

***Reading Philosophy, Writing Poetry: Intertextual Modes of Making Meaning in Early Medieval China.*** By Wendy Swartz. Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series, 111. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018. Pp. xii + 304. \$49.95/£35.95.

To apply to traditional Chinese literature the notion of “the intertext”—the idea that “every text constructs itself as a mosaic of citations, every text is the absorption and transformation of another text” (as Julia Kristeva put it in her *Sémiotikê*, 1969)—might seem to be pushing at an open door. For every reader of Chinese poetry knows that it is rife with allusions. Becoming aware of this fact is a harsh part of the education of the foreign reader, in particular. What might seem to be an image or metaphor often turns out to be a citation. When such references are taken into account, the poem that might seem to say “my love is like a red, red rose” is really saying something like “my love is like the love that Robert Burns described as being like a red, red rose.” But the citation does not necessarily bring a loss of vividness, an increase in bookish distance from lived situations, because among literate people in China the experience of reading, particularly of reading and memorizing the Classics, counted as immediate and vivid; it was a condition for entry into the community of readers and writers, and thus bore on essential interests of life.

Wendy Swartz’s purpose in raising the question of intertextuality in this fine new book is not to demonstrate its existence but to show its workings and to debate its value for a particular juncture in literary history, the Wei-Jin period of fragmentation and transition. Its title mentions two centres of interest: “philosophy” and “poetry.” Existing scholarship tends to pit these two interests against one another in evaluating the contributions of Wei-Jin writers.

As for philosophy, the times were conducive to improvisational bricolage. The often short and violently interrupted reigns of warlord emperors were marked by purges and executions. The inclusive, optimistic ideologies of Han classicism, predicting a durable empire grounded on the understanding of the cycles of the cosmos and the nature of humankind, found few takers, and many members of the gentry preferred living in retirement to engagement with the risks of the public sphere. It is not surprising that those living in such an age were drawn to thinkers of detachment, resignation, or anarchy, and found resonance in the *Yijing* 易經, *Zhuangzi* 莊子, and *Laozi* 老子, especially as interpreted by Wang Bi 王弼 and Guo Xiang 郭象. “Pure conversations” (*qingtan* 清談) and “dark learning” (*xuanxue* 玄學) replaced Han academicism. As is also well known, the Six Dynasties intellectual elite welcomed Buddhism and transformed it by mixing it with these *xuanxue* references. No one would consider this a fallow period for Chinese thought, though it did not generate schools as easily identifiable as the thought of Zhu Xi 朱熹 or Wang Yangming 王陽明.

As for literature, the conventional judgement is mixed. With “the weakening of autocracy” and a consequent “ideological pluralism,” to cite one typical account, the Wei-Jin was “a chaotic but colorful age” whose “ideological trend . . . attached importance to individual values.”<sup>1</sup> In short, it was a period of aestheticism, which in conventional Chinese literary history suggests irresponsibility and mere ornament. Moreover, the poetry produced by adherents of the *xuanxue* movement has long been disparaged as a departure from the true path of “warmth and sincerity” (*wenrou dunhou* 溫柔敦厚) as exhibited in the *Book of Odes* and the *Songs of Chu*. As Swartz recalls, tastemakers such as Tan Daoluan 檀道鸞 and Zhong Rong 鍾嶸 excoriated these “conversations about emptiness” as leading to poetry that was “bland and wanting in flavor . . . flat and pedantic” (Swartz, p. 154, citing Zhong Rong’s *Shipin* 詩品).

So the case for the relevance of intertextuality as a mode of interpretation will look somewhat different according to the discipline which one is addressing. If one is speaking to scholars of intellectual history, Six Dynasties intertextuality will consist mainly of the fruitful, though often forced, combination of doctrines from diverse sources (a selective appropriation of Confucian ideas together with Daoist and Buddhist frameworks, reorganized around leading notions such as transcendence, dispassionateness, and the reversibility of values). If one is speaking to readers of literature, the traditional picture of the era is biased against intertextuality, as one sees from the standard contrast between Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 and Tao Yuanming 陶淵明, the former presented as a *recherché* aesthete whose cleverness leads him into derivative word puzzles, and the latter as a humble, tranquil, sincere recluse whose reading of Confucius and Laozi did not, miraculously, drain his poetry of inspiration.

Swartz rises to the task. Allusion is not in itself good or bad for poetry; we need, she says, a way of reading that will not only identify the textual references being made but make evident the art with which the poets weave them together. As she puts it in a comment on a poem series by Xi Kang 嵇康, the poet “judiciously selected materials (images, tropes, metaphors) from an array of heterogeneous textual sources (poetic and philosophical).” The sources are indeed widely divergent in their original tone and focus, lacking “inherently related or even obviously compatible frames of reference. . . . Yet these various strands come together rather seamlessly in a coherent address to the poet’s brother. . . . Far from reading like a pastiche, the series integrates its various borrowings into its own story of union, separation, betrayal, and transcendence, and effectively taps into the evocative ability of allusions and quotations to express meanings beyond the words” (pp. 73–74).

<sup>1</sup> Luo Yuming, *A Concise History of Chinese Literature*, trans. Ye Yang (Leiden: Brill, 2011), vol. 1, pp. 146, 149, 153.

Swartz brings a sense of drama to the reading of these poems. How are their “various, often-conflicting, textual resources” (p. 132) to be reconciled? Is it a matter of sequencing different modes or attitudes? Is it an exercise of profound wit, where concepts not easily reconciled are packed together in a few ambiguous words and left for the reader to ponder? Or is it a matter of testing the ideas by voicing them more or less in the words of others and creating a dialogue? These ways of reading create interest and suspense where earlier readers were content to give up and put many poems aside as so many sermons in verse. Swartz is as effective as anyone can be in her defence of Sun Chuo’s 孫綽 four-character verse, though not all readers will be inspired to go looking for more of it. It was important to defend Sun Chuo, however, for his poetry bears the brunt of the accusation made against *xuanyan* 玄言 poetry, that it failed of inspiration and muddled the orthodox lineage (p. 155).

In setting out the biographical elements relevant to many of these poems, Swartz reminds us of the reliance of Chinese poets of all eras on previous writing as (in Kenneth Burke’s phrase) “equipment for living.” Often the point of referring to a *Zhuangzi* discussion or a *Shijing* 詩經 poem is not to support a thesis, but to exhibit an attitude appropriate to confronting some situations. A series of attitudes may be tried out one after the other, with none finally deemed adequate to resolving the situation (as in Tao Yuanming’s dialogue of “Body, Shadow, Spirit” 形影神). The ideas of authorship developed in Warring States China are inseparable from the practices of citation. The speakers of *Shijing* odes are taken, in the commentary literature that grew up around that collection and in Confucian moral discussion, to be exemplars of conscience. Thus to allude, sometimes with no more than a character or two, to a *Shijing* poem means to take on the identity of one of those speakers. As Borges humorously suggests, “Everyone who recites a line from Shakespeare becomes Shakespeare”—but in China this style of echoing was taken quite seriously as a personal engagement with the earlier writer. To “follow the rhymes” of a predecessor, as Su Shi 蘇軾 for example did with Tao Yuanming, was to express a desire for identification with him. Later scholars who have made much of the supposed contrast between a Chinese literary tradition centred on the lyric and a Greek tradition centred on drama and fictionality have disregarded this form of persona-shifting, essential to the cumulative, memory-laden quality of Chinese poetry. In the poems considered by Swartz, learned poets writing for a no less learned audience apply the method of role-playing through allusion to a far wider set of texts: philosophy, commentary, divination, and sutras.

Allusion makes the words on the page richer. But does that gain come at the expense of something else? How do we distribute our attention; how do we decide whose voice we are hearing? “If meaning is generated by the intersection of texts, how do we determine how much of that meaning comes from the source text?”

(p. 213). Such questions cannot possibly have a single, generally valid answer, but they direct our attention to our operations of reading. When we have accounted for the intertexts, how much is left over that can only be credited to the author who brought them together? Perhaps the accusations of insipidity pointed at *xuanyan* poetry are misdirected; it is not that the wrong (i.e., unpoetic) elements were introduced, but that too often the poets are so busy with the cutting and pasting that they forget to add something of their own. Be that as it may, Swartz is right to argue that critics mislead themselves into zero-sum arguments, as when debating whether Tao Yuanming is “mostly” or “really” a Confucian or a Daoist on the basis of his frequency of allusions to *Lunyu* 論語 or *Zhuangzi* (pp. 190–95). The thing to watch is how the allusions add up, where they go, how they are played off against one another. And for that, Swartz’s practice is enlightening to observe.

Chapters on Xi Kang, Sun Chuo, Tao Yuanming, and Xie Lingyun make the case for the importance of allusive reading with studies of three canonical poets and one neglected one. The short Chapter 4 (pp. 158–83) has an unusual collective subject: the poems and prefaces associated with the Lanting 蘭亭 excursion in 353, a garden party made imperishable by the preface in the hand of Wang Xizhi 王羲之. Swartz furthermore translates the whole series of poems in this collection in an appendix (pp. 263–76). What makes this sample especially valuable is the way it displays the resources of intertextuality in the hands of writers both gifted and less gifted. Comparison makes us aware of the common stock of references and the ways in which they could be combined. Indeed, the same ingredients could produce sensibly different results, depending on a few subtle shifts of order or emphasis. Along with demonstrating the nature of poetic sociality through allusion, the collection forms a bridge between *xuanyan* philosophical concerns and the appreciation of landscape, a conjuncture later to be greatly developed by Xie Lingyun, subject of the last full chapter. Xie’s poetic style is often dismissed as overly ornamental, a complaint that Swartz wittily turns on its head by discovering in Xie’s poetry itself a rich vein of conjecture on the preferability of rusticity or ornament, mountains and rivers versus parks and gardens (pp. 247–52).

With its level-headed response to long-encrusted polemic, its willingness to follow poetic allusion wherever it might lead, and its inventive synthesis of intellectual history and literary interpretation, *Reading Philosophy, Writing Poetry* gives new life to the “dregs and chaff” at which Zhuangzi’s wheelwright scoffed.

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