Comptes rendus


The study under review is the first English-language overview of the Chinese lexicographic tradition. It covers a wide range of titles from the Zhōu (1046 -256) to the Qīng dynasty (1616-1919) and takes into account bilingual dictionaries from Táng to Qīng. The book is based on a four-period division (p. 10): (1) the pioneering and emerging period: 1046 BC-AD 220 (Western Zhōu to Eastern Hàn), (2) the exploration and cultivation period: 220-1368 (Three Kingdoms to Yuán Dynasty), (3) the reform and shaping period: 1368-1991 (Míng to Qīng), (4) the depression and booming period: 1911-present (XXth C.).

The book is organised as follows:

I. Introduction (pp. 3-12)

II. The genesis and emergence of lexicographical culture and works in Ancient China (pp. 13-152)

III. The exploration and cultivation of lexicography in China (pp. 153-255)

IV. The reform and shaping of lexicography in China (pp. 257-364)

V. Chinese bilingual lexicography: A brief overview (pp. 365-402)
The book also includes three appendices, a bibliography (pp. 447-451), a useful list of five websites, an index of Chinese names, and a preface by J.H. Prynne of Cambridge University.

In the introduction, the authors call for a new theoretical investigation of lexicography combining linguistic, socio-cultural and psycho-cognitive approaches. They propose to take into account the compiler, the dictionary as well as the user of dictionaries, and maintain that a broader perspective is becoming necessary. Therefore they propose to include in the scope of their investigation bilingual dictionaries, and to compare Chinese lexicography with other lexicographic traditions in order to show the originality of Chinese dictionaries. They aim at avoiding obscurity and "inconsistency in employing lexicographical terms" (p. 7) and propose in their new policy "indexes and appendices to list and explain difficult and obscure terms".

All of the stated aims require a careful and methodological study. The book is written in a pleasant English style. The authors discuss some original points, like for example, the similarities between passages from Ėryā 爾雅 and Shīzī 尺子 by Shī Jiāo 尺佼 (ca. 390-330) (p. 40, but nothing is said about the edition they have used). They provide an instructive presentation of bilingual dictionaries. But, unfortunately, the authors lack a rigorous and coherent method based on relevant sinological literature. The comparison of the Chinese lexicography with other lexicographic traditions is limited to some English dictionaries (p. 143), and the authors hastily conclude that compared to the Chinese tradition (Ēryā, Shimíng), the thematic arrangement of the Latin-Anglo-Saxon eleventh century glossary is not as comprehensive or well focused as its Chinese counterparts. I note, however, that the book under review is not entirely free of obscurity or "inconsistency in employing lexicographical terms". There are many unnecessary repetitions and inaccurate translations. The book does not have any footnotes and lacks a conclusion.