Abstract and Keywords

This chapter discusses two major ways of organizing and disseminating knowledge in premodern China, namely, compiling an encyclopedia and making an epitome. An encyclopedia, leishu, consists of extracts taken from a variety of earlier works and classified under different categories. It is supposed to present an organized system of knowledge of the world, reflecting an orderly universe in its comprehensive, structured arrangement of ideas, concepts, and things. The imperial commissioning of a large-scale encyclopedia is also a way of demonstrating the state’s cultural power and political legitimacy. An epitome (chao or shuchao) is usually based on either one work or one type of work; it includes what are considered key passages from a work, and sometimes summarizes or paraphrases the content of a work. The making and circulating of encyclopedia and epitome raise important questions about what, and how, people read in medieval Chinese society.

Keywords: encyclopedia (leishu), epitome (chao/shuchao), epitome-making (chaoshu), knowledge organization, knowledge transmission, history of reading, history of the book

Lazy King and Fatigued Prince

In Chinese antiquity, reading was a rare and cumbersome activity. It was a privilege of the ruling class, and yet a ruler might not always have the time or patience to engage in it. Knowing this to be the case, the tutor of a Chu king made an epitome of the Spring and Autumn Annals, a work of history, for his royal pupil. The “Yiwen zhi” 藝文志 (“Monograph on Arts and Writings”) of the Han shu 漢書 (History of the Former Han) from the first century CE records a title Duoshi wei 鐵氏微 (Mr. Duo’s Subtleties) in three scrolls. No longer extant, it is believed to be the very epitome made by Tutor Duo for King Wei of
Chu 楚威王 (d. 329 BCE), who was “unable to read the entire Springs and Autumns” (Shiji 14.510).

One might attribute the king’s “inability” to royal lethargy, but ever since the increasing use of paper from the first century CE on, there simply have been too many books. Even in an age when people were producing and reproducing books without word processors, printers, and copiers, the sheer volume of books could seem overwhelming. In the words of a sixth-century prince, one of the greatest book collectors of the time and an avid reader since his early teens:

Philosophers emerged during the Warring States, and literary collections first flourished in the Han. Nowadays, each family produces writings, and every person has a collection. What is well written may give voice to the author’s feelings and purify customs; what is poorly written proves no more than a waste of sheets that will only wear out the later-born. The texts of old pile up high, with more texts being produced ceaselessly. A person raises a foot and walks down the road of learning, and yet, even when one’s hair turns white, one will not have exhausted everything.

(Xiao 2011: 164)

Although the two types of work discussed in this essay—encyclopedia (leishu 集書) and epitome (chao 鈔)—emerged in response to many needs, they both are, first and foremost, expedient ways of dealing with the problem of the quantity of books. Encyclopedias and epitomes are closely related and yet remain distinct. A crucial part of the educational and literary tradition in premodern China, they were two of the most important forms of organization and dissemination of knowledge in the period covered by this volume and beyond.

The “Imperial View”: Toward a Definition of Leishu

Leishu is literally a “classified book.” In the simplest definition, it consists of extracts that are taken from a variety of earlier writings and classified under different categories. Beyond this simple definition, however, complications arise. Chinese scholars have debated for a long time about the origin, nature, and scope of leishu. From Erya 爾雅, the oldest surviving Chinese “dictionary,” and Masters Texts (zishu 子書) to the Classic of Poetry or the sixth-century literary anthology Wen xuan 文選, almost anything and everything has been regarded as either a source of or associated with leishu, based on
the recognition that all of the above-mentioned works, broadly speaking, have two things in common: they contain in themselves an “assembly of all sorts of things,” and they represent a certain order of arrangement and classification (Sun 2007: 3–4). The confusion about what constitutes or, more precisely, what does not constitute a leishu is tied to the ironically troubled classification of a “classified book” according to the traditional Chinese bibliographical scheme of the “four parts” (classics, histories, Masters Texts, and literary collections; see Chapters 11 and 12–15). The eighteenth-century editors of the grand Siku quanshu 四庫全書 (The Complete Library of the Four Treasuries) exclaim with some exasperation: “A ‘classified book’ may incorporate classics, histories, Masters Texts, and literary collections, but it is not a work of any of the four and cannot be classified under the four parts” (Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao 135.2781).

Despite these vagaries and contestations, there is a general consensus that the first real leishu was the Huang lan 皇覽 (Imperial View) from the early third century. We will begin with this work, for its compilation embodies several important characteristics of the Chinese leishu and demarcates the boundaries of a typical leishu as discussed in this essay.

The central figure in the project was Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226), also known as Emperor Wen of the Wei 魏文帝, his posthumous title. The son and heir of warlord Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220), the real power behind the throne in the last years of the Han empire, Cao Pi had grown up as a de facto prince, if not one in name until 217. Cao Pi took a passionate interest in literary writings and cultural matters. To him is credited the first extant discussion about literary genres in his Dian lun 典論 (Normative Discourses), a work of Masters Literature. Such a work usually consists of a number of chapters on social, ethical, and political issues, each chapter under a subject heading. While from Eastern Han on it was customary for such a work to include a chapter on rhetoric or some aspect of writing, Cao Pi presented a slightly permuted version by devoting a chapter to textual literature, in which he famously praises literary works as “the grand achievement in the management of state, a splendor that never decays,” and evaluates contemporary as well as past writers (Yan 1987b: 8.1098).

The great plague of 217 that took the lives of many of his literary friends provided an impetus for Cao Pi to intensify his cultural pursuits. Judging from an assortment of brief mentions in historical sources, Cao Pi had commissioned the compilation of the Imperial View in 220, after he succeeded to his father as the King of Wei but before he founded the Wei dynasty in place of the Han. The project involved a number of scholars, including Wang Xiang 王象 (d. after 222), Huan Fan 桓範 (d. 249), Liu Shao 劉劭 (d. 240s), Wei Dan 韋誕 (179–251), Miao Xi 繆襲 (186–245), and Miao Bu 繆卜, and took several years to complete. The Imperial View was a compilation of extracts from “the five [Confucian] classics and various works,” which were “classified and divided into different
sections” (*Sanguo zhi* 21.618). The “various works” presumably include both histories and Masters Texts. The compilation, when completed, “had altogether over forty categories [bu], each category consisting of several dozen chapters [pian], totaling over eight million characters” (*Sanguo zhi* 23.664). Another comment affirms that the *Imperial View* had “over a thousand chapters” (*Sanguo zhi* 2.88). In the first half of the sixth century, this work might still have been largely intact, in a bulky 680 scrolls, in south China, but after the massive destruction of books during the fall of the Liang 梁 dynasty (502–557), it seems that only abridged versions produced in the fifth century had survived (*Sui shu* 34.1009; *Xin Tang shu* 59.1562), and not many scholars had seen even these. Sima Zhen 司馬貞, an eighth-century scholar, regarded the *Imperial View* as a book that “records the tombs and mausoleums of historical personages,” perhaps based on the citations of the book in that particular category in later encyclopedias (*Shiji* 1.5). Ironically, the reconstituted *Imperial View*, pieced together from citations in commentaries and encyclopedias by the eighteenth-century scholar Sun Pingyi 孫馮翼, indeed mostly consists of entries on mausoleums and tombs (*Huang lan* 1–7). This is perhaps because the rest of the *Imperial View* largely overlaps with other early sources, including the numerous encyclopedias compiled from the sixth century onward, with only the section on tombs and mausoleums being a unique source of information.

The above account of the *Imperial View* epitomizes a number of crucial characteristics of a typical *leishu*. Commissioned by a ruler who was deeply concerned with cultural matters, it was a large-scale project that required the participation of more than one scholar, and whose completion spanned several years; it was classified into many topics; and, judging from its size, it aimed to be comprehensive and encyclopedic. Compiled for the sake of “imperial view,” it was also designed to reflect the vista of the imperial person. Although the ruler himself did not have a hand in the compilation, the fact that he employed many scholars at his court to accomplish this project is significant: while the work itself becomes a gathering place for earlier writings, the process of compilation, too, involves the collaboration of the finest scholars in the empire.

The first direct descendants of the *Imperial View* that appeared in the late fifth century inherited every aspect of the original work in terms of royal sponsorship and large scope. Between 480 and 482, the founding emperor of the [Southern] Qi 齊 (479–501) commissioned scholars at his court to compile the *Shi lin* 史林 (*A Forest of Histories*) in thirty scrolls “in the tradition of Emperor Wen of the Wei’s *Imperial View*” (*Nan shi* 4.113). If this work seems relatively modest, the emperor’s grandson, Xiao Ziliang 蕭子良 (460–494), the Prince of Jingling 竟陵, commissioned men of letters to compile a much better known work that was explicitly “modeled upon the example of the *Imperial View*.” Consisting of the “extracts of the five classics and works of a hundred schools” and spanning a thousand scrolls, this work was entitled *Sibu yaolue* 四部要略 (*An Epitome of Books of the Four Categories*) (*Nan Qi shu* 40.698). With this work, we see the first
golden age of the premodern Chinese encyclopedia, which coincided with the rule of the sophisticated Liang dynasty and in many ways represented the highest point of the cultural and literary development of early medieval China.

The compilation of leishu in the Liang dynasty reveals an acute awareness of the cultural prestige and authority associated with the compilation of an encyclopedia. Xiao Xiu 蕭秀 (475–518), the brother of Emperor Wu of the Liang 梁武帝 (r. 502–549), had supplied the learned scholar Liu Jun 劉峻 (better known as Liu Xiaobiao 劉孝標, 462–521) with books and asked him to put together a compilation of extracts from the books, which was subsequently named Leiyuan 類苑 (The Garden of Classified Extracts). The compilation proved so popular that it went into wide circulation even before it was completed. It was said that upon the completion of the work, which stood at 120 scrolls, Emperor Wu felt so competitive that he commissioned five scholars to compile something grander based on the imperial book collection. The project began in 516 and was finished eight years later; the end result was entitled Hualin bianlue 華林遍略 (The Comprehensive Extracts of the Park of Flowering Groves) in 700 scrolls (Nan shi 49.1220, 72.1782–1783).

Buddhist encyclopedias also flourished. Emperor Wu commissioned the compilation of Fo ji 佛記 (Record of the Buddha) in the early 500s and then Jinglü yixiang 經律異相 (Differentiated Manifestations of Sutras and Laws) in 516, the latter now the only extant encyclopedia from before the seventh century. Prefaces to both compilations stress that they aim to facilitate retrieval of information from a vast number of sutras. A third Buddhist encyclopedia, Fabao lianbi 法寶連璧 (Joined Jade-Disks from the Treasures of Dharma) in 220 scrolls, was commissioned by prince Xiao Gang 蕭綱 (503–551) and completed by about forty courtiers in 534. In interesting contrast, no Daoist encyclopedia was commissioned during this period, although the famous Daoist Tao Hongjing 陶宏景 (456–536) had initiated a general leishu named Xue yuan 學苑 (The Garden of Learning) that reportedly contains 150 topical headings (Yunji qiqian 107.371). A Daoist encyclopedia, Wushang biyao 無上秘要 (Supreme Secret Essentials), supposedly compiled (more likely commissioned) by Emperor Wu of the Zhou 周武帝 (r. 560–578), is preserved in the Daozang 道藏 (Daoist Canon). There is, however, only a single mention of the Zhou emperor’s involvement with such a work (Ren and Zhong 1991: 888); it is impossible to say whether the extant Wushang biyao was the same one commissioned by Emperor Wu of the Zhou, especially considering the fact that, as has been pointed out, the Daoist scriptures cited in the compilation were largely from scriptures of the Shangqing and Lingbao textual traditions that were embraced by the southern elite (Zhou 2011: 60).

Copies of Hualin bianlue were clearly not limited to an exclusive audience in the Liang court but could be accessed by anyone with the financial means to hire a scribe and make a copy of it. A copy was carried over by traders to north China, which was ruled by non-Han peoples at the time, and offered for sale to Gao Cheng 高澄 (521–549), the
powerful minister of the Eastern Wei 魏 (534–550). Gao Cheng asked the seller to leave the book with him for browsing first, and summoned an army of scribes to copy out the whole volume within a day and night. He then returned the book to the seller, saying: “I have no need for it” (Nan shi 47.1737).

At the Eastern Wei court, Pei Jingrong 裴景融 (495–546) was put in charge of making an encyclopedia also to be called Sibu yaolue, but the project was never brought to a finish (Wei shu 69.1534). It was not until the last years of the Northern Qi 齊 (550–577), the most cultured of the northern dynasties, that a leishu of scope and length more or less comparable to those of the southern encyclopedias was commissioned and produced in the north; it took a group of scholars about six months to complete, and was presented to the throne in the winter of 572. The accompanying memorial states:

In the past, Emperor Wen of the Wei [ordered] Wei Dan and others to compile the Imperial View, which incorporated various discourses and was divided into thematic categories. When enjoying some leisure from affairs of the state, Your Majesty is fond of the silk scrolls [books] and has thoroughly browsed the writings of the Magnolia Terrace and the storehouse of bundled bamboo slips [i.e., the imperial library]. Your Majesty believes that in reading one prizes wide-ranging scope, but within the wide-ranging scope one must prize obtaining the essentials; to save time and yet double the results, one requires ease and simplicity.

Previously, at the Hall of Promoting Culture, Your Majesty commanded us to research the former canon and compile from various books. We humbly applied our shallow talent and immediately set to work. Emulating the numbers of heaven and earth, we came up with fifty categories; reproducing the sum of yarrow stalks needed to form the Qian and Kun Hexagrams, we completed three hundred and sixty scrolls.

(Yan 1987a: 7.3865)

Like the other encyclopedias cited above, this compilation, known as Xiuwen dian yulan 修文殿御覽 (Imperial View at the Hall of Promoting Culture), was put together for the practical purpose of helping a reader navigate in the sea of books and facilitate the retrieval and reuse of information by organizing it under appropriate headings. The references to the numbers of heaven and earth and to the sum of yarrow stalks in the above passage deserve special attention. Taken from the Yijing 易經 (Classic of Changes), a divination manual that has come to be regarded as the most important work in Chinese intellectual history, these references indicate the deliberate matching of the numbers of categories and scrolls of a leishu with the mystical cosmic numbers. A leishu is thus much more than just a chest of drawers serving as a repository of knowledge and material aids to memory: it possesses in miniature the dimensions of the cosmos. Like the imperial
garden, from which a *leishu* frequently takes its name, it is supposed to present an organized system of knowledge of the world, reflecting an orderly universe in its comprehensive, structured arrangement of ideas, concepts, and things. Its compilation, imperially commissioned, is also a means of demonstrating the state’s cultural power and political legitimacy.

The Earliest Surviving Encyclopedias

Two of the oldest encyclopedias to have survived are from the early seventh century: *Beitang shuchao* 北堂書鈔 (*Extracts from the North Hall*) and *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 (*Classified Extracts from Literature*). *Beitang shuchao* was compiled by Yu Shinan 虞世南 (558–638) when he was working in the imperial library of the Sui 隋 (581–618); it reportedly consisted of eighty main categories in 801 scrolls, but now only nineteen categories and 160 scrolls are extant, and these fragments can hardly represent the original version because of heavy interventions and interpolations during the book’s vexed history of textual transmission (Zhu 1981: 30–37). *Yiwen leiju*, on the other hand, is preserved in a much better shape and remains largely intact. Spanning one hundred scrolls, it was commissioned by the founding emperor of the Tang dynasty in 622 and completed two years later by a team of leading northern and southern scholars, including Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 (557–641), Chen Shuda 陳叔達 (d. 635), Yuan Lang 袁朗 (?–?), Pei Ju 裴矩 (d. 627), Zhao Hongzhi 趙弘智 (572–653), and Linghu Defen 令狐德棻 (563–666). A quick review of the structuring of *Yiwen leiju* will illustrate the way in which a *leishu* organizes knowledge and the values and beliefs reflected in the organization.

*Yiwen leiju* includes forty-six categories (or forty-eight, depending on how one counts) and 727 subcategories. It begins with the concepts of heaven, earth, and man, followed by social, political, cultural, and religious institutions, and moves on to things of nature such as plants, minerals, birds, beasts, fish, and insects, ending with auspicious and inauspicious omens manifested in the world of nature. The first thirty-seven scrolls are arranged as follows:
The encyclopedia predictably opens with heaven and earth. Scroll 10, “Imperial Signs” (i.e., heavenly signs portending a ruler’s enthronement), transitions from heaven and earth to the human realm, and yet it is clear that the imperial family constitutes a special category above ordinary human beings. It is also interesting that administrative units—prefectures and commanderies—precede the two categories of natural landscape. The world is envisioned, first and foremost, in terms of empire. Much can be gleaned about medieval Chinese views of the world from the way in which the encyclopedia is conceived: the arrangement of the categories and subcategories, and the inclusions and exclusions. The eighteenth-century editors’ criticism of the “omissions” and “miscategorization” is based on a lack of understanding of the historical forces at work in the compilation of a *lei sku* and on an implicit assumption that cultural values never changed. For instance, they complain that the subcategory of “princess” is appended to the category of “Crown Princes” while the subcategory of “princes” is placed under the category of “Offices” (*Siku quanshu zongmu ti yao* 135.2783), without realizing the immense power and influence of the female members of a family—imperial family included—in the northern culture during the period of disunion (317–589), and that the Tang, though ruling over a unified China, was very much a northern dynasty. The female dominance at the Tang court culminated in Empress Wu Zhao’s 武曌 (624–705) establishment of her own dynasty from 690 to 705 and only gradually faded after the eighth century. The princes, on the other hand, were regarded as officers of the empire, albeit the officers at the very top, above the prime minister, because unlike princesses,
who could wield political power invisibly, the princes could and did hold public offices. Modern Chinese scholars often attribute such “miscategorization” to the leishu compilers’ “historical limitations,” and yet it might be the critics who have failed to historicize the values and beliefs behind the compilation of an encyclopedia.

After making the customary declaration of the overwhelming quantity of existing books, the preface by Ouyang Xun states:

[The emperor] puts martial concerns to rest and promotes cultural matters, establishes schools and opens seminaries, desiring for every family to be rich in Sui pearls and everybody to hold the jing jade. In the view of His Grace, previous compilers each executed his own plan: the [Collection of] Literature Arranged by Genre [Wenzhang liubie] and A Literary Anthology [Wen xuan] only include literary writings; the Imperial View and Comprehensive Extracts [of the Park of Flowering Groves] straightforwardly record the plain facts [about a given category]. As their editorial principles differ, it is difficult for the reader to consult and research. Thereupon He issued an edict that we compile both plain facts and literary compositions.

(Yiwen leiju 27)

Two things are worth noting here. One is that it makes a point of systematically including extracts from literary writings—poetry, poetic expositions, and so forth—under all categories, which, according to its preface by Ouyang Xun, is a new feature compared with earlier encyclopedias that only “record plain facts [about a given category]” (zhi shu qi shi 直書其事). Although the writings are in most cases excerpts instead of complete texts, Yiwen leiju has preserved numerous pre-seventh-century literary compositions that would otherwise have been lost. For writings of which we do have alternative sources, it presents us with some of the earliest textual variants available, thus enabling us to catch a glimpse of different versions of a text and of the messy state of manuscripts in circulation from the age of manuscript culture. The other remarkable point about Yiwen leiju is its manifest purpose of public consumption and education. It is meant to be a treasure chest open to all, or at least all members of the elite.

Nowhere is the pedagogical value of a leishu better revealed than in Chuxue ji 初學記 (A Primer for Beginners), an encyclopedia of thirty scrolls with twenty-three categories and 313 subcategories. Commissioned by the Tang emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756) to help his young sons in their literary compositions, it was presented to the throne in 725. Ironically, the earlier leishu were now considered by the emperor as too large and cumbersome for quick retrieval of information, and he wanted something smaller for easy use and speedy results (Liu 1984: 137). Though condensed, Chuxue ji remains just as comprehensive in terms of its coverage as Yiwen leiju. It also has a
distinguishing feature: besides extracts offering basic information ("plain facts") about a given category and extracts of pertinent literary writings, it includes a section known as "parallel allusions" (shidui 事對). For instance, in the category of "Seas," the "parallel allusions" section gives a number of paired allusions related to ocean lore:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{tong tian / dong di 通天/動地 (joining heaven / moving earth)} \\
\text{busi cao / fanhu shu 不死草/返魂樹 (death-defying plant / soul-returning tree)} \\
\text{qingxie baichuan / huifu wanli 倒瀉百川/迴洑萬里 (water pouring from a hundred rivers / currents whirling for ten thousand leagues)}
\end{align*}
\]

These phrases, ranging from two to four characters, all appear in pairs; a slash is inserted here to separate the two parts of a pair, which form a perfect grammatical parallel with each other. Each pair is followed by relevant quotations from the textual sources. The parallel both constitutes a mnemonic aid and can be readily used in the composition of "regulated verse" (lüshi 律詩), which requires two parallel couplets in the middle, or of a piece of parallel prose, both forms in vogue in the Tang and for centuries to come. As traditional Chinese lyric theory stresses that poetry comes directly from the historical experience of an individual poet, Chuxue ji structures one’s experience as much as it structures one’s utterance of it. The inclusion of the “parallel allusions” section, providing an aspiring writer with essential building blocks, thus establishes a leishu firmly at the heart of literary learning: it teaches one how to conceive the world and how to articulate the world, and the two mutually reinforce each other.

The section of “parallel allusions” is reminiscent of a contemporary children’s primer entitled Meng qiu 蒙求 composed by Li Han 李瀚 (fl. mid-eighth century) (Fu 2004: 58–64). This rhymed work, in the tradition of earlier primers like the Jijiu 急就 of the Han and spawning many similar works in later times, is a series of parallel four-syllable phrases featuring anecdotes about well-known historical figures, designed for easy memorization and primary education (see Chapter 6). Although it has no discernible order or classification, it has been catalogued under leishu since the Song (960–1279), apparently because of the pedagogical aspect of a leishu. The other precedents of the “parallel allusions” section are compilations of parallel phrases that were produced as an aid to literary composition, especially poetry writing. One such precedent is Yu dui 語對 (Phrases in Pairs) in thirty scrolls by Zhu Danyuan 朱澹遠 (fl. mid-sixth century), who also compiled Yu li 語麗 (Lovely Sayings) ("li" also means “parallel”) (Sui shu 34.1008). Neither is extant; but according to Chen Zhensun 陳振孫 (ca. 1179–ca. 1262), Lovely Sayings was classified into forty categories (Chen 1987: 423). The other precedent, whose fragments (of doubtful authenticity) are extant, is Bian zhu 編珠 (Strung Pearls), which was reportedly compiled by Du Gongzhan 杜公瞻 in 611 at the command of Emperor Yang of the Sui 亖煬帝 (r. 605–618) (Song shi 207.5293; Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao 135.2782).
fragmentary Tang dynasty *leishu* from the Dunhuang manuscript trove, given the name *Yu dui* 語對 by the modern scholar Wang Sanqing 王三慶, also adopts a similar format (Wang 1985).

**Pearls, Blossoms, “Minced Meat for Pye,” and “Private Rubbish of Sorts”**

*Chuxue ji*, like *A Forest of Histories*, is a “forest” that will supply the woodcutter with trees to be reused to construct a new edifice, just as Ben Jonson (1572–1637) had called his commonplace book *Timber*. During the Tang, there were many vast encyclopedias compiled under imperial auspices, such as the *Sanjiao zhuying* 三教珠英 (*Pearls and Blossoms of the Three Teachings*) commissioned by Empress Wu, although nothing else besides *Yiwen leiju* and *Chuxue ji* has survived. There are also a number of privately compiled *leishu* listed in the bibliographic chapters of *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (*Old History of the Tang*) and *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (*New History of the Tang*). Only a small portion has survived, such as the famous poet Bai Juyi’s 白居易 (*Bai Ju-yi*) *Jing shi shilei* 經史事類 (*Classified Allusions to Classics and Histories*, better known as *Baishi liutie shilei ji* 白氏六帖事類集) in thirty scrolls; *Lei lin* 類林 (*Forest of Categories*) in ten scrolls by Yu Lizheng 于立政 (627–679), which resurfaced in Dunhuang (Shi 1993); and Du Sixian’s 杜嗣先 (633–712) *Tuyuan cefu* 兔園策府 (*Storehouse of Bundled Bamboo Slips from the Rabbit Garden*), a fascinating compilation commissioned by a Tang prince and adopting a “Q and A” format, as in the civil service examination (Qu 2001: 126–129).

There are also a number of compilations discovered among the Dunhuang manuscripts and generally referred to as “*leishu*” by modern scholars for convenient labeling. Compared with the imperially sponsored and collectively produced *leishu*, these private compilations are all on a small scale and do not aspire to be comprehensive. For instance, one of the largest, best preserved compilations of this lot, known as *Li zhongjie chao* 劉忠節鈔 (*Extracts Encouraging Loyalty and Integrity*), focuses on moral and ethical values and codes of political conduct (Qu 2007). *Shi lin* 事林 (*Forest of Facts*) and *Shi sen* 事森 (*Grove of Facts*) look like individual notebooks made by a man with some basic education for his personal use (Bai 1999: 53–54). *Shi lin* begins with two lines of doggerel: “You must establish yourself,/Don’t get intimate with the alehouse.” It records nothing more than a few anecdotes about the diligent studying of eight historical figures. The fragmentary *Shi sen* records forty stories on various types of virtuous conduct; an inscription at the end reads: “*Shi sen*. On the tenth day of the fourth month in the wuzi year, Yuanyi recorded them while copying books.” This is followed by another piece of doggerel, which begins: “If one does not drink ale while copying books,/one often sees the
brush drying up.” Clearly Mr. Yuanyi was constantly feeling pulled by a desire for ale. On
(p. 141) the back of the paper were copied a few miscellaneous poetic expositions (fu),
signed by “Student Lang Yuanyi 郎員義 of the Jingtu Temple at the Dunhuang
Commandery on the fifth day of the eighth month in the guisi year, the fifth year of the
Changxing era.” There was no “fifth” year of the Changxing era, which stopped with the
fourth year in 933, but it was common for people living far from the capital not to learn of
the change of reign titles in a timely manner.

There are similar types of texts from Dunhuang that are no more than notebook
collections of copied passages, such as Yingji chao 應機鈔 and Qin dushu chao 勤讀書鈔.
Although scholars loosely refer to them as “Dunhuang leishu,” the passages in these
notebooks are not even always grouped under different headings, defying the basic sense
of a leishu. Insomuch as these texts fulfilled the needs of primary education at lower
levels of society in a provincial region, they evoke the “poetry manuals” that became
popular in the Tang (see Zhang 2002). Those manuals claim to teach a beginner the
“know-how” in poetic composition or promise to unravel the secrets of writing good
poetry, which became a required part of civil service examination in the seventh century
(see Chapter 6). If the Dunhuang notebooks demonstrate how members of the lower
strata of society obtained knowledge, a work like Jin yue 金鑰 (Golden Key), a small
collection in two scrolls put together by the famous writer Li Shangyin 李商隱 (ca. 813–ca.
858) and divided into four categories, seems to represent the other, elitist end of the
spectrum of note-taking (Song shi 207.5293; Chen 1987: 424).

These notebooks are not unlike the numerous specimen of the Western commonplace
book from the Renaissance period onward. Indeed, it has been suggested by scholars of
medieval Chinese literature that leishu bears a similarity to the commonplace book in the
Western tradition. Leishu has also been occasionally translated as “commonplace book.”
For this reason, a closer look at commonplace books may prove helpful in highlighting
some of the unique characteristics of leishu proper, i.e., the kind that is imperially
commissioned and sponsored.

“Commonplace” in the Western tradition had had a prestigious origin in Aristotle’s works;
its original usage, whether the topos koinos in Greek or the communes loci in Latin, was
closely associated with the rhetoric and oratory of ancient Greece and Rome.
Commonplaces were “the general and universal ideas used in all argumentation and
persuasion” (Lechner 1962: 228). In the Renaissance period, scholars such as Erasmus
developed elaborate methods for keeping a notebook of excerpts in a structured
arrangement to aid their discussions and debates (Havens 2001: 28). However, the term
“commonplace book” went through many changes over centuries of development. From
1700 onward, commonplace books are often no more than scrapbooks, with the copied
quotations that “first defined their purposes” forming only one part of their diverse
contents. They were sometimes neatly written and sometimes scribbled, on material ranging from folders of loose sheets to printed almanacs, often mixed with a drawing or even a pressed flower (Miller 1998: 35). After 1800, with cheap newsprint, some people even used clippings from newspapers to replace hand-copied notes (Allan 2010: 29). An English squire, William Congreve (not the earlier playwright), describes his commonplace book as “private rubbish of sorts,” and a Mrs. Piozzi wrote simply on the cover of one of her commonplace books, “Minced Meat for Pyes” (Allan 2010: 28). One notable trait these commonplace books have in common is that they were privately, individually compiled and more often than not intended for the compiler’s use only. They were also made as often by women as by men after the Renaissance. Most important, even the printed commonplace books from the Renaissance do not aspire to be encyclopedic, but usually focus on one area, whether literature, law, science, or theology.

In contrast, premodern Chinese leishu, beginning with the Imperial View, are distinguished by their public, comprehensive nature; that is, they were more often than not imperially commissioned, large-scale group projects that aspired to be encyclopedic in coverage. They were also intended to be circulated, not restricted to private use or even to a small audience. From the tenth century onward and throughout imperial China, colossal leishu continued to be commissioned by imperial rulers and collectively compiled, and were meant to demonstrate the state’s role as the custodian of culture.

Chinese scholars sometimes trace the origin of leishu to early philosophical treatises, specifically the so-called syncretic works from late Warring States and early Han such as Lüshi chunqiu 呂氏春秋 (Mr. Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals), Huainanzi 淮南子, and Shuoyuan (or Shuiyuan) 說苑 (Garden of Persuasions). Here again a cursory comparison sheds light on the unique features of a leishu. Lüshi chunqiu, also known as Lü lan 呂覽 (Lü’s View), was compiled under the direction of the powerful chancellor Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (d. 235 BCE). Its “comprehensive nature of the material” and its “systematic presentation” have led to the suggestion that it was “an encyclopedia of knowledge for the time” (Loewe 1993: 325). Huainanzi is a monumental work compiled at the court of the Han prince Liu An 劉安 (ca. 179–122 BCE); Shuoyuan, composed by Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 BCE), is a collection of material taken from earlier texts and arranged in twenty thematic chapters. Despite internal inconsistencies and diversity, Lüshi chunqiu and Huainanzi are both synthetic works with an inner coherence; even Shuoyuan contains Liu Xiang’s own creations, adaptations, and comments, with each chapter beginning with his prefatory remarks expounding the chapter’s theme.

Compared with these works, a leishu merely presents existing material. The relation to earlier texts underwent a radical change from the Lü’s View to the Imperial View: if a philosophical treatise like Lüshi chunqiu or Huainanzi seeks to integrate, then an encyclopedia preserves extracts as they are. This shift is a complicated indication of
several interrelated cultural phenomena emerging from the third to the fifth century. The age of massive encyclopedic Masters Texts was gradually replaced by an age of literary writings much shorter in length (Tian 2006; see also Chapter 15); those shorter literary writings required an adroit, artful use of allusions to earlier texts, and the need to make use of earlier writings in one’s own compositions could be satisfied by consulting a leishu. This is particularly true in poetic writings from the fifth century onward, coinciding exactly with the boom of encyclopedias. The importance of leishu as a writing aide was tied to the value being placed on one’s literary writings, and one can easily understand why, as such, it first emerged in the early third century under the auspices of a prince who was passionately interested in literature.

The Making of an Epitome

The modern scholar Wen Yiduo 魏一多 (1899–1946) noted the important relation between leishu and literary compositions long ago (Wen 1998), yet, as Teng and Biggerstaff point out, “encyclopedias have never been in very high repute among Chinese scholars, both because of their nature as secondary sources and because most scholars have considered it degrading to resort to short cuts to knowledge” (Teng and Biggerstaff 1971: 84). The attitude has changed in recent years as the significance of leishu in literary and intellectual history has been increasingly recognized (Ge 2001; Tang 2008). Nevertheless, the practice of copying out extracts from a work to make an epitome, known as chao 抄, chaoshu 抄書, or chaochuo 鈔撮, has received little attention. Although a leishu is entirely made from extracts, an epitome is not necessarily a leishu. A leishu consists of many extracts from different works arranged by category, but an epitome (as noun, chao or shuchao 書抄) is usually based on either one work or one type of work. For instance, scholar and writer Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343) once made a Shiji chao 史記鈔 (An Epitome of Shiji) in fourteen scrolls (Xin Tang shu 58.1463); Cao Cao, father of Cao Pi, was credited with making an epitome of various works of military strategies which he named Ji yao 接要 (Assembly of the Essentials) and subsequently circulated as an independent title (Sanguo zhi 1.2; Sui shu 34.1013–1014).

In modern Chinese, chaoxie 鈔寫 has become a compound simply indicating “copying,” but in early medieval times chao, used as a verb (to make an extract) or as a noun (extract), is defined against xie 寫, to copy (Tian 2007: 79–82). The former requires active selection: one chooses what are considered important passages from a work for copying, and sometimes summarizes or paraphrases in one’s own language the content of a work. The practice of chaoshu, a prized act of learning, spread far beyond the making of an encyclopedia, and accounts of chaoshu abound in early medieval times (see Tian 2007:
82–83). Strikingly, in dynastic histories, the epitomes produced by a biography subject are frequently listed next to, and on a par with, his own writings as part of his textual accomplishments. The passage from Yu Zhongrong’s 庾仲容 (477–ca. 550) biography in Liang shu 梁書 (History of the Liang) is typical:

Zhongrong made an epitome of Masters texts in thirty scrolls, one of various literary collections in thirty scrolls, one of various geographical works in twenty scrolls, and one of women’s biographies in three scrolls. He also authored a literary collection in twenty scrolls. All went into circulation.

(Liang shu 50.724)

Yu Zhongrong’s Zi chao 子鈔 (Epitome of Masters Texts) was reworked by Ma Zong 馬總 (fl. early ninth century), who renamed the epitome Yi lin 意林 (Forest of Ideas). A large part of it is extant and proves a precious source of many Masters Texts that have since been lost.

A passage from Zhang Mian’s 張緬 (490–531) biography is also illustrative of the status of epitome-making in this period:

Mian reconciled the differences of the various histories of the Later Han and of the Jin dynasty, and subsequently produced a Record of the Later Han in forty scrolls and an Epitome of the Jin in thirty scrolls. He also set out to make an epitome of the literary collections from the south, but did not get to finish it.

(Liang shu 34.492)

Again, Zhang Mian’s epitomes were treated as his unique accomplishments, and his failure to finish the epitome of the literary collections by southern authors was considered a regrettable loss. Indeed, a popular phrase in the Southern Dynasties histories is chaozhuan 抄撰, literally to produce extracts and compile (e.g., Liang shu 25.381, 49.689; Nan shi 50.1246; Chen shu 27.353). The only “original” aspect of chaozhuan is to exercise one’s judgment in reconciling differences of one’s sources; otherwise, chaozhuan is a scholarly activity that does not involve creative writing, as can be seen clearly in the statement that Emperor Wen of the Song 宋文帝 (r. 424–453) once ordered scholar He Shangzhi 何尙之 (382–460) to chaozhuan wujing 抄撰五經 (“produce extracts from the Five Classics and compile them”) (Nan Qi shu 54.943).

Nevertheless, chaozhuan, unlike a professional copyist’s copying of a book (xie shu 写書), is not an entirely passive process. Zhang Mian’s epitomes of the histories of the Later Han and the Jin were based on a variety of sources that clearly contained differences and conflicts, and he had come up with a synthetic work of his own—one might even call it a “critical edition.” As the Sui shu historian stated, “Since the Later Han, scholars have
often made an epitome of earlier histories and therewith produced a historical work of their own” 自後漢已來，學者多鈔撮舊史，自為一書 (Sui shu 33.962).

Many works recorded in the bibliographic chapters of the Sui shu are entitled “X or Y chao,” indicating that they are epitomes made from X or Y; the names of the epitome-makers are frequently noted whenever they are known. Such is no longer the case in Tang dynastic histories. While occasionally a biography still mentions epitome-making, it no longer constitutes a common feature. Values had changed.

Apparently, however, the practice of epitome-making had remained. People in the Tang continued to make epitomes, and this is nowhere more clearly seen than in the case of bieji, literary collections of individual authors (see Chapter 15). The evidence can be seen in the process of Northern Song scholars putting together a critical edition of a Tang author’s literary collection. As Owen demonstrates, a complete collection of a Tang author more often than not had to be assembled from many manuscript copies of an author’s partial writings by Song editors, and it was the norm to copy out selections from a collection—known as xiaoji, the “little collection” or an “anthology” of a single author’s work—based on the reader/copyist’s individual taste and preference rather than reproducing the entire tome (Owen 1997: 303–312). From copying extracts and making an epitome of a lengthy work to collecting “anthologies” of an author’s work and assembling them to rebuild a complete collection, we have come full circle.

Coda

Encyclopedias and epitomes are important ways of organizing and transmitting knowledge in medieval China. Though overlapping, the two remain distinct. Their popularity was closely associated with the proliferation of books and the difficulty of obtaining or reading many books, and with the need of literary composition. With regard to the classics, histories, and Masters Texts, one wanted to obtain the “gist” (yao); as for literary collections, one followed personal taste and preference and copied selectively. People did not always, or even generally, reproduce or read a work in its entirety. The making of encyclopedias and epitomes and their circulation (xing) raise a number of important questions in intellectual and literary history, about what and how people were reading in medieval Chinese society. The imperial commissioning of a large-scale encyclopedia is also a way of demonstrating the state’s cultural power and political legitimacy.
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