Trading Literary Competence: Exchange Poetry in the Eastern Jin

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Poetics during the Eastern Jin 晉 dynasty (317–420) was largely shaped by xuanyan 玄言, a type of metaphysical discourse that primarily drew topics, ideas, and language from the Yijing, Laozi, Zhuangzi (later collectively known as the “Three Mysterious Works,” san xuan 三玄), and their respective commentaries. Most of the extant examples of xuanyan verse from this period are of the exchange or group variety, products of a social ritual pervasive among the Wei-Jin gentry class. Exchange poetry in the xuanyan mode grew out of “pure conversation” (qing tan 清談), a scholarly practice and social activity with its own rules, criteria, and instruments. These conversations covered subjects ranging from metaphysics to epistemology to behavior and sought reconciliations between ideas from the Three Mysterious Works and the authority of the classics. As an extension of the conversational genre, Eastern Jin exchange poetry accorded the same priority to the Three Mysterious Works. In such poetic dialogues, the writer often skillfully couches his message to his friend in allusions drawn from these philosophical texts. Literary competence is equally required of the reader to decipher the codes within which the message is inscribed. The exchange of poems that draw from a shared and circumscribed set of cultural meanings ultimately affirmed a collective identity. Marcel Mauss observed that in archaic societies the exchange of goods and services served to establish a “bond of alliance and commonality.” The gift of

1 Xuanyan translates literally to “discourse on the mysterious [Dao].” The term xuan appears in the first chapter of the Laozi as a reference to the Dao: “These two [being 有 and non-being 無] have the same origin, but different names. Both are called the mystery (xuan); mystery upon mystery is the gateway to all marvelousness.” See also Paul W. Kroll’s useful explication of the term xuan in “Between Something and Nothing,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 127 (2007): 409.

2 For a general survey in English of zengda (“presentation and response”) poetry in early medieval China, see David Zebulon Raft, “Four-syllable Verse in Medieval China” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard Univ., 2007), 284–381.

3 Conversationalists often looked to the golden age of discourse, the Zhengshi 正始 era (240–49), for classic examples of rhetoric, style, argumentation, etc. Many of the written discourses adopted the structure of the dramatic dialogue, in which a “host” and a “guest” argue a topic in numerous rounds.


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a poem and the return of one between literati men in premodern China was such a form of social compact that identified and banded together a certain group.

Shared appreciation of a select set of texts and interpretations attested not only to the bonds of friendship but also the participants’ cultural stock. In an age in which poetic output increasingly became a type of cultural capital that could be converted into political gain or social prestige, poetic exchanges and social poetry allowed one to display one’s ability to produce and interpret cultural products, a competence that is cultivated and transmitted within families or social groups. The degree of success in producing and interpreting cultural products to a great extent hinged upon one’s mastery of texts and allusions. The accumulation and transmission of a certain cultural wealth through the subscription to a set of shared texts and methods as well as goals of study identified the membership of the literati elite and ensured its privileges. In early medieval China, cultural currency was very much based on fluency in *xuanxue* 玄學 discourse, a repertoire of arguments, notions, and values that permeated the lives and sensibilities of the literati and informed their views on aspects ranging from office, reclusion, and friendship, to the ideal character type and mindset.

A literary competence that specialized in *xuanxue* topics and terms consummated exchanges between Eastern Jin writers. In a stroke of rare good fortune during the early medieval process of textual preservation, a pair of exchange poems—one by Xie An 謝安 (320–385) and a response from Wang Huzhi 王胡之 (fl. 330–360s)—has been transmitted intact. The other exchange that I will treat in this essay is represented by only the response poem: Sun Chuo’s 孫綽 (314–371) answer to Xu Xun’s 許詢 (ca. 326-after 347) now lost poem. The value and interest in examining Sun’s response here lie in at least two points: it supposedly summarizes the lost poem and it reveals what literary competence Sun Chuo reasonably expected of his audience, which is of as much interest to our discussion as whether the audience did in fact possess it.

Poetic transactions made through the medium of *xuanxue* issues and language did not begin in the Eastern Jin, though the trend reached its peak during this period. It is instructive therefore to review briefly an earlier and

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