INTRODUCTION

The twenty essays in this book provide new insights into Chinese literature and music from the Tang dynasty to the present. The authors are scholars who have worked closely with Wilt Idema during his tenure as Professor of Chinese Language and Literature at Leiden University (1974–1999) and Professor of Chinese Literature at Harvard University (since 1999), and wish to honor him on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday.

Paying tribute to Idema’s achievements as a scholar and translator of premodern Chinese drama, fiction, poetry, and prose, this book bears witness to the huge advances that the study of Chinese culture has made since the 1970s, when he started his academic career. The sheer volume of primary sources now available in print and in searchable online formats has enabled research on an ever wider range of Chinese texts and topics from antiquity to the present. In addition, the study of modern Chinese culture has been greatly enriched by increasing opportunities for fieldwork in the broadest sense, and for international cooperation.

At the same time, shifting cultural hierarchies and changing intellectual paradigms have drawn attention to hitherto understudied texts, genres, authors and audiences, a case in point being the study of oral, vernacular, and performance literature, especially of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Idema’s contributions have been instrumental in establishing these fields firmly in Western sinology. Performance and music, and their interaction with textual work, come to the fore as shared areas of interest for many of our contributors.

The study of writing, performance, and music by Chinese women prior to the twentieth century was virtually non-existent forty years ago. Arguably, it is in this field that the most spectacular developments have taken place in recent decades, in terms both of the discovery and publication of previously unknown or ignored texts and artifacts, and of new methods and theories for studying these materials and assessing their cultural and intellectual significance. Idema’s work has made major contributions to this enterprise, and a significant number of essays in this volume take as their topic women’s literary and artistic
Wilt Idema in the early 1970s (photographer unknown).