

# Wang Shizhen (1634–1711) and the “New” Canon

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how Wang Shizhen’s poetics of *shenyun* 神韻 (spiritual resonance) came to occupy a canonical position in literary judgment during early Qing, and how its gradual canonization resulted from both aesthetic and political discourses of the time. The article also discusses how Wang Shizhen became one of those great authors who constantly revised their own writings until the last moments of their lives.

**Key Words:** literary canon, Wang Shizhen, spiritual resonance, Qian Qianyi, partisan views, “entering Zen”, Zhao Zhixin, Qian Zhongshu, Yuan Mei, “great authors”, “popular authors”

Who are the arbiters of the standards and direction of literature? Which writers are central to the literary canon? Who are the ideal literary models and precursors? Such questions, although to all appearance belonging in a post-modern world, in fact were the basis of heated literary debate during the late Ming (i.e., late 16th and early 17th century China) when different schools of literary criticism contested their individual agenda in literary taste (either “pro-Tang” or “pro-Song”) in a consistent, and even vociferous, manner. Indeed, the number of schools of literary criticism in the late Ming was in itself quite unprecedented. Most important, “cultural belatedness” (to borrow a felicitous phrase from Harold Bloom)<sup>1</sup> seems to characterize the spirit of the age, when the late Ming literati not only felt the “anxiety of influence” that came from the tremendous burden of the past, but also engaged in constant competition against each

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1. Harold Bloom, “The Anguish of Contamination,” Preface to *The Anxiety of Influence*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), xxv.

other in search of a creative space that would allow them to find their own voices. The result was the unusual proliferation of “partisan schools” (*menhu* 門戶), and among them each one insisted on its own agenda and refused to listen to the voices of others. Responding to this phenomenon in literature, scholars such as Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 harshly criticized the politicizing tendency of contemporary critical schools, a tendency which in his view was responsible for the widespread influence of the poetic works of many hypocrites (*xiangyuan* 鄉愿) at the time.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile the beginning of the Qing also witnessed an overwhelming desire to find the center of the canon. From the 1660s on Qing society began to enjoy an atmosphere of peace and promise. It was also during this transitional period that the poet-critic Wang Shizhen 王士禛 (1634-1711) came to be recognized as a canonical figure. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how Wang’s poetics of *shenyun* 神韻 (spiritual resonance) came to occupy the center of literary judgment during this period, and how its gradual canonization resulted from both aesthetic and power discourses of the time.

A child prodigy who produced beautiful verses from the age of seven, Wang Shizhen was destined to lead a life of celebrity. He represented the “second-generation” Chinese who grew up under the Manchu rule (Wang was only 10 years old when Ming dynasty fell) and did not mind serving in the Qing court. Wang Shizhen began his political career as Judge (*tuiguan*) of Yangzhou prefecture at the age of 26, and later was promoted to a series of high positions at the Imperial court, where he served dutifully until past 70.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, few Chinese literati living under the Qing could boast a more distinguished and lengthy official life than Wang. Most important, known as a leading poet of his day, Wang Shizhen was especially favored by the Kangxi Emperor and was hand-picked by him to serve as an imperial tutor in the Hanlin Academy. Their special friendship was marked by frequent gifts of the imperial painting and calligraphy, tangible tokens of Kangxi’s esteem. In a culture where imperial favor or disfavor could dictate virtually everything, it was only natural that Wang Shizhen would attract ardent admirers due to his imperial connections.

However, more than twenty years before Wang was favored with his first imperial audience in 1678 he had already won widespread recognition for his

2. Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲, “Tianyue chanshi shiji xu” 天嶽禪師詩集序, *Nanlei wending* 《南雷文定》, ji 3, juan 1. See also Hu Youfeng 胡幼峰, *Qing chu Yushan pai shilun* 《清初虞山派詩論》 (Taipei: Guoli bianyi guan, 1994), 384.
3. Fang Chao-ying, “Wang Shih-chen,” in Arthur W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), 833.

poems, especially the poem-series “Autumn Willows” (“Qiuliu shi” 秋柳詩) which he wrote at a large poetic gathering near the scenic Daming Lake in Ji’nan, Shandong, in 1657. A young poet of 23, Wang suddenly found himself a popular author who inspired hundreds of male and female poets to compose matching verses to his “Autumn Willows.” That his “Qiuliu shi” could evoke such a sensational response from writers and readers at the time was a total surprise to Wang himself. But modern scholars, notably Yan Dichang 嚴迪昌, have argued that there was a certain “inevitability” to the unusually enthusiastic reception of the “Autumn Willows” poems, and hence that of Wang as a writer, at this particular juncture in history.<sup>4</sup> What Yan Dichang has seen is the meeting of a “new poetry” and a “new age” which combined to form a “new taste” that was particularly timely during the period of peace and reconciliation which accompanied the Kangxi reign. The “new” taste so defined refers to Wang Shizhen’s aesthetic of “spiritual resonance” (*shenyun*),<sup>5</sup> characterized in his poetry by gentle and moderate expression, with a sense of lingering emotion that was thought to be most appropriate for the new age. Although Yen Dichang’s notion of “historical determinism” might not be entirely convincing to all, it is important to note that such eminent Ming-Qing figure as Chen Weisong 陳維崧 who personally lived through the dynastic transition also viewed Wang Shizhen’s special poetics as a kind of “poetic education” (*shijiao* 詩教) that was needed for promoting the morals of a “peaceful world”.<sup>6</sup>

That Emperor Kangxi, and later Emperor Qianlong, would favor Wang Shizhen’s “poetic education” was—at least to many traditional Chinese scholars—perfectly understandable. For according to this view, the recognition of Wang Shizhen as a preeminent poet and critic, and consequently making him the center of the canon, necessarily involved the workings of Qing imperial power. Needless to say, the emperor’s approval did open the door for further promotion of a poet who had already won the respect of his contemporaries.

Nonetheless, we should remember that a large percentage of Wang Shizhen’s contemporary readers who favored his poetry were older Ming loyalists who attempted to interpret Wang’s “Autumn Willows” poems as works of

4. Yan Dichang 嚴迪昌, *Qing shi shi* 《清詩史》 (Taipei: Wunan tushu gongsi, 1998), 1:411; Gong Xiaowei 宮曉衛, *Wang Shizhen* 《王士禛》 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji chubanshe, 1993), 18.

5. Richard John Lynn, “Orthodoxy and Enlightenment: Wang Shih-chen’s Theory of Poetry and Its Antecedents,” in Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed., *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1975), 246-253.

6. Chen Weisong 陳維崧, “Wang Ruanting shiji xu” 王阮亭詩集序, *Jialing wenji* 《迦陵文集》, juan 1. See also Yan Dichang, 1:413.

topical allegory expressing secret loyalty to the Ming. Granted that the “Qiuliu” poems were perhaps only meant to mourn the passing of the Courtesans’ quarters in Nanjing without any specific political agenda,<sup>7</sup> still the ambiguous nature of the poems—reinforced by the vague images of beauty and melancholy—provoked readers to further explore the hidden meaning of the “autumn willows”. Just the opening couplet alone (“When autumn arrives what place moves us most?/ The setting sun and the west wind at the White Gate”) was likely to evoke nostalgic memories of the Ming, for the “White Gate” (Baimen) in Nanjing could symbolize the lost splendors of the former dynasty. Certainly the ending couplet in Poem # 1 conveys a feeling of melancholy with a particular lingering quality:

Don't listen to the windblown flute,  
The sadness of Jade pass is always beyond words.  
莫聽臨風三弄曲  
玉關哀怨總難論

It is in this sense that Wang Shizhen’s poetics of “*shenyun*”—a poetics of implicit rhetoric conveying infinite meanings “beyond words”—became extremely popular among the circles of Ming loyalists as something they could safely turn to in both reading and writing poetry, without incurring the dangers of literary inquisition which had posed a steadily increasing threat to them.<sup>8</sup> For example, after reading some of Wang Shizhen’s *huaigu* 懷古 poems (poems on historical themes), the elder poet Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 commented that Wang’s lyric verses were most moving because they subtly evoked “mournful feelings toward one’s country”,<sup>9</sup> and that, in particular, the “Qiuliu shi” series were a rewriting of the richly allegorical “xiaoya” of the *Shijing* 詩經.<sup>10</sup> Needless to say, Qian’s strategy of reading was a direct reflection of his own writing aesthetics, in which

7. Yan Dichang, 1:422-423.

8. Gong Xiaowei, 18, 57.

9. Qian Qianyi 錢謙益, “Wang Yishang shiji xu” 王貽上詩集序, in Wang Shizhen 王士禛, *Yuyang Shanren jinghua lu [jianzhu]* 漁洋山人精華錄 [箋注], commentary by Jin Rong 金榮 (1720?; rpt. Taiepi: Guangwen shuju, n.d.), juan 1, 1b.

10. Qian Qianyi, “Wang Yishang shiji xu,” in Wang Shizhen, *Yuyang shangren jinghua lu [jianzhu]*, 2a. For the tradition of writing and reading allegorically in traditional China, see also Pauline Yu, *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987); Longxi Zhang, “The Letter or the Spirit: The Song of Songs, Allegoresis, and the Book of Poetry,” *Comparative Literature*, 39.3 (Summer 1987):193-217; Earl Miner, *Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990); Haun Saussy, *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1993).

historical allusions were often heavily embodied with topical and symbolic meanings.<sup>11</sup> Such a method of reading and writing indeed reminds one of Leo Strauss’ idea of a peculiar type of literature, in which the true meaning can only be understood by reading between the lines:

That literature is addressed, not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only. It has all the advantages of private communication without having its greatest disadvantages—that it reaches only the writer’s acquaintances. It has all the advantages of public communication without having its greatest disadvantage—capital punishment for the author.<sup>12</sup>

Whether Wang Shizhen had actually intended his “Quiliu shi” to be read in the way adopted by Qian Qianyi and other Ming loyalists is of course difficult to know—although several decades later Wang’s poems were almost banned and burned during the Qianlong period due to an accusation of some sort, but Emperor Qianlong himself came to the rescue and decided that both the “language and meaning” (*yuyi* 語意) of the verses by Wang Shizhen were innocent.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Wang Shizhen might have already become concerned that his “Autumn willows” series would one day become a target of political criticism, as he obviously decided not to include in his own Collected Work *Yuyang shanren jinghua lu* 漁洋山人精華錄 (a definitive collection which Wang edited and published himself in 1700) the poems’ original “Preface” which contained words that could easily be misinterpreted.<sup>14</sup>

During Wang Shizhen’s lifetime, however, Ming loyalists still dominated the literary world of the times despite their marginal political status. After all, these loyalists were the true bearers of Chinese culture and they were most anxious to demonstrate their trustworthiness by continuing to possess “power” in literary influence, as may be seen in the notable examples of Qian Qianyi, Wu Weiye 吳偉業, and Mao Xiang 冒襄 who were all extremely prolific and all came to appreciate the talent of the young poet Wang Shizhen.<sup>15</sup> If anything, it was through

11. See Chi-hung Yim, “The Poetics of Historical Memory in the Ming-Qing Transition: A Study of Qian Qianyi’s (1582-1664) Later Poetry,” Ph.D. diss. Yale Univ., 1998.

12. Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952; rpt. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), 25.

13. Gong Xiaowei, 18-19.

14. For the original preface, see Wang Shizhen, *Yuyang jinghua lu [ji shi]* 漁洋精華錄集釋, ed. by Li Yufu 李毓芙 et al. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), I:67.

15. See Yan Dichang, 1:424; Wang Shizhen 王士禛, *Wang Shizhen nianpu* 王士禛年譜, ed. by Sun Yancheng 孫言誠 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), 29.