
***The Poet Zheng Zhen (1806–1864) and the Rise of Chinese Modernity*, By J.D. SCHMIDT. Leiden: Brill, 2013. Pp. xxviii+720.**

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In this hefty tome J.D. Schmidt has given us yet another of his comprehensive studies of major Chinese poets. This time the subject is Zheng Zhen 鄭珍 (1806–1864), but previously Schmidt has dedicated monographs to Fan Chengda 范成大 (1126–1193), Yang Wanli 楊萬里 (1127–1206), Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–1798) and Huang Zunxian 黃遵憲 (1848–1905). As impressive as Schmidt's earlier studies were, this may be his most ambitious book yet, recasting a poet who has often been omitted entirely from literary histories as one of China's greatest writers. Schmidt presents Zheng Zhen's life and poetry with such authority and detail that anyone interested in Chinese literature must admit the weight of his evidence, in spite of a few quibbles.

For the publication of this book we owe our gratitude to Brill, which has done so much to sustain Western Sinology in recent years. In the preface (p. xviii), Schmidt alludes to some challenges he encountered in getting the work published. This kind of "life and times of a major Chinese poet," the genre employed with such success by Arthur Waley, seems to have difficulty attracting readers today. Yet Schmidt has almost single-handedly revived the form, bringing to life Zheng Zhen as a historical person while also devoting ample space to translation and interpretation of his poems. Though it is wonderful that Brill has been able to publish such a detailed study, one only regrets that the results of his labors are not also available in a more affordable edition. If only some publisher would recognize again the opportunity that Twayne took advantage of in the 1970s and early 80s, with its convenient series of Chinese "world authors."

The contents of *The Poet Zheng Zhen* are exceedingly rich, and this review will not attempt to cover them in detail. The organization of the book follows that of Schmidt's previous study of Huang Zunxian, a biographical study followed by a generous selection of the poetry itself, in smooth and readable English translations. Zheng Zhen was a native of Guizhou province who spent most of his life there, and Schmidt gives ample attention to his social environment, even providing clear maps and a number of paintings that help to provide a vivid sense of his local context. The book opens with two chapters presenting in remarkable detail Zheng's education and frustrating career. Here I would echo the blurb by Jonathan Chaves on the back cover of the book: "In fact, there is no more complete study of any Chinese poet from any period . . ." Using both Zheng's own writings and huge variety of contemporary sources, Schmidt is able to detail both the key events of Zheng's life and reconstruct his interior psychological states as well. Zheng's impressions and reactions throughout the Opium War and Taiping Rebellion are of particular historical interest.

The one area where Schmidt's treatment of Zheng Zhen lapses in scholarly rigor is when he attempts to paint Zheng Zhen as a representative of a larger cultural transformation, namely that of Chinese modernity. This is the burden of the third chapter, entitled "The Bright and Dark Sides of Zheng Zhen's Mind." Here Schmidt gives his most extended treatment of the unlikely proposition stated in the introduction and also indicated in the book's title, Zheng Zhen as an early exemplar of Chinese "modernity." Schmidt himself is too honest a scholar to conceal the counterevidence from the reader, and gives a balanced portrayal of Zheng's work that belies the claim of modernity. It is telling, for instance, that chapter three on Zheng Zhen's "positive and negative modernities" is followed by chapter four on "Zheng Zhen and the Song School's Theory of Literature," an informative and lucid survey of how Qing dynasty poets developed models from the Song. Over and over again Schmidt identifies some aspect of Zheng's work as modern, but then goes on in the next sentence to identify precedents in an earlier dynasty.

Schmidt makes much of the difficulty of defining "modernity," pointing out that different writers attribute it to entirely different areas. He specifically

identifies “positive” and “negative” modernities, with the former including intellectual openness, rationalism, “sympathetic attitude to women,” etc., and the latter including guilt, anxiety, and alienation (pp. 33–34). But these value associations, positive and negative, are orthogonal to the value scheme of a literary modernity. In literature and culture, modernity or modernism is “characterized by departure from or repudiation of traditional ideas, doctrines, and cultural values in favour of contemporary or radical values and beliefs.”¹ One thinks of Picasso carving into rhombuses and ovals the figures of his mistresses, Buñuel and Dali dissecting a woman’s eyeball on screen. There is barely a hint of radical innovation or repudiation of tradition in Zheng Zhen’s work.² What Schmidt seems to be referring to is rather the appeal that Zheng Zhen holds, or ought to hold, for modern readers.

Thus Schmidt is particularly convincing when showing how Zheng Zhen adapted the techniques of earlier poets to his own circumstances, a strand of argument that is highlighted by his decision to include a complete translation of Du Fu’s “Journey to the North” and Yuan Mei’s “Impromptu Poem about a Trip Home” at the end of the book. Schmidt shows the value of Zheng Zhen’s poetry, but then furnishes a false façade of modernity that obscures the solidity of the traditional craftsmanship underlying it. While enjoying and admiring the book as a whole, I nonetheless wish its title had been something more like *The Poet Zheng Zhen and the Resilience of Chinese Tradition*: this would have captured much more of Zheng Zhen’s appeal, as demonstrated by Schmidt’s scholarship.

Here Schmidt is on much firmer ground, and the book’s analysis of Zheng Zhen’s poetic techniques and content is erudite and insightful. The highlight of the book for this reader is chapter 7, “Stories Told in New Ways: The Narrative Verse,” which gives a highly persuasive account of Zheng’s originality in narrative technique. Through close consideration of a number

1 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “modernity,” definition 1b: “An intellectual tendency or social perspective characterized by departure from or repudiation of traditional ideas, doctrines, and cultural values in favour of contemporary or radical values and beliefs (chiefly those of scientific rationalism and liberalism).”

2 One section of the book does note a few poems where Zheng expresses mild doubt about the cultural tradition (pp. 205–9), but these are in no way *characteristic* of Zheng’s oeuvre.

of longer narrative poems (most of which are translated in full at the end of the book), Schmidt demonstrates the artistry of Zheng's work, how his poems seem to replicate his own thought process in tandem with a succession of sensory impressions and personal experiences. The effect is to suggest the fullness of his experience in a new way. In one illuminating comparison, Schmidt first translates Du Fu's "Presented to Layman Wei" 贈衛八處士), then analyzes Zheng's 82-line poem "I am Delighted When Hu Changxin Comes Up the Mountain to Visit" 胡子何來山中喜, 賦此 (discussion on pp. 414–19, translation of Zheng's poem in entirety on pp. 580–83). First Schmidt explains the basic similarity in theme, a meeting with a friend that becomes the occasion for a reflection on human life. Then, however, he identifies a number of original devices in Zheng's narrative, in particular a number of surprising plot twists in the second half of the poem, where Zheng's expectations are repeatedly frustrated.

This account is particularly convincing because Schmidt grounds his analysis in detailed references to earlier poetry, particularly from Du Fu, Su Shi, and Yuan Mei. Schmidt's frequent references back to his own work on Yuan Mei are a brilliant demonstrative of the cumulative quality of real scholarship. By contrasting his detailed knowledge of the two poets, Schmidt is able to distinguish personal quirks and singular techniques from more typical habits of the literati poet, again deepening our sense of Zheng's personal character. This is the focus of chapter 5, "Redefining the Human Realm" (an allusion to Schmidt's own work on Huang Zunxian, *Within the Human Realm*), which examines Zheng's personal relationships, such as his fond depictions of his wife, and his "relationship of intense love and guilt" (p. 322) with his mother.

In a book otherwise exemplifying erudition and scholarly precision, incidentally, the opening paragraph of chapter five (p. 289) stands out as one misguided in its account of the textual tradition. Schmidt asserts confidently here that "For the ancient Chinese, the human realm was the center of the universe." This strikes me as an overly tendentious summary of the cultural tradition preserved in the oracle bones or the *Zhuangzi*, to cite two obvious counterexamples. Schmidt cites Dong Zhongshu on Heaven, Earth, and Man:

but Dong's thought could just as easily be construed as evidence that, in Han Confucianism, the human realm was seen as merely one subordinate unit of a larger entity, equally defined by Heaven and Earth (obviously this is a topic for a larger debate: but the selective assertion that only Man is of consequence in this trinity demands substantiation). Worse, later in the same paragraph Schmidt claims that the Han *fu* (inaccurately described as "prose poetry") "mostly depicted life in the imperial court." This is not true of the famous *fu* on the capitals or imperial parks (which are famous for their detailed description of the animal, vegetable, mineral, and astral realms), and is even less true of works like Sima Xiangru's "Rhapsody on the Great Man" (Daren fu 大人賦) or Zhang Heng's "Rhapsody on Contemplating the Mystery" (Sixuanfu 思玄賦), whose primary subjects are celestial voyages. To assert that their subject matter is limited to their site of composition is like saying that *À la recherche du temps perdu* mostly depicts life inside a cork-lined chamber. Chapter five does use Zheng's own poetry to paint a vivid portrait of his personal life—but there is no need to misrepresent other parts of the Chinese tradition to do so.

Two other chapters, "The Rapture and Terror of Nature" and "Poetry on Learning, Science, and Technology" discuss the varied subject matter of Zheng's verse. Whatever the specific subject matter, Schmidt's translations are remarkably enjoyable to read. Here is one translation from the "Poetry on Learning, Science, and Technology" chapter which suggests both Zheng's strengths as a poet and Schmidt's effectiveness as a translator (pp. 456–57):

After I Finished Copying Out Meng Jiao's Complete Poems, I wrote Two of my Own Poems to Append at the End (One Poem of Two) (1839) 鈔東野詩畢，書後二首

峭性無溫容 There was nothing warm or gentle about this rough and hard man,
 酸情無歡蹤 Not a trace of happiness in his pessimistic soul.
 性情一華嶽 Yet his nature and feelings soar to the summit of Mount Hua,
 吐出蓮花峰 And spit forth a peak like a lotus blossom.
 草木無餘生 No trees, no flowers can survive up there;
 高寒見巍宗 Everything is frozen on that towering mountain.

我敬貞曜詩 Still I honor and respect Meng Jiao's verse,
 我悲貞曜翁 Though I feel terrible sorrow for Meng the man.
 長安千萬花 He galloped past Chang'an's flowers when he passed his exams,
 世事難與同 But nothing in the world ever went right for him.
 一日即看盡 He finished seeing all those flowers in a single day,
 明日安不窮 But could not escape his poverty the following morning.
 貞曜如有聞 I'm certain that if he could just hear what I'm saying,
 听然囚出籠 He'd break into a smile and leap like a prisoner from his cell!

I have omitted two notes explaining "Mount Hua" and the allusion in line nine. It is particularly noteworthy how Schmidt translates this line, which literally just says, "Chang'an's millions of flowers" 長安千萬花. Rather than translating literally, Schmidt inserts the allusion to Meng's poem "After Passing the Examinations" 登科後, also quoted in the original footnote. This alteration makes the translation easy to read and appreciate without the intermediation of the scholarly apparatus. This method of translation would not be appropriate for dealing with all kinds of texts, but it works very well with Zheng Zhen's poetry. The long narrative poems, in particular, depend very much on the rhythm that builds up over dozens of lines, and Schmidt's attention to that narrative line is clearly visible. Too many footnoted allusions would break up the rhythm irreparably. Schmidt's solution preserves the drama of these poems in English, and one hopes they will reach a wide audience, in spite of the formidable price of this book.

Incidentally, *The Poet Zheng Zhen* makes a fine companion to another Brill publication, *The Great Recreation: Ho Ching-ming (1483–1521) and His World*³ by the late Daniel Bryant. Both books are slightly over 700 pages long, represent the fruit of decades of meticulous scholarship, and are devoted to long-overlooked poets from the late imperial era. Moreover, both are outspoken in their critique of the conventional narrative of Chinese literary history that has prevailed since the May Fourth era, particularly in its rigid association of particular genres with particular eras: the Han *fu*, Tang *shi*, Song *ci*, Yuan *qu*, Ming-Qing fiction, presumably leading up as if inevitably to 20th-

3 Leiden: Brill, 2008.

century modernism.⁴ Both Schmidt and Bryant are entirely persuasive in their rejection of this model and in their demonstration of the importance of these particular poets.

At the same time, though, these two tremendously impressive books have neglected to offer us a new model of literary history to challenge the old one. As misleading as it is, the association of genres and eras provides an extraordinary powerful model for literary research. It allows the scholar to reject 99% of the Chinese literary corpus as outdated or irrelevant, while also providing a definitive metric for evaluation of the remaining 1%, and as such is extremely handy for a time-pressed graduate student or assistant professor. Each Han *fu* can be studied as a model of the genre's normative features, without regard to its more confusing post-Han developments; a few Tang *ci* take on supreme importance for their role as harbingers of the genre in the Song. If we reject this model, are all *shi* poems potentially of equal literary-historical significance? But the corpus of *shi* poems from before 1911 (even leaving aside the continuing life of the form in our era) is unimaginably huge. To filter and select the literary works that have been neglected will require radically new models of literary history. This remains a project of tremendous importance for future scholarship. It is a testament to Schmidt's achievement that any such new model will have to explain how Du Fu's narrative verse was re-created in the late Qing, and indubitably will find a prominent place for Zheng Zhen.

4 Schmidt has an incisive and enlightening discussion of this model on pp. 9–12. Note, however, that this view of literary history is anticipated by Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602), “Tongxinshuo” 童心說, in *Fen shu* 焚書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 3.98.

