《漢學研究》0254-4466
第 41 卷第 1 期 民國 112 年 3 月（2023.3）頁 331-342 漢學研究中心

Book Review

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Xiaoshan Yang 楊曉山
Wang Anshi and Song Poetic Culture
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center Press, 2021, 366 pages.
ISBN 9780674262904

Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021-1086) is a crafty poet whose quest for novelty at all costs resulted in preposterous lines that led his readers into uncertain moral territory and verged on the traitorous toward sovereign and country alike. Wang Anshi is a skilled poet whose works were grounded in careful study of the classics of Tang dynasty poetry, yet still broke new ground and projected profound meaning, especially his exquisite quatrains that all consider to best reflect his "late style." Between these two assessments, which one captures the true Wang Anshi? The answer suggested by the new book *Wang Anshi and Song Poetic Culture* written by Xiaoshan Yang and published by the Harvard University Asia Center is essentially "both and neither at the same time." One of the greatest contributions of Yang's new book is the hermeneutic-

Manuscript received: July 25, 2022; approved: January 17, 2023.
2022 年 7 月 25 日收稿，2023 年 1 月 17 日通過刊登。

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response methodology that he employs to understand Wang Anshi's poetry. By this term, I refer to the way that Xiaoshan Yang explores the development of Wang Anshi's poetic craft, while at the same time mapping the "hermeneutic landscape" increasingly permeated by partisan politics within which critics sought to reframe the interpretation of Wang's poems. Yang identifies some of the most representative, interesting, and controversial responses of Song dynasty readers to Wang's provocative poems and then deftly reconstructs the literary conventions, political conflicts, and intellectual pursuits that formed the umwelt from within which elites debated Wang's controversial poetry. Yang's aim is not to agree or disagree with Wang's occasional fans or his many detractors, but rather to understand the cultural field within which such propositions could be made and to begin considering their larger implications. This is how Yang is able to show Wang Anshi in his alternating guises as the crafty poet or the skilled poet, depending on the reader and the particular cultural framework of interpretation they applied.

To those familiar with the history of the Song dynasty, Wang Anshi is best known as the once and powerful vice minister and later grand councilor to Emperor Shenzong of Song (r. 1067-1085) under whose reign Wang implemented an ambitious set of reforms to the fiscal, political, and education systems of the time known as the "New Policies." When Wang encountered stiff opposition from scholar-official critics to the New Policies, history records that he said, "Changes in the empire system are not to be feared, the ancestors need not serve as our models, and what people say in criticism need not be heeded."[1]

1 See Ronald C. Egan, *Word, Image, and Deed in the Life of Su Shi* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1994); Michael Fuller, *The Road to East Slope: The Development of Su Shi's Poetic Voice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Zhiyi Yang, *Dialectics of Spontaneity: The Aesthetics of Ethics of Su Shi (1037-1101) in Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Yugen Wang, *Ten Thousand Scrolls: Reading and Writing in the Poetics of Huang Tingjian and the Late Northern Song* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011); Yugen Wang, *Writing Poetry, Surviving War: The Works of Refugee Scholar-Official*

Reflecting on this statement, I am reminded of how Wang's standing as a seemingly indomitable political figure has both overshadowed all other aspects of his cultural biography in much contemporary scholarship and—worse—often been reduced to the caricature of the treasonous villain in premodern Chinese historiography on the collapse of the Northern Song. It is therefore a great pleasure to see the first full-length English-language monograph devoted to Wang Anshi's role as a poetic craftsman and his central place in Chinese literary history. On the one hand, Yang's book fills a noticeable lacuna in studies of major Northern Song dynasty poets and joins works on Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101) by Ronald Egan, Michael Fuller, and Zhiyi Yang; more recent books on the poetry of Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045-1105) and Chen Yuyi 陳與義 (1090-1138) by Yugen Wang; and a monograph on Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084-1155) also by Egan.[2] But on the other, Yang's book in many ways transcends the "life and works" model of traditional literary history and gestures toward the kind of cultural history of literary and artistic practices represented by Egan's study of the lure of aesthetic pursuits in his *The Problem of Beauty* and Anna Shield's exploration of mid-Tang literati discourses on friendship in her *One Who Knows Me*.[3] Like these latter two books, Yang's work assembles a set of discrete case studies of literary practices across a range of genres and styles and synthesizes them to reveal a cultural shift or transformation of such significance and scale that it creates a discursive space ripe for comparative study in a potentially global context. Below I will first provide brief summaries of Yang's hermeneutic-response approach to each of the poetic case studies in the five chapters of his

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Chen Yuyi (1090-1139) (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2020); Ronald Egan, *The Burden of Female Talent: The Poet Li Qingzhao and Her History in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014).

2 Ronald Egan, *The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in Northern Song Dynasty China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006).

3 Egan, *The Problem of Beauty*; Anna Shields, *One Who Knows Me: Friendship and Literary Culture in Mid-Tang China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015).

book and then elaborate further on the potentialities for comparative and cultural histories of Song dynasty poetic culture.

Five Case Studies of "Contrarian Poetics"

Epistemological confidence is a trait that was both highly particular to Wang Anshi and broadly characteristic of major literary and intellectual figures in eleventh-century China. Yang coins the phrases "contrarian personality" and "contrarian poetics" to capture Wang's particular streak of adamancy and willingness to court controversy in his poetic practice. In each of the case studies represented by this book's five chapters, Yang takes up one poetic practice and elaborates the singular contrarianism with which Wang pursued it, while also persistently emphasizing how these practices were still quite representative (but not ordinary) examples of a larger Song poetic culture. Taking 1076, the year that Wang Anshi retired from politics for good, as the key watershed in Wang's development as a poet, Yang devotes the first two chapters to the poetic practices of Wang's early phase: the technique of polemical reversal 翻案 in *shi* 詩 poetry as applied by Wang to the legend of the imperial consort Wang Zhaojun 王昭君 (54-19 BCE) in a series of poems exchanged with five other prominent poets of the eleventh century in 1059 and the practice of compiling anthologies of poetry from the Tang dynasty, in this case Wang's *Tang baijia shixuan* 唐百家詩選 completed during 1059-1061 in collaboration with Song Minqiu 宋敏求 (1019-1079) and drawing on Song's massive book collection that he held in the capital. Yang gathers evidence in chapters 1 and 2 to definitively show how representative Wang's use of polemical reversal was in Song poetic culture and how derivative his early efforts at compiling an anthology of Tang poetry were compared to similar prior and contemporary anthologies.

Yet, even though Wang's efforts in these two areas were less outstanding and quite representative of period practice, due to the partisan nature of the

hermeneutic frameworks some contemporaries and later readers applied to these poetic activities, his works were nonetheless understood as suffused with his contrarian personality and politics and routinely singled out for extremely harsh criticism. The underlying assumptions of this framework are that Wang is a "crafty" poet whose words aim to deceive and that his readers should not trust him, a brand of criticism whose purpose was to draw a clear line between Wang Anshi and the interpretative community.

In chapters 3 and 4, Yang examines two poetic practices that Wang Anshi newly engaged with during his post-retirement life after 1076. Chapter 3 looks at the relationship between the high critical praise Wang received for his "late-style" heptasyllabic quatrains on life at Bell Mountain in Nanjing and the new Song practice of compiling chronological-biographies 年譜 and chronologically arranged poetic editions for the great Tang poet Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770). Chapter 4 delves into the understudied topic of Wang's revitalization of the satirical-didactic mode of the Tang monk poet Hanshan 寒山 (?-?) in Wang's Buddhist inspired poetry. In contrast to the previous two chapters, chapters 3 and 4 show how Wang Anshi's most startling poetic innovations were products of his retirement years, largely separate from his political policies and persona, and once again the result of his creative reshaping of modes and genres inherited from the Tang dynasty. These two chapters are my personal favorites in the book for the way that they foreground the high quality and polish of Yang's masterful translations and his attention to Wang's wordsmithing. In distinction to the lengthy narrative "ancient-style" poems Wang often composed in his youth, these late-life poems tended to be shorter forms such as quatrains, regulated-verse, and the unusual colloquially-rambling "regulated verse poems in ancient style" favored by Hanshan. These short poetic forms invite close analysis, but are particularly challenging to translate well.

Intriguingly, within the hermeneutic framework applied to Wang's late-life poems by these pre-modern critics, readers and writers alike, Wang Anshi appears as the figure of a skillful craftsman. In chapter 3, Yang demonstrates how keen

Song readers like Ye Mengde 葉夢得 (1077-1148) associated Wang's couplet-crafting with a distinct "late-style," and in chapter 4, Yang documents how the works by Southern Song Buddhist monk poets were indebted to Wang's prior appropriation of Hanshan's colloquial voice and clever word-repetitions to found a new minor-tradition of "imitating Hanshan" 擬寒山 poetry. Strong assertions of personality seem to have largely disappeared in Wang's late-life poetry, except for the tracks Wang left behind in his telling word-choices. The traces of these careful word-choices and couplet-crafting became the grist of the critical mill for Song readers who claimed Wang as the master of his own unique style and sought to show him to be a "skillful poet."

Yang's final fifth chapter ends by returning to the beginning and "echoing" 呼應 the first chapter's key themes—the problems of interpretation and trust. Chapter 5 delineates the partisan debates surrounding the authorship and use of the "abandoned woman" persona in the poem "Hard to Trust You" 托君難. This poem employs the persona of a wife who voices her lament that despite exemplary household management, her husband has abandoned her due to the false slanders of those around him, and expresses her regret that only now does she realize the sentiment of "How Hard to Trust You!" Many Song dynasty critics interpreted this poem according to the traditional hermeneutic framework which held that the relationship between wife and husband is analogous to that between minister and ruler. They read the abandoned-wife persona's lament toward her husband as Wang Anshi's chastisement of Emperor Shenzong for dismissing Wang from his post as grand councilor, despite everything the ambitious minister had accomplished on behalf of the young emperor. From ancient times, beginning with the poet Qu Yuan 屈原 (?-278 BCE), this gender-crossing trope was generally received by readers as one that added pathos and a sense of legitimate grievance to the hierarchically subordinate position of a minister vis-à-vis a ruler, simultaneously casting the wife and minister as sympathetic figures with whom the reader could identify.

Yet again, ignoring the uncertain attribution of this poem to Wang Anshi

and in a radical departure from traditional hermeneutics, Song partisan critics actually found Wang's use of the trope of the abandoned woman as "morally inappropriate."[4] Further, Yang documents in detail how this malicious interpretation was emblematic of a larger politicized literary environment. Just as the political accusation of lèse-majesté was directed toward Wang's political rival, Su Shi, based on malicious interpretations of Su's poetry in the Crow Terrace Poetry Case 烏臺詩案 of 1079, so too Wang's opponents in the 1070s made use of seemingly neutral philological practices of "footnoting" and "annotating" Wang's poems to gather what they hoped would be damning evidence against him. Yang clearly shows us that "the practice of willfully distorting poetic texts into prosecutable evidence gained currency across the political spectrum" in Song culture from the eleventh century onward.[5] If the historical premise of eleventh-century Song intellectual culture was that the official examination system and the atmosphere of open debate at court gave rise to a scholar-official class willing to argue for new interpretations of the classics and apply them to advocate bold new visions for a better society, then the peril was the abuse of this confidence and the unbridled weaponization of texts for partisan political advantage. In an environment in which the truth of interpretation became just an expediency of the political needs in the moment, prominent poets must have often come to feel that "Trusting You Is Hard."

The Diverging Paths of Literary and Cultural History

Ending a book is hard too. The five case studies are so rich and well researched and Yang's book is so packed with insights, that there will inevitably be untapped potentialities for further exploration. Yang's conclusion in the "Coda" aims to consider how Wang Anshi's contrarian poetics were evaluated within the larger

4 Yang, *Wang Anshi and Song Poetic Culture*, 233.

5 Yang, *Wang Anshi and Song Poetic Culture*, 268-72.

tradition by tracing the way that premodern critics placed Wang Anshi in different lineages of poetic masters and their subsequent followers that they constructed. Yang's survey and translation of major and minor voices in this premodern critical tradition from the eleventh century of the Song dynasty up to the eighteenth century of China's last dynasty, the Qing, is essential reading for any student of Chinese poetry who wishes to understand Wang Anshi's reception within the Chinese literary tradition. Fascinatingly, two points that emerge from this detailed overview include the idea of Wang as an isolated master without clear followers for his style, as articulated by Dai Biaoyuan 戴表元 (1244-1310) and Yuan Jue 袁桷 (1266-1327), and the view of Wang as a "transitional figure" who seemed to belong to both the older generation of Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-1072) and the younger generation of Su Shi and Huang Tingjian, as argued by Quan Zuwang 全祖望 (1705-1755).[6] Even over the long term, Wang's contrarian poetics defied pre-modern critics' attempts to affiliate him with a single school or lineage.

At the same time, focusing on the winnowing framework of poetic lineages used by pre-modern Chinese critics to evaluate the importance of Wang Anshi's poetics almost inherently narrows the potential audience for some of the conclusions in his book primarily to scholars in the field of premodern Chinese literature. Some readers may have wished to see in the conclusion more of the outstanding moments of cross-cultural comparison in Yang's book that reach out to a broader audience, such as the one that occurs at the end of chapter 3. Here Yang compares premodern Chinese critics' views on the development of a "late-style" in the poetry of Du Fu and Wang Anshi to the arguments of nineteenth and twentieth-century Western critics like Georg Simmel (1858-1918), Havelock Ellis (1859-1939), and Edward Said (1935-2003) on the relationship between bio-chronological stages in the life of an artist and a stylistic perfection transcending rules that only arrives with advanced age and often difficult life experiences.

6 Yang, *Wang Anshi and Song Poetic Culture*, 279-81, 286.

Two other potential moments for connecting Wang Anshi's poetry to a larger cultural history that occur in Yang's book are also worth brief mention. They both concern the relationship between place and cultural identity on different levels in Wang's poetry, from the personal to the "national." First, Yang's analysis of Wang's poems written in imitation of the Buddhist monk poet Hanshan in chapter 4 may well have larger cultural implications related to the tendency of Song elites to identify with local place. Yang focuses on the connection between Wang's formal clever repetition of key words in his poems written in the style of Hanshan and the concept of "leisure" 閒 in his life of retirement at Bell Mountain. In Wang's poem "Wandering in Bell Mountain" 遊鐘山, the key term repeated twice in each line of this quatrain is precisely the geo-poetic place of the "mountain" 山 itself.[7] So too in Wang's "Between the Two Mountains" 兩山間, a rambling ancient-style poem, Wang repeats the word "mountain" in nine out of twelve lines and attributes decision-making agency to the mountain that "persuaded me to return."[8] Not only do these repetitions enhance the sonic, oral, and song-like qualities of the quatrain, but they also reinforce Wang's late-life insight about the primacy of the "external scene" or the environment over the poet's "subjective mind."[9] Yang's analysis shows the growing importance of personal attachment to local place for well-traveled, cosmopolitan Song scholar-official elites such as Wang Anshi, especially when they were displaced by being sent into exile or when they retired from official service. The almost modern conceptual division between professional work and unscheduled "leisure" displayed in Wang's late-life poems and the almost proto-environmental outlook on the local landscape are topics that Yang has addressed in his earlier scholarship on gardens and private life in Tang-Song poetry which deserve further in-depth treatment as cultural history.[10]

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7 Yang, *Wang Anshi and Song Poetic Culture*, 218.

8 Yang, *Wang Anshi and Song Poetic Culture*, 220.

9 Yang, *Wang Anshi and Song Poetic Culture*, 223.

10 For an environmental interpretation of poems on extracting garden rocks from mountains

Second, Yang's discussion of the changing critical reception of Wang's poems "Song of Brilliant Lady: Two Pieces" 明妃曲二首 in chapter 1 provides tantalizing evidence for a high level of "national consciousness" among the Song scholar-official elite. Wang's poems took the legend of Wang Zhaojun as his topic.[11] As a narrative that dramatizes the crossing of cultural boundaries between Chinese territories and competing nomadic peoples to the north, the legend provided scholar-officials openings to debate the rigidity or porousness of these cultural boundaries and to comment on where Wang Zhaojun's loyalties should lie. Yang identifies what Song readers took to be the most provocative lines from the endings of Wang Anshi's two poems and then reconstructs the interpretative debate surrounding these lines by culling comments from the deep archive of poetry criticism found in Song dynasty genre of poetry chats 詩話 from the eleventh to twelfth century. Remarkably, Wang's lines suggest that Wang Zhaojun's life among the "barbarians" was potentially no worse than the lonely fate she would have faced as an unappreciated concubine languishing deep in the Han palace and that since "Han's favor is shallow and the barbarian's deep; / The joy of life is to know each other's heart," the best course for Wang Zhaojun was one of cultural accommodation. Significantly, Yang's reconstruction of the hermeneutical debate on Wang's two poems shows a stark divide between comments by critics writing before and after the Jingkang disaster 靖康之變 of 1126-1127 when the Song capital Kaifeng was sacked and the northern territories were occupied by the invading Jurchen forces. While late Northern Song critics such as Wang Hui 王回 (1023-1065) and Zhu

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and for Yang's in-depth discussion of the concept of "leisure" in Tang-Song poetry, see Xiaoshan Yang, *Metamorphosis of the Private Sphere: Gardens and Objects in Tang-Song Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 120-2, 213-20.

11 Wang Zhaojun was a Han dynasty imperial concubine who was married off to a Xiongnu chieftain when he asked to form a marriage alliance with the Han state. In some versions of the legend, Wang commits suicide on the eve of her departure from Chinese territory, while in others she marries the chieftain and bears him a son, but then is forced to remarry the son of the chieftain's previous wife (her own stepson) as required by Xiongnu custom.

Bian 朱弁 (1085-1144) alternatingly praised Wang's lines by comparing them to great Tang poets like Li Bai 李白 (701-762) and Wang Wei 王維 (699-761) or signaled some minor discomfort with Wang's praise of "barbarian" ways, this pales in comparison to the way that critics such as Fan Chong 范冲 (1067-1141), writing in the charged environment after the Jingkang disaster, criticized Wang's poem of traitorous intent.[12] Fan interpreted Wang's poem as directly encouraging Song elites to switch sides and support the Jurchen invasion, stating in incendiary terms, "Those who betray the favor of their lords and surrender to and join foreign robbers these days all conform to what Wang Anshi meant."[13] The radical shift toward hardened notions of cultural identity within the context of the traumatic loss of imperial territory demonstrated in the reception of Wang's poems by Fan and other Southern Song critics raises provocative evidence in the larger debate about the rise of a "national consciousness" among Song scholar-official elite in the late eleventh and early twelfth century that warrants further consideration.

Pointing out these areas where Yang's book has room to expand its comparative or cultural scope in no way suggests that these are flaws of this important and ground-breaking work. On the contrary, Yang reveals the many facets of Wang Anshi's poetic production that will inspire future scholarship. Yang has created a substantial work of scholarship in his study of *Wang Anshi and Song Poetic Culture* and a book that will appeal to diverse audiences. Social historians of literature will be fascinated by the poems of exchange written by a circle of five prominent Song poets and the dynamics of polemical reversal in their debate over the Wang Zhaojun legend examined in chapter 1. Literary scholars interested in the process of canon formation or the concept of an authorial style that evolves through biological stages with age will find much to learn in chapters 2 and 3. Religious studies scholars and students of interactions between literati and Buddhist monks in China and East Asia

12 Yang, *Wang Anshi and Song Poetic Culture*, 18-22.

13 Yang, *Wang Anshi and Song Poetic Culture*, 23-4.

will delight in reading Yang's vibrant translations of the witty poems written in imitation of Hanshan by Wang and Song dynasty Buddhist monk poets in chapter 4. Scholars of medieval and early modern political culture will be astounded by the pervasiveness and sometimes viciousness of the Song dynasty "politics of poetry" revealed in chapter 5. Indeed, by showing the breadth of Wang Anshi's poetic activities and the ways contemporaries interpreted them, Yang has both made a major contribution to the field and provided a welcome introduction to this controversial and contrarian poet of strong opinions whose "multiplicity and proteanism […] defy any attempt to define his historical position in rigid chronological or stylistic terms."[14]

14 Yang, *Wang Anshi and Song Poetic Culture*, 286.