

Crafting a Collection: The Cultural Contexts and Poetic Practice of the Huajian Ji (Collection from Among the Flowers). By Anna M. Shields. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006. Pp. xii + 398. \$49.95/£32.95.

Revisiting a familiar classic is an exciting, rewarding and essential critical exercise. Literary fashion changes with each generation, and with this comes a transformation in methodology, research data and approaches that creates the requisite preconditions for the revisionary process. It is over twenty years since a Western sinologist, Lois Fusek, produced her pioneering translation and study of the classic anthology, *Among the Flowers*,¹ so it is clearly time for a thorough reevaluation. Anna Shields's monograph presents a wealth of new data and fresh perceptions that complements, but also goes far beyond Fusek's original work.

It has to be said, however, that Shields's book is not an easy read. Her vast amount of research material, while intrinsically interesting and useful, threatens to engulf her important discussion of the classical text. Therefore, I will first summarize her critical objectives and research findings for each chapter, and then address more general methodological issues.

Compiled in AD 940 at the court of the kingdom of Shu in the post-Tang era, the anthology represents a unique collection of a literary form perfected at that time and in that place, and constitutes a summation of its artistic development. Its 500 song texts (*quzi ci*) by 18 late Tang-Shu poets adhere to 75 metrical patterns. Traditionally, literary critics have attempted to trace the development of the Song dynasty *ci*-lyric directly from the Tang-Shu song lyric (*quzi ci*). In her first chapter, Shields reorients the study of the genre of the song lyric away from the Song literary context and redirects it toward the world of Tang musical entertainment with which it has greater affinities, and for which there is considerable documentary and textual evidence. Of these contemporary sources, the most important is the *Record of the Imperial Academy of Music* (the *Jiaofang ji* compiled by the Tang courtier Cui Lingqin in the eighth century). Also in this chapter Shields explores the cultural context of the predominant theme of the anthology in what she terms "the culture of romance," tracing its significance through a variety of Tang sources, such as the *Account of the North Ward* (*Beili zhi* by Sun Qi), Tang short story (*chuanqi*), and Tang love poetry. Going further back in time, she briefly comments on the influence of the *Yutai xinyong* (*New Songs from a Jade Terrace*) on the Shu anthology and the subgenre of Tang palace plaint (*gong yuan*). Shields breaks new ground with her thesis that the Shu anthology's genre of *quzi ci* (song lyric) is a late literary phenomenon that gained momentum in the ninth century and reached its peak in the tenth century. This goes against the prevailing critical view that the genre emerged from a long and gradual evolutionary process. Her documentary evidence for this convincingly supports her thesis and calls for a reassessment of this problematic issue (pp. 54–61). She is also careful not to fully identify the Shu song lyric with its successor, the *ci*-lyric of the Song dynasty, but to classify it as a formal precursor.

¹ Lois Fusek, trans., *Among the Flowers: The Hua-Chien Chi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

In her next chapter Shields turns to an exploration of the socio-political and cultural context that produced the anthology *Among the Flowers*. Of primary importance in shaping this new literature were the geographical isolation and political independence of the Shu kingdom. After a quasi-essay on problems of Shu historiography (pp. 71–78), she presents useful biographies of the Shu founders and rulers, the Wang and the Meng clans, underscoring their meritocratic and dynamic approaches to government and cultural activities, and she explains the opportunities they created for music and song, and hence the song lyric (*quzi ci*, pp. 71–106). She cites a rich source of data for its composition in the contemporary records of censorious officials at court graphically describing the “debaucheries” of Wang Yan’s court musical entertainment (pp. 89–98). She follows this with a discussion of the 18 poets represented in the *Flowers* anthology, providing their biographical data, which in some cases is very scant (pp. 108–13). The single defining characteristic of Shu culture in the tenth century is its rulers’ fascination with light musical entertainment and their personal preferences for the song lyric and other forms. Wang Jian’s tomb near Chengdu is a visual testament to this, with its bas-relief sculptures of an all-female band and dancers.

Shields follows this discussion with a substantive section on the antecedents to the *Flowers* anthology, restating her position that it is more productive to analyze the three centuries of extant Tang anthologies than to take the *Flowers* anthology as a starting-point and tracing its evolution into the Song *ci*-lyric. This chapter produces a great amount of relatively new and important information, not just about the structure and strategies of anthologies, but also about the way the *Flowers* compilation diverged to become a distinctive Shu literary product (pp. 121–48). She ends with her translation of the preface to *Among the Flowers* by Ouyang Jiong (896–971), represented in the anthology by 17 lyrics, included by its compiler Zhao Chongzuo, who modestly, and perhaps prudently included none of his own specimens of the form. In analyzing Ouyang’s literary strategies in his preface, Shields proposes that his interest lay not so much in the literary form of the *quzi ci* as in his desire to attach to the collection the cachet of the prestige of the Shu imperial court, and its inspiration and source for the practice of composing songs of a refined aesthetics.

In Chapter Four Shields argues that, as the preface itself proclaims, the anthology poets did not place a high value on originality, but esteemed the technique of imitation, what is now termed intratextuality. Their innovative features include detailed imagery, a sustained mood of melancholy, often relieved by wit and colloquial humour, interesting rhetorical structures, a mix of literary and vernacular diction, metres, rhyme, and tonal schemes. She illustrates these features with lyrics by Wen Tingyun and Wei Zhuang to the *Pusa man* tune, or metrical pattern (pp. 171–81), taking up the question often debated by modern critics of Wen and Wei as literary opposites. She emphasizes that there is a general consensus among scholars of the anthology that although Wen died almost a century before it was compiled, he represents a stylistic model for the Shu lyricists.

Under the rubric of “gender,” Shields examines the techniques of voice and point of view in the lyrics, focussing on the tune title *Wine Springs* (*Jiu quanzi*) and that of *Sands of Silk-washing Streams* (*Huanxi sha*) by 7 composers, extrapolating generalizations from this (pp. 230–70). Her findings show that for all their emotional content, the lyrics are not generally read as expressions of personal experience, except for some cognitively presented

lyrics in the confessional male voice (p. 228). She notes that they evince a stylistic homogeneity deriving from the same emotional response to the conventional love story they depict, and from the uninhibited intratextual mode of the poets who borrow each others' phrases (p. 272). She rightly counters any charge of stylistic weakness by reminding her readers that in evaluating the song text one must try to evoke its performance context of a court wine party, exotically dressed female singers, court musicians, and above all its melodic accompaniment (pp. 272–73).

Some of the 500 lyrics are set to tune titles which suggest affinities with Daoist religion. Shields argues that while it is true that they contain Daoist allusions, these constitute only the trappings of that belief system rather than its credal verities. Here she parts company from Suzanne Cahill,² who reads the lyrics to the title *Transcendent by the River* (*Lin jiang xian*) as texts that display six elements specific to this tune title that are central to the theme of the quest for the goddess. Shields instead reads these as elements that recur in the main body of the anthology's song texts. Coming to the debatable tune title, *Daoist Nun* (*Nü guanzi*), Shields also rejects the view of Edward Schafer that several features are found in this set that indicate a Daoist particularity. While acceding that phrases such as "libation platform" (*jiao tan*) and "pacing the void" (*bu xu*) have Daoist connotations, she concludes that the poets' use of Daoist "paraphernalia" constitutes "the appropriation of divine imagery for the practice of writing romantic song lyrics" (p. 342).

The concluding chapter concentrates on two areas: an assessment of the main concerns underlying the overt meaning of the lyrics, and the literary reception of the classic in the later tradition. Shields isolates these concerns that form a subtext to the lyrics: liminality; the passage of time; the interrelated psychological states of dream, drunkenness, and memory; the unattainability of the object of desire; the difficulty of communication between a lover and the significant other; and powerlessness, both of the male and female subject (pp. 356–58). She provides a lucid summary of the reception history of the anthology, showing how it was widely circulated and read during the Song period, but was neglected for three centuries up to the sixteenth. A renewal of interest is seen in the late Ming, when in 1575 the dramatist Tang Xianzu sponsored a new edition. A further boost to its popularity, after a period of ambivalence in the Qing era, came with its endorsement by Wang Guowei as a medium of "singular excellence" (pp. 353–55).

Although Shields has undoubtedly made a significant contribution to *Huajian ji* studies, I have a number of reservations concerning methodology. The first issue has to do with literary history. In my view, it is inconceivable that the poetics of the anthology could be discussed with only a cursory acknowledgement of the body of earlier literature which so obviously and profoundly influenced it. I refer to the *Yutai xinyong*. There are so many parallels between the two anthologies, separated by four centuries, that it would have benefited the reader for this literary precursor to have been examined to show how numerous features translated into *Huajian ji* poetics. These features include the single theme of love,

² Suzanne Cahill, "Sex and the Supernatural in Medieval China: Cantos on the Transcendent Who Presides over the River," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105.2 (April 1985), pp. 197–220.

a prevailing melancholic mood, a boudoir setting, woman-as-subject, élite and vernacular diction, and the palatial metonymic structures.

Similarly, clearer parallels could have been drawn between the popular song tradition, which itself revitalized the court poetry of the *Yutai xinyong*. I refer to the Wu Songs and Western Songs (*Wu-sheng gequ* and *Xiqu*) current from the fourth to fifth centuries. There is a distinct filiation from Han folk-songs through popular songs of the Wu and Yangtze region to the *Yutai xinyong* and on through Tang to Shu lyrics. Shields refers to much of these discrete repertoires of song by the term *yuefu*, but by the end of the Tang and earlier this term had lost its original generic meaning. It is therefore advisable to refer to these discrete repertoires by their traditional generic terms, rather than the catch-all, meaningless genre of *yuefu*.

Shields's scholarly apparatus throughout her text is thorough, making excellent use of the secondary sources, especially the research of Ren Bantang. Her bibliography, and some annotations have some serious omissions, however. For example, Claudio Guillén, Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov, and David R. Knechtges are mentioned in footnotes, but are omitted from the bibliography (pp. 5–6, nn. 4 and 5). Anne Birrell's translation and research data on Han *yuefu*, which might have aided the reader to get literary historical bearings, is not mentioned, nor the same author's recent work on the *Yutai xinyong*.³ Lois Fusek, whose pioneering work on the anthology appears in the bibliography, is never mentioned in Shields's text, though it remains exemplary for the clarity of its systematic presentation of the basic data, such as poets' biographies and list of all tune titles. These omissions are surely unprofessional?

Some general errors occur. The explanation of the cuckoo allusion (p. 192) is wrong: the king of Shu was not a "betrayed lover," but the betrayer who cuckolded his minister. Fusek's glossary note on this is correct and admirably clear (p. 207). The translation and interpretation of Zhang Bi's *Huanxi sha*, third of 10 (pp. 259–60) are somewhat garbled: a woman is pictured standing with her back to a screen backlit by a lamp, rather than Shields's "presents . . . a glimpse of the woman's back." The *Youming lu* (a collection of supernatural tales) is attributed to Liu Yiqing (AD 403–444), and belongs to the early medieval era. Shields might have usefully designated the various periods of "the medieval era" for the general reader, since, in her book at least, it extends from the fifth to the tenth century (p. 320 and passim). Wei Zhuang is referred to throughout by the epithet "hearty," perhaps derived from Fusek's "open-hearted" (p. 21), but Shields's repetition of "hearty" becomes an annoying stylistic tic (p. 246 and passim).

As I noted at the outset, this book is not an easy read. This is partly because the mass of data is not presented in a clear and systematic way; the literary historical guidelines are obscured by lack of precise chronological demarcations; too many digressions and mini-essays interrupt the discursive flow; and arguments are not proposed in a sufficiently succinct style. A more stringent editorial reading would have resolved some of these

³ Anne Birrell, *Popular Songs and Ballads of Han China* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993); Anne Birrell, *Games Poets Play: Readings in Medieval Chinese Poetry* (Cambridge: McGuinness China Monographs, 2004).

weaknesses of vagueness and lack of direction. Another resolution would be for sinologists specializing in traditional literature to read and keep up with general contemporary critical approaches.

Shields indicates an awareness of postmodern or contemporary literary criticism (p. 277), but she does not integrate it into her analyses of poets and their song texts. The concept of gender, for example, though it appears in the title to Chapter Five, is not used or applied in the same way as modern critics, such as Elaine Showalter.⁴ Yet the underlying concerns of the song texts that Shields herself correctly identifies—negativity, time, memory, fantasy, escapist drug-taking (wine), failure, inability to communicate, powerlessness, obsession, pursuit of the unattainable, liminality (and, I would add, woman-as-metonymic construct)—fall exactly within the parameters of modern literary discourse. Only one concept, liminality, is given a modernist treatment by Shields (p. 189), while intertextuality is treated as quoting.

Professor Shields has brought together in this book a truly phenomenal amount of research, which will prove extremely useful to general and specialist readers alike. Her book builds upon, but goes far beyond Professor Fusek's 1982 study. Her translations are limpid and her interpretations valid. She ably addresses the prevailing issues in the literary history of the anthology and the genre, creating new definitions of some well-established critical positions. Her comprehensive research impressively consolidates our knowledge and understanding of this tenth-century classic, and admirably lays the foundation for further investigative study, especially in terms of its modernist literary concepts.

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Ruan Yuan, 1764–1849: The Life and Work of a Major Scholar-Official in Nineteenth-Century China before the Opium War. By Betty Peh-T'i Wei. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006. Pp. xvii + 392. \$59.50.

Betty Peh-T'i Wei's new book explores the life, times, and works of Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849), a distinguished scholar-official known in the mid-Qing era prior to the Opium War for his classical learning 經學 and scholarly patronage. His support of Han Learning 漢學 and evidential research 考證學, for example, helped promote the last great classical turn in Confucian scholarship 儒學 before Western incursions challenged traditional institutions and values after the Opium War. Betty Wei currently holds honorary appointments at the Institute of Qing History 清史研究所 at Renmin University of China 中國人民大學, Beijing, and the Centre of Asian Studies and the Department of History at The University of Hong Kong. She has carried out research at many libraries, archives, and on many continents.

⁴ Elaine Showalter, ed., *Speaking of Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1989).