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"THE LADY-GENERALS ON AN EXPEDITION WESTWARDS: CHARMING AND FULL OF GRANDEUR"

——ON THE ARTISTIC CHARMS OF WU MEICUN’S POETIC CREATION

Wu Meicun 吳梅村 (zi: Wu Jungong 駿公, hao: Wu Weiye 偉業) was born in Taicang 太倉 (in what is now Jiangsu province) in 1609 in late Ming Dynasty and died at the age of 63 on December 24, 1672 during the time when the Emperor Kangxi of Qing Dynasty ruled.

Wu Meicun was the most distinguished poet in the late Ming and early Qing period and through the Qing Dynasty as well. He also occupied a pretty significant position in the entire history of the Chinese poetry. From his youth when he began to write poems till shortly before his death when he composed “A Poem Written on Deathbed” (Lin zhong shi 臨終詩), Wu Meicun’s poetic creating activities lasted four decades, leaving us in total over 1,000 poems, which were mainly included in A Collection of Poems by Wu Meicun (Meicun ji 梅村集) and A Collection of Wu Meicun’s Private Manuscripts (Meicun jiacang gao 梅村家藏稿).

When he was still alive, Wu Meicun had gained great popularity owing to the exceedingly distinctive features of his poetic creation. Many of his poems received favorable comment upon their appearance, and were spread far and wide so that quite a few scholars at that time enjoyed reading his writings very much and time and again expressed their heartfelt admiration and appreciation. For instance, shortly after Wu wrote “A Trip to Luoyang” (Luoyang xing 洛陽行), Chen Zilong 陳子龍 passionately read it in his presence and spoke very highly of it as “a harmonious piece”, comparing his
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poems to those of Tang Dynasty’s poet Li Qi 李覯;\(^1\) Li Wen 李雯 even applauded and praised, “High rhythms chanted in low voice astound the deities, that is none other than ‘A Trip to Luoyang’”.\(^2\) Immediately after Wu’s “Four Nostalgic Poems Written at Qinhe” (Qinhe ganjiu sishou 琴河感舊四首) were completed, Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 was greatly overwhelmed by it, and “walked back and forth to admire it”, fully convinced that it embodied the influences from Li Shangyin 李商隱 and Han Wo 韓渥. Thus he couldn’t help but employ the same rhythm to compose four poems in response to those of Wu Meicun’s.\(^3\) And in 1653 under the Reign of the Emperor Shunzhi of Qing Dynasty, Wu Meicun improvised “Four Poems Composed on the Gathering of the Xiyin Society at Hu Qiu on a Spring Day in 1653” (Guisi chunri Xiyinshe ji Hu Qiu ji shi sishou 氾已春日禊飲社集虎丘即事四首) at the meeting of the two literary societies Shenjiao and Tongsheng, which were quickly spread among his fellow poets.\(^4\) As to such well-known pieces as “Yong Hegong Ci 永和宮詞”, “Pipa Xing 琵琶行”, “Yuan Hu Qu 鶴湖曲” and “Yuan Yuan Qu 圓圓曲”, they all received exceptionally intense echoes and produced in the reader favorable comments beyond compare.

After his death, Wu Meicun’s poetry was no less loved and appreciated by the reader in each generation. For instance, Gong Zizhen 龔自珍 once remarked in his preface to “The Three Favorite Poems” (San bie hao shi 三別好詩) that “I’ve loved Wu’s poems since my childhood and loved them even more in my teens...I used to read his writings by my mother’s bed or in the study. Mother taught me to learn his poems by heart so that they always linger in my mind”. In The Reading Notes of Yueman Hall (Yuemantang dushuji 越縵堂讀書記), Li Ciming 李慈銘 commented on Wu Meicun’s poetry, observing that “I have a preference for his writings and regard them as an important sect outside Yun Men”. Wu Mi, a renowned scholar of our time,

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1 “Meicun shihua 梅村詩話 (Notes on Classical Poetry)”, in Wu Weiye, 1990, 58:1135 and 1140.

2 “Ji zeng Wu Jun gong tai shi jia man huan chao 寄贈吳駿公太史假滿還朝” (To Wu Jungong on His Returning from a Vacation), in Li Wen 李雯, (year) juan 17.

3 “Notes on Classical Poetry”, in Wu Weiye, 1990, 58:1135 and 1140.