

BOOK REVIEW

Lore Transformed: Remembering History in Early Medieval Chinese Poetry

Zhang, Yue. *Lore and Verse: Poems on History in Early Medieval China*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2022, 240 pp. ISBN: 9781438486918 (cloth).

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In the sixth century, when the Crown Prince of the Liang Dynasty—Xiao Tong (501-531)—and his editorial team first applied the Chinese term *yongshi* as a label to categorize a group of 21 poems in their edited anthology *Wen xuan* (Selections of Refined Literature), they probably would not anticipate that this label later would become a commonly used term to categorize a popular subgenre of classical Chinese poetry—*yongshi shi*. Often rendered as “poems on history,” *yongshi shi* refers to a particular type of poetry in which descriptions of historical events and figures, as well as personal reflections on history, are presented. During and after Xiao’s time, the practices of reading history and writing this subgenre of poetry remained pervasive among premodern Chinese authors. By focusing on such poems composed in early medieval China (220-589), Yue Zhang’s *Lore and Verse: Poems on History in Early Medieval China* offers a very valuable read for anyone who seeks to examine the popularity of this subgenre in premodern China, to probe into the Chinese cultural phenomenon of memorizing history via poetry, and to understand the relationship between history and literature.

As the first English-language monograph on poems on history in early medieval China, via the lens of cultural memory, Zhang’s book adapts a novel theoretical framework to understand the cultural

significance of these poems. As Zhang stated, this book examines “spaces created by early medieval Chinese literati for fostering and celebrating the cultural memory of historical figures and events” (p. 3) in the poems on history. By borrowing “retrospective memory” and “prospective memory” as two analytical terms, Zhang thus conceptualizes the link between cultural memory and poetry as a mutually transformed relation. Although Chinese literati and poets have created a “continuous tradition of cultural memory” through writing poems in which they retrospectively reflected upon historical events and figures, they, at the same time, “fashioned their works to be remembered by later literati” (p. 4). Their works were further canonized through intertextual connections, becoming part of new cultural memory for later generations. By illuminating the mutually influenced relationship between history and poetry, Zhang’s book thus provides an entirely new perspective and framework for people to understand how poetry as a medium of transmitting culture is shaped by and, in turn, shapes cultural memory.

This book offers several case studies of representative poets in six chapters to align with the above framework. Chapter 1 sets the stage by investigating the definition and scope of the term “poems on poetry (*yongshi shi*)” as in various early medieval texts. Due to the fluidity of texts and the loose uses of literary terms in the era

of manuscript culture, Zhang held that “*yongshi shi* in early medieval China include both poems based on a poet’s reflection on reading historical accounts and poems based on the poet’s contemplation of the past after visiting historical sites” (p. 25), thereby encompassing the traditionally divided “poems on history” (*yongshi shi*) and “poems meditating on the past” (*huaigu shi*). Such a consideration is in line with early medieval literati’s perception, as shown in Xiao Tong’s practice of anthologizing poems of both categories into the *yongshi* section in *Wen xuan*.

Chapters 2 and 3 collectively offer a case study of “retrospective memory” and “prospective memory” presented in poetry. These two chapters focus on the renowned medieval poet Zuo Si (ca. 250-ca. 305), a poet whose poetry series on history opens a new tradition of composing a group of such poems. Here, Zhang showed his deliberate skills of close reading, demonstrating how Zuo Si placed himself along with the exemplary historical figures, thereby accomplishing self-idealization. With later generations’ acceptance of Zuo Si’s poems as the alternative ways of understanding these historical figures and the related historical themes, the ways of remembering these figures were thus transformed through Zuo’s poetry.

Chapter 4 offers another case on the representation of cultural memory by examining the poems composed by the renowned poet Tao Qian (ca. 365-427), who “carried on cultural memory in a way that also conveyed his personal perspective on life” (p. 73). Tao’s poetry inscribes history with his personal life attitude, shows his interpretations of history, and thus marks his departure from previous generations, demonstrating the new development of poems on history that appropriates cultural memory on the personal level.

Although the previous chapters examine “poems based on a poet’s reflection on reading historical accounts,” Chapter 5 instead focuses on those based on the poet’s contemplation of the past after visiting historical sites. By analyzing Jin-Song poet

Xie Zhan’s (385-421) works written in the era of dynastic transition, this chapter goes beyond the role of cultural memory in renowned works by individual poets, providing a case for understanding how the past cultural memory was appropriated by contemporaries to justify “the legitimacy of a new regime” (p. 97) on the political level.

Chapter 6 returns to the discussion of *Wen xuan*, the anthology where the label “poems on history” was used to refer to a group of 21 poems. Zhang divided the anthologized poems into three groups according to the poets’ three ways of appropriating lore in relation to the expression of their personal opinions. Some poets simply hide their views behind detailed accounts of historical figures and events; some use history as supporting materials without extensive accounts of history in the poems; while some express personal feelings explicitly by using the lore as simple allusions. This chapter provides many innovative and in-depth close readings of renowned and unknown poems by analyzing several poems. It also could serve as a perfect summary of all previous case studies. Through the three different writing strategies analyzed in chapter six, “poetry on history” (*yongshi shi*) has become a popular subgenre to represent the history and shape cultural memory.

To summarize, Zhang’s book argues how cultural memory shaped and was shaped by poetry in early medieval China. This book also provides in-depth readings of many early medieval Chinese poems written by a variety of poets. Through citing, translating, analyzing, and annotating a careful selection of poems, Zhang’s book delineates the allusions, motifs, and tropes in early medieval poems on history, a less-studied subgenre of Chinese poetry. It has provided a new understanding of the relations between literature and history, offering many new insights into the study of premodern Chinese poetry. It should be of interest not only to scholars and students working on premodern Chinese poetry but also to anyone interested in literature, history, and culture.