In the history of Chinese literature, times of poetic bloom only rarely appear to coincide with a flowering of literary theory. In most cases, reflection on poetry begins after a period of blooming has subsided. We experience, for example, the first blooming of literary criticism during the late Six Dynasties as a reaction to the flourishing of poetry during the preceding Han, Wei, and Jin dynasties. It was in this era that Zhong Rong 鍾嵘 (fl. 483–513) wrote the Shipin 詩品 (Classification of Poets) and Liu Xie 劉勰 (c.465–c.520) his great theoretical treatise Wenxin diaolong 文心雕龍 (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons) which, with its comprehensive, systematic, and profound probing into the essence of literature, stands unrivalled in the history of Chinese literary criticism. The minor theorists of the High Tang, the Golden Age of Chinese poetry, such as Wang Changling 王昌齡 (c.690–c.756) and the monk Jiaoran 隅然 (730–99), are more acknowledged for their poetry rather than their theoretical works; and Sikong Tu's 司空圖 (837–908) influential series of critical poems Ershisi shipin 二十四詩品 (Twenty-four Classes of Poetry) was written, long after the bloom, at the very end of this dynasty. Likewise, the theoretical and critical reception of the flowering of poetry during the Tang and Northern Song first began with Yan Yu's 殷羽 important treatise Canglang shihua 滄浪詩話 (Canglang's Poetry Talk), written during the Southern Song period. This work, which interprets poetry in analogy to Chan-Buddhist ideas—i.e., poetry understood as a reflection of the intuitive, enlightened apprehension of reality—was to have a lasting influence on literary theory in the centuries to come, particularly on the archaist movements of the periods that concern us here, the Ming and early Qing dynasties.

The Qing period fits right into this pattern: insignificant regarding poetry, but flowering in theory. The critical literature of this time, the so-called “poetry talks” (shihua 詩話),1 outmatches in

1 Ding Fubao's 丁福保 standard collection Qing shihua 清詩話 has recently
scope and volume everything that was written on this topic in the preceding periods.

Out of this flood of theoretical and critical writing, however, only a few distinguished and important works emerge, and even among those, there appear to be only two or three which may be called systematic. The majority of them are simply collections of random thoughts on poetry in the shihua tradition. The more important theories circle around one or two key terms, such as Wang Shizhen’s 王士禎 (1634–1711) shenyun 靈韻 (spiritual reverberation). Wang’s ideas follow the tradition began by Yan Yu with his interpretation of poetry in Chan-Buddhist terms. Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–97), to mention another critic, understands poetry as expression of the poet’s “personal sensibility” (xingling 性靈)—likewise an elaboration of an already established view, that of Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568–1610) and the Gongan 公安 School of the Ming. We may call this view of literature, to borrow M.H. Abrams’ terminology, “expressive”, in contrast to the former which would fall into his “transcendental-mimetic” category.2 Shen Deqian’s 沈德潛 (1673–1769) theory, finally, is known as gediao-theory 格調 (ge meaning form and diao melody). His ideas are a continuation of Ming archaist views, i.e. those of the so-called “Later Seven Masters”, particularly of Li Panlong 李攀龍 (1514–70) and Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526–90).3 Shen Deqian’s view is both formalistic and

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3 In order to avoid confusion between the two Wang Shizhen, whose names are written with different characters, the respective dates will be added in brackets when they are mentioned in the following.