollect the past or analyze the history, we often write the article in dynastic order. In fact, many books about the classical Chinese literature follows the order of this kind. They talk about all types of articles from ancient times to the present to study the evolution of Chinese literature. Also, some books on Chinese literature classify poems by genre and study them by comparing different genres. However, this book is unique. There is a thesis in each chapter, but the chapters are not arranged by time or space order. The author carefully selects numerous poems, including classical Chinese prose and poetry, from a wide variety of Chinese classical literature, regardless of time. All the classical works that are discussed in the book are related to memories, and the author unexpectedly links them together, including those annihilated by wars, a fragment of stone, the collapse of the palace, and the dim boudoir of the traditional Chinese girls. From these details which are easy to ignore, through wonderful interpretation, imagination, analysis and textual research, the author presents to us a fundamental theme of Chinese classical literature: recalling the past.

The first and the last chapter correspond with each other, showing us the relationship between the Rememberer and the remembered. The Rememberer recollected the past and desired to be remembered. This idea is vividly shown in the example of “stele for shedding tears”, which indicates that every climber on the Mount Hsien hopes to be connected and remembered.

Chapter 2 is about the living and the dead. The dialogue between Chuang-tzu and the hollow skull depicts the dead cares nothing about the living; the story of Wang Shou-jen indicates the living created the relations with the dead (recollected the dead) simply to satisfy the needs of themselves. Chapter 3 is more about the Moral Necessity and Amoral Necessity in traditional Chinese history, with the recollection of the past event “Red Cliff”. The next chapter is about “an aesthetics of silence”, a typical Chinese writing technique named “Liubai”. It explains the value of fragments in Li ho’s poem. Chapter 5 describes the memories of Li Ch’ing-chao and Chao Te-fu. Their attitude towards antiques changed gradually, according to *Records on Metal and Stone*. The views of both sides diverged and Li Ch’ing-chao’s love for antiques gradually mixed with

her complaints about the present and her nostalgia for the common happiness of the past. She fell into the snares of memory. [1] "Too many memories may crowd the present." Chapter 6 narrates Shen Fu's fabricating memories of his imperfect life. He embellished his memories, making them more unrealistic but acceptable to him, so his own memoirs were fake but perfect. Chapter 7 deepens the idea of the last one. It talks about writings of Wu Wen-ying. Almost every word he wrote recalled his dead concubine. The writing based on recollection was compared to the "finely wrought door", a silk door embroidered with exquisite patterns and patterns, which separates the reality and the world created by the rememberer. Using this metaphor, Stephen explained that memory is an art full of ingenuity. Authors rewrite their recollection freely in their own world inside the door.

## 2.2. Storytelling Style

The statements of each chapter are demonstrated vividly and strongly, thanks to the storytelling style and his original and logical arguments. Based on the static pictures depicted by the poets, he filled the narration with details and personal imagination [2], and finally formed the story which demonstrates his argument. For example, in the first chapter when he interprets the writings of Meng Hao-jan and Ou-yang Hsiu, he tells the story of the two poets, describing their action and thoughts. Sentences like "Meng Hao-jan managed to stake his own claim on part of that landscape," and "The concern for immortal fame both lures Ou-yang Hsiu and repels him" are good examples.

This kind of narration, based on Stephen's subjective imagination, is perceptual and vivid, making the arguments more convincing but sometimes controversial. For example, in the third chapter, Stephen describes that the two Ch'iao sisters were filled with the sexual desires that would remain unfulfilled without Ts'ao Ts'ao. This kind of interpretation is a little bit unacceptable, as from his point of view the Ch'iao sisters might betray their husbands. This interpretation seems to deviate too much from the tradition and too maverick. But this kind of deviation is rare. Also, as it is an essay aimed more at sharing Stephen's opinions on the classical Chinese literature instead of study this topic rigorously [3], this could not be called a disadvantage.

Some Chinese scholars believe that western Sinologists misread Chinese literature. There is no denying that there would be real misreading when a scholar interpret the book, but misreading is also a kind of understanding. No one can truly restore the truth of history. Stephen's interpretation of the Ch'iao sisters is wrong from the point of view of the traditional thought and wrong from the point of view of history, but it is undeniably novel and interesting. In fact, all the description and narration of the Chinese poems in this book are just imaginations and stories, which means they are probably false, but who knows the truth? We only know that this kind of storytelling style can attract more people and add new vitality to the study of Chinese literature.

## 2.3. Good Combination of Chinese and Western styles

Stephen is of course showing his opinions. As a work of a foreign scholar, the most unique feature of this book is that he uses a natural style of English essay to analyze the classical Chinese poems. The contrast and integration of the two very different literary styles of the West and China expresses the tone of inquiry and demonstrates the spirit of academic freedom. It is less stuffy and more vivid, and also fits the deep and romantic theme of "memory".

If you analyze the structure of this book, you will find that although the chapters are arranged illogically, the key points of view are very clear and the statements and evidences are sufficient. He is making comments freely and calmly, and this is the feature of English essays. The style of an essay is like asking you to do a free discussion. You can say whatever you want, and you need arguments and examples to support your ideas. This style makes it possible for different people

to share their own literary viewpoints with each other and tolerate each other. He chooses the style of English essay because he wants to write in a way of discussion, which not only makes this commentary collection full of artistic aesthetic value, but also makes his views more acceptable. In the analysis of the text, this style also has a unique advantage, he tries to retell the author's writings, thoughts and feelings through his perception of images, which is itself a prose full of imagination. He recreates the environment where the author stayed to make us feel that we are there too. Through this way, it would be much easier to understand the inner meaning of the work.

But cultural differences always exist, which makes this book both novel and confusing to its readers. And also, the perspective of essay is narrow and the points of view are often subjective and personal. Chinese literary theory emphasizes that when a scholar is commenting on a work, the author and his background should be investigated first. This method is to make your statements as objective as possible. But the interpretation and description of the Chinese literary works by Stephen focuses more on his imagination, through the reproduction of images and scenes in the work, rather than the author's real-life environment. On a personal note, however, the tradition of Chinese classical literature study needs to be maintained, but it also needs to be supplemented and there needs to be an open space for free discussion. From this point of view, the book *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* by Stephen Owen undoubtedly open up a whole new world to us. I think it would be wonderful if we can discuss freely about the study of classical Chinese literature in the form of English essays, and then the field of Chinese literature will certainly be more vibrant.

### 3. Conclusion

To conclude, *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* is worthy of study. It is a new and unique style. It follows a special order. We can describe it as "the shape disperses while its spirit concentrates". The so-called "storytelling style" can bring us to the past scene through vivid narration. Also, as a good combination of Western essay and Chinese style, this book open up a whole new world to us. It can make you deep in thought through the author's original and distinctive ideas. It can also convince you through powerful examples and arguments. My essay can just provide you with a general picture of Stephen's thoughts of Chinese classical literature. In fact, his ideas deserve more and deeper exploration.

### References

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