

Written at Imperial Command: Panegyric Poetry in Early Medieval China. By Fusheng Wu. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008. Pp. ix + 289. \$80.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

In this sophisticated study of “poems written at imperial command” (*yingzhao shi* 應詔詩 or *yingzhi shi* 應制詩), Fusheng Wu argues that in Chinese literary tradition, the poems written under these formal and official circumstances have not yet been identified as a particular genre, not even in the almost all-embracing literary anthology, the *Wenxuan* 文選 (Selections of Refined Literature) by Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531). Although Xiao included such poems in his anthology, he classified them under several other categories such as *xian shi* 獻詩 (presented poetry) and *gongyan shi* 公讌詩 (banquet poetry) (p. 1). However, the significance of this genre should not be ignored. In this study, the author argues that this type of poem not only reveals the court culture, the interaction and sometimes dangerous relationship between the imperial rulers addressed in the poems and the poets, but also “compel[s] us to reexamine the Chinese poetic tradition,” a tradition of “personal, spontaneous expression” (ibid.). Wu adapts the Western category of panegyric to the somewhat different circumstances of Chinese tradition. He traces the court tradition of written for the imperial rulers back to the Han epideictic rhapsody (Chapter 1), and delineates the special nature and distinct features of the panegyric poetry for China’s early medieval period known as Wei-Jin Nanbeichao 魏晉南北朝 (220–618) (Chapters 2–9).

Fusheng Wu also identifies the first poem written with the explicit title, *yingzhao*, by Cao Zhi 曹植 (192–232) to his imperial brother Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226), and shows that the term was not widely used for the poem’s title until the Liu Song 劉宋 period (420–478). Cao Zhi wrote because he wanted to. He was the initiator who wrote to reflect his summoned trip to the capital. He did not write this poem under Cao Pi’s command (even though he addressed this poem to Cao Pi), nor did he respond to Cao Pi’s poetic composition on a certain court occasion, while in later poetry *yingzhao* refers to the poems written at the imperial command (p. 44). It is noticeable that throughout the study the author emphasizes poems written to respond to the imperial rulers’ poetic composition on an imperial related occasion, but he also includes poems written initially by poets and presented to the ruler later (such as Cao Zhi’s poem). Perhaps this is the reason for the inclusion of, for example, Wang Can’s 王粲 (177–217) “Following Military Campaigns: Five Poems” (*Congjun shi wu shou* 從軍詩五首) (pp. 26–39), and Jiang Zong’s 江總 (519–594) “Poem Written during a Tour of the Qixia Temple at Mount She” (*You Sheshan Qixia si* 遊攝山棲霞寺) (pp. 159–63). Even though it is not clearly justified in the book, the significance of the author’s inclusion of the poems by Wang Can and Jiang Zong which expands the scope of the *yingzhao* poetry is valuable. The *yingzhao* poetry cannot be just defined by the title. In fact, it is still not easy to categorize the *yingzhao* genre.

Fusheng Wu’s argument that panegyric poetry is formal and impersonal (hence unlike the tradition of personal expression in Chinese poetry), sometimes seems to contradict

the examples he discusses. Many of these examples are filled with personal expression. One example can be drawn from Zuo Fen's 左芬 (*fl.* second half of the third century) "Rhapsody on Thought of Separation" (Lisi fu 離思賦) (pp. 51–54). After providing the background and translation of Zuo Fen's long piece, the author notes:

The most remarkable feature of this work is that it completely ignores the emperor. Zuo Fen focuses exclusively on her own experiences and her reactions to them, turning her poem into an intense personal reflection on her fate as a confined court lady. (p. 53)

Furthermore, two problematic terms in Fusheng Wu's translation need to be discussed. It has never been easy for scholars to translate those terms which either have no equivalent in English or are already ambiguous in Chinese. The following two terms, for example, might need more clarification than just simply translate them.

A poem by Wei Shou 魏收 (505–572) titled "Hui ri fanzhou yingzhao shi" 晦日泛舟應詔詩 is translated by Fusheng Wu as "Boating on a Gray Day: Written at Imperial Command" (p. 174). The clarification of the term *hui ri* might change our view of Wei Shou's poem. The following is his translation.

裊裊春枝弱	Softly the tender spring branches wave,
關關新鳥呼	Harmoniously the new birds chirp.
棹唱忽逶迤	Oar songs all of a sudden meander about,
菱歌時顧慕	Lotus tunes occasionally correspond.
睿賞芳月色	[His Majesty] is enjoying the beautiful moonlight,
宴言忘日暮	The banquet guests are oblivious to the approaching dusk.
游豫慰人心	Such an excursion comforts our heart,
照臨康國步	The [moonlight] shines on this thriving state.

By definition, *hui ri* is the last day of any lunar month. Yet, as the first two lines of the poem in question indicate that the season is in the early spring, *hui ri* in the title specifies the last day of the first lunar month. Furthermore, according to the *Wei-Jin Nanbeichao shehui shenghuo shi* 魏晉南北朝社會生活史 by Zhu Dawei 朱大渭 and others, it was also a custom during the Wei-Jin Nanbeichao period to go boating to celebrate the *hui ri* of the first month, which also meant to drive away the evil spirits.¹ Therefore, the translation of *hui ri* as "a gray day" without explanation does not bring out the cultural aspect of the poem. Moreover, as we understand that *hui ri* is the last day of the month, which means there is *no* bright moonlight to "shine on this thriving state" (line 8), we may wonder why Wei Shou created an "imagined moonlight" in his poem and associated the waned moonlight with "imperial power and beneficence" (p. 175). As

¹ Zhu Dawei et al., *Wei-Jin Nanbeichao shehui shenghuo shi* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 中國社會科學出版社, 1998), pp. 365–66.

Fusheng Wu points out readers will find Wei Shou's poem in question contains several contradictory images and need to "stretch their imaginations to make sense of it" (ibid.).

Another problematic term is about the identity of the plant *yujin* 鬱金 in line 5 of Yu Shiji's 虞世基 (d. 618) poem, "Four Season Songs of White Ramie: Summer in Jiangdu" 四時白紵歌：江都夏, which is written to match a poem by Emperor Yang 煬帝 of Sui dynasty (r. 605–618). While I appreciate the author's sensitive analysis of Yu's poem in question (pp. 197–98), his translation of the plant *yujin* as "tulip" needs to be further examined. For the purpose of discussion, I provide here the author's translation of lines 5 and 6 of Yu Shiji's poem in question:

輕幌芳煙鬱金馥 Light curtains, scented mist, and tulip fragrance,
綺簷花簾桃李枝 Inlaid eaves, flowery mats, and peach branches. (p. 197)

Is the flower plant *yujin* with strong aroma in Yu's verse the tulip? Or, might it be a different plant? As we know, tulip is commonly known in Chinese as *yujinxiang* 鬱金香 (*Tulipa gesneriana*), the similar name may have caused the confusion. It is not my intention here to trace the initial use of tulip in Chinese literary texts and its first migrant from its native place Central Asia to south of the Yangtze River of China. However, based on the textual evidence, there are reasons to argue that *yujin* is not tulip (*yujinxiang*). Instead, it is probably the Chinese native plant *yujin* (*Curcuma domestica* Valetton) or the *jianghuang* 薑黃 (*Curcuma aromatica* Salisb., which is also called *yujin* in some ancient texts). One of the reasons for the *yujin* in the poem is not *yujinxiang* is that, as the subtitle of Yu's poem (also Emperor Yang's) suggests, the poem describes a summer scene at Jiangdu 江都 (present-day Yangzhou 揚州). While tulips bloom in spring not in summer, in Yu's verse, the *yujin* that blooms with strong fragrance in mid-summer time cannot be the tulip which cannot really tolerate the summer heat. Furthermore, according to the *Hanyu da cidian* 漢語大詞典, "*yujin* is a Chinese fragrance herb, which is the root-tuber of aromatic turmeric. It blooms in summer."² Pan Fujun 潘富俊 in his *Tang shi zhiwu tujian* 唐詩植物圖鑑 also explains that the *yujin* in several Tang poems is the aromatic Chinese plant.³

This study marks a great contribution to the field of Chinese poetry, and it ends a long period of neglect and disparagement of this type of poems. Fusheng Wu has drawn our attention to the panegyric poetry and the court culture of the early medieval China.

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² *Hanyu da cidian* (Shanghai: Hanyu da cidian chubanshe 漢語大詞典出版社, 1986–1993), vol. 3, p. 1139.

³ Pan Fujun, *Tang shi zhiwu tujian* (Taipei: Maotouying chubanshe 貓頭鷹出版社, 2001), pp. 146–47.