Chapter 5

Guanzhui bian, Western Citations, and the Cultural Revolution

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Guanzhui bian 管錐編, first published in four sizable volumes in 1979, is Qian Zhongshu’s most ambitious scholarly work, the culmination of a lifetime of reading in Chinese literature and philosophy and their counterparts in the Western tradition. The work consists of hundreds of short essays or reading notes, filling over 1500 pages, keyed first to ancient Chinese classics like the Classic of Changes and Classic of Poetry, and second to more miscellaneous compendia such as a voluminous tenth-century collection of marvel tales and the “complete” collection of pre-Tang prose that was put together in the Qing dynasty. The essays are short, typically just one to three pages long. Each begins with a snippet of text from the classic or other composition under consideration, then proceeds to explore parallel or divergent treatments of the same image, metaphor, motif, or thought in later Chinese writings. In exploring these later writings, Qian casts his net wide. There is hardly any type of writing that he overlooks: poetry, literary prose, literary criticism, histories, biographical collections, local gazetteers, philosophy, anecdote collections, drama, and novels—all are amply represented among the sources he draws upon. Having reviewed comparable Chinese statements, Qian then typically moves on to Western parallels, in history, philosophy, and literature, citing everything from classical Greek and Roman writings, to medieval literature and religious texts, to pre-modern and modern works in European languages. His purview includes modern scholarly works and criticism in these languages as well as primary literary and philosophical texts.

The title of Guanzhui bian (literally, “tube and awl collection”) alludes to an early Daoist parable about a fool who tries to survey the heavenly bodies at night while looking through a tube or straw and attempts to measure the depth of the earth by poking an awl into the ground. The title thus self-deprecatingly refers to the focus of the essays on minuscule passages lifted out of great works, implying that they are completely inadequate for taking the measure of the great writings in which they are embedded. As the same time, the title reminds us that Qian is thinking of what is grand and overarching even as his approach to it is through the immediate and finite. Qian’s own English translation of the
title is “Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters,” which I have used in my selected English translation of the work.¹

One can readily discern connections between Guanzhui bian and Qian Zhongshu’s previous scholarly writings. Certain subjects treated in essays Qian wrote decades earlier (e.g., on synesthesia, the shared aesthetics of painting and poetry, the expression of sorrow in poetry, and so on),² reappear multiple times in the voluminous 1979 work. The earlier work that most resembles Guanzhui bian is Qian’s Tanyi lu (On the art of poetry, 1948; rev. 1984), a collection of essays on Chinese poetry and poetry criticism, that similarly resorts to using a sometimes bewildering pastiche of quotations from primary and secondary sources to make its arguments. Even in Qian’s copious annotations to his anthology, Songshi xuanzhu 宋詩選注 (Poems of the Song: an annotated selection, 1958), one can see similarities to the learning and scholarly style of Guanzhui bian. Still, in scope and intent, Guanzhui bian goes beyond anything that Qian Zhongshu had previously produced. It is far more intellectually ambitious than On the Art of Poetry in extending its inquiry beyond poetics into aesthetics, the psychology of perception, language, other literary genres, and intellectual history. Although it may be faulted for its disjointedness and particularity, Guanzhui bian at the same time may be considered more sustained and systematic than the earlier collections of essays, for in it Qian is exploring nearly the entire corpus of the Chinese “classics,” using them as grist for his mill, to reflect on hundreds of themes and issues they raise, rather than writing on just a few selected topics.

In the thirty years since its publication, Guanzhui bian has come to be recognized as the capstone of Qian Zhongshu’s scholarly work, and a long list of interpretive studies, indices, and other aids in Chinese has been produced to help guide readers through it. Guanzhui bian has also cemented Qian Zhongshu’s reputation as one of the pioneers of the study of comparative literature in China, an accolade that he did not relish, given his low opinion of scholarship in that discipline. Yet even for scholars and Qian Zhongshu specialists, not to mention the general academic reader, questions linger about the work. What exactly was Qian Zhongshu trying to accomplish? Why did he write it in Literary Chinese (wenyan 文言)? What is the purpose of juxtaposing all the Western citations with the Chinese ones? Such questions are difficult to answer, even today. In the body of the work itself, Qian Zhongshu never sets

¹ Qian, Limited Views.
² These essays appear in Jiuwen sipian 舊文四篇 (Four Old Essays, 1979) and half of the text of the Yeshiji 也是集 (This Also Collection, 1984); all of the former and half of the latter are anthologized in the collection Qi zhui ji 七綴集 (Patchwork).