
The Yongming Era (483-493) was one of the most significant and yet most terribly misunderstood periods in traditional China. It is unfortunate that literary historians have long ignored the Yongming poets, who were major players at an important juncture in the Chinese court culture and precursors of a ground-breaking poetics. Today, they are mostly remembered for their technical experiment with ‘prosodic rules’, while the more important cultural implications of their prosodic invention were mostly forgotten. One wonders why there has been such a gap in the literary reception. In her book, *Sound and Sight*, Meow Hui Goh explains the answer, ‘Clearly, we no longer hear the “four tones” or the many rhyming syllables that the Yongming poets heard’; the ‘sensory world of Yongming poetry does not present itself naturally to our modern sensibility or to pre-modern critics in the canonical tradition’. It also answers the question as to why the Yongming culture has now ‘vanished into abstraction, leaving only little traces in many “mute texts”’.

Goh’s book successfully demonstrates to us that the Yongming poetics was about a new perception of sound and sight within a particular courtier community during the first half of the so-called Southern Dynasties. Within this context, ‘sound’ referred to one’s ability to listen with sharp ears, and ‘sight’ to the keen interest in observing things. According to Goh, this ‘new’ poetic issue of sound and sight reflects an important shifting socio-political structure, and its impact remains crucial even to the modern times. Indeed, one of the pleasures of reading this book is learning how to open our eyes (and ears) to a ‘new’ way of perception that is pivotal to our understanding of a forgotten court culture. Thus, the true significance of Goh’s book lies not just in recalling a little-known and misunderstood historical moment, but in turning the ‘mute texts’ of early medieval China to sound and sight.

In her book Goh repeatedly emphasizes that her main inspiration comes from Buddhist thought, for the Chinese court culture during the Yongming period was thoroughly immersed in Buddhism. Of course, Goh is not the first person to claim the Buddhist influence on the four-tone prosody; Sinological scholars such as Victor Mair and Tsu-lin Mei have already traced the Chinese prosody to the Sanskrit origins several years ago. However, Goh’s main concern is not about the specifics of the prosodic invention,
but rather about ‘the Buddhist perspective’ that came into play in the individual poet’s sensory perception. Mainly, Goh looks at how courtier-poets such as Shen Yue (441-513), Wang Rong (467-493), Xie Tiao (464-499), and their princes (who all happened to be devout Buddhists) actively pursued ‘sound refinement’ under the influence of Buddhist chanting (and the Chengshi School of Buddhist teaching), and hence were greatly liberated from the traditional ‘pejorative attitude toward the pursuit of form and artistry in poetry’. These poets became so conscious about grasping sound in the most meticulous way that they even revised the definition of zhiyin. (Zhiyin, which used to mean ‘the one who understood music’, now comes to refer to one who ‘truly knows sound’). Goh cites several examples from the poetry of the Yongming writers to show how, under such rethinking of sound and form, there emerged a new way of representing the sensory perceptions in poetry. A case in point was a ‘sound poem’ by Shen Yue (a typical zhiyin) that used a succession of nasal sounds such as m, n, ny, ng to describe the cries of gibbons (31).

Parallel to the sound perception, the Yongming poets’ way of seeing things was also shaped by the Buddhist perspective—namely, the perspective of seeing things in constant transformation. In other words, these courtier-poets believed that no single view of things was permanent, for every sight was specific to the ‘moment’ and would naturally disappear with the moment.2 Interestingly, Goh compares this Buddhist perspective to ‘a movie played in slow motion’. Another striking example can be found in Goh’s reading of Xie Tiao’s ‘The Grand Warden’, in which the poet writes: ‘Forever intent on “double-forgetting”—/Through instant appreciation, we part with the hills and the valleys’ (70). Goh interprets this ‘double-forgetting’ as the Buddhist sunyata (the state of absolute and

1) As early as 1934, the Chinese scholar Chen Yinque (a.k.a. Chen Yingke) claimed that the invention of the ‘four-tone prosody’ was a direct influence from the Buddhist chanting method. But recently mainland Chinese scholars have begun to question such a claim; they argue that the Buddhist influence on the four-tone prosody originally came from the process of translating sutras, rather than through Buddhist chanting. Also, they argue that the invention of the four-tone prosody was greatly inspired by the local Wu dialect in Jiankang (today’s Nanjing). See: Wang Xiaodun and Jin Xi, ‘Jingbai xinsheng yu Yongming shiqu de shige biange’ (The New Buddhist Chanting and the Poetic Changes during the Yongming Period), Wenxue Yichan 6 (2007), pp. 25-38.

2) See also Xiaofei Tian’s description of the Buddhist concept of nian, which may be translated as ‘a succession of thought-instants’: Xiaofei Tian, Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502-557) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), pp. 229-233. See also Goh’s comment on nian, p. 20.