Chapter 2

“Passing Handan without Dreaming”: Passion and Restraint in the Poetry and Poetics of Qian Zhongshu

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This chapter examines three of Qian Zhongshu’s works directly related to his composition of traditional-style Chinese poetry (jiuti shi 舊體詩) and scholarship on traditional Chinese verse: Poetic Remains of an Ephemeral Life (Huaiju shicun 槐聚詩存, 1994), Poems of the Song: An Annotated Selection (Songshi xuanzhu 宋詩選注, 1958), and On the Art of Poetry (Tan yi lu 談藝錄, 1948; rev. 1984). The first is a collection of Qian’s own poems written in the traditional style over half a century (1934 to 1991), and compiled by Qian himself.1 The second was finished during the Mao period and remains one of the most influential anthologies of Song Dynasty (960–1279) poetry. The third is a work of criticism on traditional Chinese poetry spanning the Tang Dynasty (618–907) to Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), first published in Civil War-era Shanghai and substantially revised and enlarged in 1984. These three works provided a nice tripartite overview of Qian’s formidable talents in the art of poetry and criticism and, because of their broad generic and temporal coverage, provide a solid framework for exploring his views and thoughts on the subject. My discussion, however, is by no means a comprehensive introduction to these three complex works or to Qian’s poetry and poetic criticism. Instead, by focusing on a few telling examples from each of the three works, I try to identify a unified vision or motivating force running through them.

My general argument is that Qian’s tremendous erudition and the density and intensity of his writing style oftentimes conceal a fundamental feature of both his creative and scholarly works. Beneath an exquisitely crafted and formidable textual surface, which often consists of layers upon layers of reference to the received literary tradition, we find that sustaining his long and prolific career as both a poet and a critic was an enduring passion for the art

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1 The collection includes 173 titles (281 poems), of which 136 titles (203 poems) date from between 1934 and 1949, and 37 titles (78 poems) from between 1950 and 1991. I use the Qian Zhongshu ji edition (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2002) in this chapter. For the meaning of the title, see Section 3.
of classical poetry. “I yield to none in my enthusiasm for our old literature,” he wrote at age twenty-five, and, indeed, the intensity of his passion was unsurpassed in modern times. This passion gave rise to a unique feature of his critical mode: though Qian tends to be cautious in offering conclusions, in presenting evidence he endeavors to be exhaustive, sometimes citing dozens of literary passages to illustrate a single point. This dual drive, toward exhaustiveness in material and restraint in argumentation, I argue, is the expression of a passionate yet methodical mind intent on unlocking an abundance of new creative and analytic possibilities from China’s rich literary tradition.

In trying to understand these intellectual and emotional dynamics, I will situate Qian’s poetry and criticism in two broad historical contexts. First, I discuss the immediate success of On the Art of Poetry in the late 1940s and the explosion of interest generated by the revised and expanded version issued in the 1980s in relation to the paradigmatic shift to modernity of the Chinese culture and society in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This process saw ancient modes and genres of literary expression, including classical poetry and poetic criticism, blamed for China’s cultural backwardness and replaced with new forms and genres introduced from the West. Qian’s career demonstrates that he embraced the fresh possibilities this new culture opened up for creative writing and literary criticism. Like many outstanding cultural figures of the Republican era, he received a Western-style education, majored in foreign languages and literature at college, and studied overseas. While in step with the cultural trend of Westernization, however, Qian had also received strict and substantial home tutoring in classical Chinese literature as a youth, and its constant pull would become part of his critical temperament. The tremendous fame he earned from a lifetime of accomplishments in traditional poetry and poetic criticism nonetheless obscures just how radical those accomplishments were.

Qian earned acclaim not only for having mastered both old and new tools and genres of literary and scholarly expression but also, and more significantly, for having mastered them equally well. It is here that we need to bring in a second historical context. Qian’s achievements in classical poetry and criticism need to be understood in relation to not only the literary and intellectual context of the twentieth century but also, I argue, the history of classical Chinese poetry and poetic criticism. Viewed in the longue durée, Qian’s works were a natural extension of a particular poetic theory and practice that had its origins in the Song Dynasty (960–1279) and that saw a brilliant post-Song resurgence.