
Wang Yugen’s book Ten Thousand Scrolls, Reading and Writing in the Poetics of Huang Tingjian and the Late Northern Song examines the impact of print technology and the resulting increased availability of books on the poetic theory and practice of one of the most important and perhaps the most influential poets of the late Northern Song Dynasty, Huang Tingjian (1045-1105). In its sustained and deep focus on the connections between the material aspects of literary production and the poetics of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries in China, Wang’s book follows a recent trend in studies of poetic production and reception during China’s middle period. This includes two recently-published books on the connections between manuscript culture and poetry of China’s medieval period: Tian Xiaofei’s study of the textual fluidity found in the poetic corpus of Tao Yuanming (365-427) and its reconfiguration in later historical periods as well as Christopher Nugent’s wide-ranging examination of the circulation of poetry through hand-reproduced manuscripts and oral performance in the Tang Dynasty. Building upon the new understanding of China’s medieval manuscript culture cogently argued for in this recent scholarship, Wang’s book stakes out new ground as the first sustained examination of the way print culture redefined poetic practice and theory during this pivotal period in China’s literary and intellectual history. As such his work is of great interest and importance to not only scholars working in the field of Chinese literary studies, but also cultural and intellectual historians of East Asia in addition to scholars of print culture and media in other world cultures.

Rather than follow a strictly chronological ordering of chapters, Wang divides his book into a two-part theoretically-orientated narrative about the intersections between Huang’s poetics and print culture. The first part of Wang’s study is composed of three chapters which are devoted largely to an analysis of Huang Tingjian’s poetics. Each chapter builds on the prior one in outlining the goals (chapter 1), methods (chapter 2), and approach to cultivation (chapter 3) in Huang Tingjian’s poetic program. As this scheme for organizing the first half of Wang’s book illustrates, Huang Tingjian’s poetics radically departed from the mainstream tradition in Chinese poetics that emphasized poetic composition as a spontaneous and unmediated revelation of the poet’s inner ‘intent’ (志) and emotions, according to the formulation ‘poetry articulates intent’ found in the Great Preface to the Classic of Poetry and repeated and amplified in later poetic criticism. Instead, Huang’s poetics ‘shifted toward a theory that stressed “methods” and through methods uncovering underlying patterns’ and devoted ‘meticulous and unrelenting attention to these ways and means of realization and materialization, known to them and later scholars as fa’ (pp. 2, 9).

In the first three chapters, Wang explores what ‘methods’ (fa) meant to Huang Tingjian. In the first chapter, Wang analyzes the Northern Song reception of the high Tang poet Du Fu (712-770), the process of the compilation of Du Fu’s poetry into printed collections by Northern Song scholars, and his ultimate elevation in Huang's poetics to the status of 'absolute model' and the goal of poetic perfection. In the second chapter, Wang then explicates how for Huang Tingjian the method for arriving at this kind of poetic perfection was not through a spontaneous outpouring of feeling spurred by an encounter with a natural scene, as was dictated by traditional medieval poetics, but rather through an encounter with words in texts involving intensive reading and the ‘time-consuming act of

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In the third chapter, Wang turns to the discourse on ‘cultivation’ (養) or the temporal dimension of ‘methods’ that Huang Tingjian introduced into his poetics. In this chapter Wang shows that for Huang Tingjian developing poetic methods was a lengthy staged process, often marked by different kinds of difficulty, such as the self-conscious choice to take on difficult poetic rhymes or topics in competitive rounds of exchanged poems among scholar-official colleagues or in the form of the involuntary difficulty of exile. In either case, for Huang difficulty and striving led to a perfection of methods. Wang demonstrates this idea by explicating Huang Tingjian’s metaphor of the ‘leopard in the fog’, stating, ‘the central image the metaphor provides, a leopard hiding and starving himself in the mist-shrouded mountains in order to actualize his skin pattern, is an apt symbol for the strenuous process of nurturing one’s writerly ability and skills of poetic composition’ (p. 105). The paradox of the final stage of Huang’s process of poetic cultivation is, as Wang shows, to transcend the self-conscious or artificial application of ‘marking lines and chopping axes’ and to achieve a level of skill at which the methods ‘fit naturally’ (p. 92).

In the last two chapters of his book, Wang situates Huang Tingjian’s poetics in the larger historical and cultural context of the impact of print technology in the late eleventh century and the resulting greater quantity and stability of printed texts. On the one hand, Wang argues that print culture reshaped ideas about poetic composition. For example, focusing specifically on poetry criticism, he contrasts Tang Dynasty poetry manuals which categorized different types of ‘diseases’ or ‘faults’ in poetic composition, but did not pursue the external reasons for these faults to Huang’s poetics which inevitably attribute faults in poetic composition to a ‘lack of both proficiency and efficiency in the poet’s reading’ (p. 144). On the other hand, Wang makes much larger claims for the ways that print culture ‘disrupted and irrevocably changed some of the most revered assumptions about reading and writing among the literati’ broadly conceived. In Chapter Four, Wang provides a broader cultural history of the meaning of book ownership and reading, arguing that in Yan Zhitui’s (531-91) *Family Instruction for the Yan Clan* mere physical possession of books was sufficient to symbolize their intellectual consumption and represent a form of cultural capital in the context of the medieval scarcity of manuscript texts, while in Huang Tingjian’s time of increased availability of printed texts ‘the model of distinction shifted from physically possessing books to intellectually consuming them’ (p. 160). Finally, in Chapter Five Wang examines how the greater availability of printed texts in the late Northern Song caused attitudes toward texts to shift from the overwhelming concern with preservation to a focus on internal qualities and reading practices. Wang documents a sense of anxiety on the part of literati like Su Shi (1037-1101) that the spread of printing technology was destroying the younger generation’s ability to read. He argues that the perhaps more tentative ‘methods of reading’ put forth in Huang Tingjian’s poetics was an early direct response to such cultural anxieties and presaged the much more assertive ‘methods of reading’ propounded by Zhu Xi (1130-1200) in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279).

One of the strengths of Wang’s book is his facility at fine-grained rhetorical analysis. For example, Wang’s second chapter on Huang Tingjian’s ideas about poetic methods is centered on the organizing tropes of the ‘hatchet handle’ and ‘nose-chopping skills’. Finding these tropes recurring in several of Huang’s poems, Wang traces them to their textual origins (in the *Classic of Poetry* and in Zhuang Zi’s parables respectively) and then traces the twist and turns of each trope’s rhetorical tradition, always showing Huang’s new twist at