

How to Read Encyclopedea – the Tale of Two *Leishu*

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Leishu is a unique form of ancient Chinese reference books whose original purpose was to provide quick references to older texts. A *leishu* usually contains two parts, a knowledge structure and a large number of texts quoted from earlier books. Similar to a western encyclopedia, the structure of a *leishu* tries to provide a comprehensive and systematic coverage of the subject domain through its classification of categories and subjects. Unlike an encyclopedia, however, the entries of a *leishu* are excerpts, often verbatim, from earlier texts about the subject instead of its interpretation.

Leishu had largely been dismissed by traditional Chinese scholars as mere copies of existing texts. However, with the ability to process and compare large quantities of texts, we can now regard *leishu* from a very different perspective. First, the knowledge structure of a *leishu* provides a glimpse of how literati of the time view the world at the time when the *leishu* was compiled. The excerpts from an old book showed how that book was utilized in the *leishu*. What is even more interesting is to compare *leishu* from different era, since that demonstrates how the perception of the world changed over time.

In this talk we present a comparative study of two important *leishu*,: *yiwenleiju* – YL (藝文類聚), completed in early Tang dynasty (624AD), and *taipingyulan* – TY (太平御覽), completed in early Song dynasty (984AD). Both were commissioned by the emperors and were about the general knowledge of the world. YL divides its view of the world into 46 categories, further into 734 subjects. TY has 55 categories and 5,597 subjects. The total numbers of characters in the two books are 900,000 and 4,000,000, respectively.

We use a *co-quotation* relation to check if two entries are nearly identical. This reveals if the same excerpt from a book appeared in both *leishu* and under what subjects did it appear. This relation allows us to closely observe the change of concept not only at the structure level but also by the variations of excerpts. We can also compare how a book is utilized in different era though the categories and subjects that quote the book in the two *leishu*. Statistics and some observations will be presented.

We feel that our study is a good example of how digital humanities can be used to provide a refreshing view of classics of old. We hope that the methodology opens a new way to the study of the Chinese history of thought through *leishu*.