
SWARTZ, Wendy. *Reading Philosophy, Writing Poetry: Intertextual Modes of Making Meaning in Early Medieval China*. Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 111. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018. Pp. xii+304.

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Xuanyan 玄言, or discoursing on the mysterious, poetry represents one major trend of poetic interests in early medieval China. The rise of this trend accompanied the development of *xuanxue* 玄學 (Learning of the mysterious), and a growing taste for *qingtan* 清談 (pure conversation) among the elite intellectuals during the Wei-Jin period. Entering the Southern dynasties, *xuanyan* poetry gradually fell out of favor, overshadowed by a renewed sense of poetic directness and a keen intent in pursuing prosodic forms.¹ Indeed, among the several major works of criticism passed down from the sixth century, poetry incorporating the *xuanyan* mode does not seem well received, and is generally reprimanded for being “flat and pedantic” (*ping dian* 平典).² As a matter of fact, this sixth-century distaste for *xuanyan* poetry has come to represent a voice of such authority that for over a millennium thereafter, the Wei-Jin poetry written in this particular fashion has not only gravely dwindled in quantity, but also been largely, if not completely, missed out from narratives of the poetic tradition. Modern scholarship since the 1980s has witnessed an increasing interest in *xuanyan* poetry, with several important works on literary history devoting substantial discussions to it in the 80s and

1 Among the earliest critics of *xuanyan* poetry was Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513), advocate for poetic directness, fervent promotor and practitioner of prosodic rules. Shen’s assessment of *xuan*-style writings essentially represents a changing literary taste among the elite men of letters in the southern Qi and Liang dynasties. See Shen Yue comp., *Song shu* 宋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 67.1778–1779.

2 See Zhong Rong 鍾嶸, Cao Xu 曹旭 annot., *Shipin jizhu* 詩品集注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1994), 24.

90s,³ and a number of monographs focusing exclusively on it in the past two decades.⁴ While each certainly has their own merits when it comes to repositioning *xuanyan* poetry back onto the early medieval literary map, they nevertheless fall short in terms of pioneering new approaches that yield new insights into this poetic trend, remaining, for the most part, faithful reiterators of the old rhetoric of criticism by faulting its artistic value and lyrical drive.

It is against such critical and scholarly backdrop, that Wendy Swartz's recent book entitled *Reading Philosophy, Writing Poetry* offers an excitingly groundbreaking take on *xuanyan* poetry. The other half of Swartz's book title, *Intertextual Modes of Making Meaning in Early Medieval China*, reveals the key concept that guides this research: intertextuality. Drawing primarily from the Western cultural theories, the author sets out to re-contextualize *xuanyan* poetry in an era that "witnessed an exponential growth in cultural wealth as the literati class developed a distinctive mosaic of ways to participate in their cultural heritage,"⁵ and by so doing tapped into a rich reserve of texts, signs, knowledges and meanings. From these perspectives, Swartz embarks on a very different scholarly quest from her predecessors: rather than trying, and failing, to measure the literary merits of the early medieval *xuanyan* poetry against the critical tastes of later times, she aims instead, for a better understanding of this particular mode of poetry writing as a manifestation of cultural memories, and as an effective means of generating meaning. Following a general discussion in its first chapter on the various facets surrounding the activities of reading and writing in early medieval China, the major content of this book is neatly structured around five individual cases spanning from the Wei (220–266) regime of the Three Kingdoms (220–280) period to the southern Song (420–479) dynasty. Unlike the

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- 3 Some influential works in this period include Ge Xiaoyin 葛曉音, *Badai shishi* 八代詩史 (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1989); Wang Zhongling 王鍾陵, *Zhongguo zhonggu shige shi* 中國中古詩歌史 (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyuchubanshe, 1988); Luo Zongqiang 羅宗強, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao wenxue sixiang shi* 魏晉南北朝文學思想史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996); Zhang Bowei 張伯偉, *Chan yu shixue* 禪與詩學 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1992), etc.
- 4 Several monographs focused on *xuanyan* poetry in the past two decades include Zhang Tingyin 張廷銀, *Wei Jin xuanyan shi yanjiu* 魏晉玄言詩研究 (Taipei: Wen shi zhe chubanshe, 2003); Hu Dalei 胡大雷, *Xuanyan shi yanjiu* 玄言詩研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007); Wang Shu 王澍, *Wei Jin xuanxue yu xuanyan shi yanjiu* 魏晉玄學與玄言詩研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2007); Yang Helin 楊合林, *Xuanyan shi yanjiu* 玄言詩研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai gujichubanshe, 2011); Cai Yanfeng 蔡彥峰, *Xuanxue yu Jin Nanchao shixue yanjiu* 玄學與魏晉南朝詩學研究 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2013), etc.
- 5 Wendy Swartz, *Reading Philosophy, Writing Poetry: Intertextual Modes of Making Meaning in Early Medieval China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018), 3.