

Book Review

Yuan Xingpei 袁行霈 and Ding Fang 丁放,
*Shengtang shitan yanjiu [Studies on the High Tang
Poetry Circles]* 盛唐詩壇研究. **Beijing: Peking
University Press, 2012, 334pp. (ISBN
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As pointed out by Professor Yuan Xingpei, many scholars have failed to avoid being dominated by the established theories and views on which their research is based. The High Tang is so popular a topic among students in classical Chinese poetry that it is really difficult to make a breakthrough in this field. However, Yuan and Ding's work, by focusing on the relationship between poetry and politics, opens up new horizons. Mutual verification between poetry and history, the interrelationship between poets and political figures, and the poets' social positions and political roles are all explored in order to present both a general picture and fine details of High Tang poetry circles.

What is the High Tang era from the perspective of poetic evolution? This is the first question to be answered. In his 1994 article "Centennial Wandering: the Trend of Early Tang Poetry Writing," Yuan defines the High Tang era as from 721 (the ninth year of Kaiyuan, when those important High Tang poets began their literary career) to 770 (the fifth year of Dali, when Du Fu passed away). According to Yuan, the An Lushan rebellion is not as important in literary history as the death of the great poet Du Fu, which ended an era.

To explore the interrelationship between poetry and politics, especially the relations of important political figures to the poetry circles, is characteristic of this work. In traditional China, stress

Yuan and Ding, most poets were scholar-officials and therefore not professional poets in the modern sense; moreover, poetry writing was the main item in the Tang civil service examinations, hence poetry was inevitably intertwined with politics in such situations. However, since the late 1970's the relationship between literature and politics has been referred to less and less by scholars in mainland China, partly in reaction to the overemphasis in the nineteen fifties and sixties on the supremacy of political criteria in any studies in the humanities or social sciences; therefore, the fact that in the Tang dynasty more often than not the poetry circles were involved in politics was unfortunately neglected. This work reminds us of this important historical phenomenon.

Yuan and Ding discuss this topic in four aspects. First, in Chapter 1 they analyze the influence of the court upon the poetry circles, with Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 and Princess Yuzhen 玉真 as examples. Enamored by Taoist religion, Xuanzong wrote quite a number of Taoist poems and even exchanged poems with Taoist priests. It is due to his Taoist background, the authors point out, that Li Bai was summoned to the court. It may even be said that the High Tang poetry circles were tinged with a certain atmosphere of Taoist immortals (*xianqi* 仙氣), as is rather unique in Chinese literary history (7). Moreover, the life and poetry of Princess Yuzhen is thoroughly examined in Chapter 2. "During the whole Tang dynasty," Yuan and Ding observe, "she is extremely active in political affairs among the princesses, next only to Princess Taiping and Princess Anle. As for the influence on literature, no Tang princess can be compared with her; no other one had communications with so many poets as she had...She became so popular among the poets exactly because she patronized such great poets as Li Bai and Wang Wei" (61). No other researchers have noticed this fact.

Second, the poets' relations with politicians, especially

powerful figures such as Yao Chong 姚崇, Song Jing 宋璟, Zhang Yue 張說, Zhang Jiuling 張九齡, Li Lingfu 李林甫, and the royal concubine Yang and her cousin, are explored. Their political activities and stands, and the impact of these things on literature, are also elaborated. Such factors are surely relevant to the flourishing of poetry during that time (62). Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 delve into the evolution of court politics, from Yao and Song, through the Zhangs and Li, to the Yangs. In addition to analyzing the personalities of those figures, the environment of the poetic writing is clearly presented.

Third, the authors take adequate notice of the poets' social positions and political roles. In the academia of mainland China, the High Tang poets are usually divided into two categories, the Landscape and the Frontier, but Yuan and Ding repudiate such a common view. Instead, they group the High Tang poets into three types: the emperors, their entourages, and the court officials; the local officials; and the common people. Within this new perspective, the panorama of High Tang poetry is displayed.

Fourth, the impact of the An Lushan rebellion on the poets is scrutinized. This historic rebellion, which serves as a demarcation line between the prosperity and decline of Tang power, definitely exerted great influence on poets. In the words of Yuan and Ding, regarding the four great poets of that time, this rebellion “consummated one (Du Fu), agitated one (Li Bai), depreciated one (Wang Wei), and even ended one (Gao Shi)” (4). The relationship between poetry and politics is nowhere more vividly portrayed than here.

The prominent Qing scholar Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (1738-1801) advocated the idea of “penetration” (*tong* 通); that is, the interconnection between and integration of different phenomena in scholarly research. Professor Yuan also emphasizes it, the application of which is revealed in the exposition of the co-conditioning of history, politics, culture, and literature as well

in the formation and development of the poetry circles in the High Tang. Such an approach widens our perspective on and deepens our understanding of High Tang poetry.

Any event is the product of historical conditions that change over time. So, in Yuan's view, the diachronic dimension of "penetration" is no less important than the synchronic one. In this light Yuan focuses on the *zongtong* 縱通 (diachronic penetration). High Tang poetry or culture, which is neither all bright nor all dark, has its own origin, flourishing, and decline; hence, we must look upon it against the background not only of the whole picture of Tang poetry but also of the entire history of Chinese literature. Moreover, we must keep in mind that any development has its turning point. In the case of High Tang poetry, Yuan and Ding maintain, it was the third year of the Tianbao period (744) rather than the fifteenth year (755)—when An Lushan started his rebellion against the Tang, which ended the glory of the Tang dynasty and marked a historical epoch—that witnessed the turning point in its development. The *raison d'être*, according to the authors, is that literary development, though greatly influenced by politics, is not always in alignment with political development, as can be seen from the numerous events among the literati described in this book.

In sum, this book, with its solid scholarship, insightful criticism, and the lively prose that is characteristic of Yuan's scholarly work, may be regarded as a milestone in the study of Tang poetry. As such, it is unfortunate that this monograph, also suffers from some uneven editing, as can be seen from inconsistencies and even repetitions among its various papers. Moreover, the book does not always follow the standard practice of modern scholarship in producing footnotes. In some cases, even page numbers are not listed. For instance, it states without referring to page number(s) that in *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High Tang*, Stephen Owen argues incorrectly that Wang Wei

was among the powerful courtiers under the emperor Xuanzong, and yet one cannot find such a statement by Owen in Jia Jinhua's translation of Owen's work.

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