Verse and Lore: ‘Poems on History’ (*yongshi shi*) from the Selections of Refined Literature (*Wen xuan*)

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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2014

Abstract

This dissertation discusses how cultural memory and nostalgia are demonstrated and negotiated in poems through investigating the section of “Poems on History” in the Selections of Refined Literature (Wen xuan 文選). Chapter One lays a solid foundation for further discussion, mainly exploring previous Chinese and English scholarship on poems on history in the early medieval period (220-580) and providing a brief history of this subgenre up to this point. Chapter Two examines why the Wen xuan editors chose certain poems in the section of Poems on History through a case study of the reception of Zuo Si’s poems. The reception and canonization process of his poems serve as a good example to illustrate how the memory of literary past is shaped and mediated by the intellectual and cultural zeitgeist of this period. Chapter Three deals with the different approaches by which the poets connect historical lore with poetry, and shows the sophistication of poems on history in Chinese literary tradition. The last two chapters discuss two case studies: one is from Zuo Si, an earlier case and the other on Yan Yanzhi, a case closer to the Wen xuan editors’ time period. Chapter Four explicitly discusses how poets use literature as a
way to create a poetic-self as an alternative to images transmitted in standard histories, a
represented self under their control through which poets influence their contemporaries and later
readers’ perception and memories about them. A good case study of this process is Zuo Si’s
“Poems on History”. Chapter Five talks about the formation of poets’ reputation in history, not
based on their political achievements and contributions, but on the highly admirable moral values
and ideals expressed in their poetry, which become models for later literati. Yan Yanzhi’s
“Poems on the Five Lords” is a case study that shows the continuing tradition of character
appraisal, dealing with five historical figures who were remembered because of their musical,
literary, and spiritual cultivation. Thus poems on history—their composition, their reception, their
transmission through anthologies—are shown to have been a vital means of interpreting and
evaluating the past, and to have played an important role in shaping Chinese identity and
character through literature.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation has been supported by several research grants, notably a five-year fellowship from the University of Toronto and a Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation Doctoral Fellowship. Other scholarships were also very helpful for making this dissertation possible, including various internal grants from the University of Toronto, such as research travel grants and conference grants, and external grants from Harvard-Yenching Library and American Oriental Society.

Many scholars helped me through my writing process, especially my dissertation committee members: Professor Graham Sanders, Professor Johanna Liu, and Professor Rick Gussio. My appreciation also goes to the external reviewer Professor Michael Farmer. I appreciate that several academic journals published my articles and book reviews, some of which I adapted in my dissertation, such as Early Medieval China, China Review International, and East Asia Forum. Professor Wendy Swartz provided me an excellent opportunity to translate her book: Reading Tao Yuanming: Shifting Paradigms of Historical Reception (427-1900) (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), through which I strengthened my understanding of how reception studies is used in Chinese literary and cultural studies. Professor Cynthia Chennault, one of the editors of the monograph Early Medieval Chinese Texts, offered me an opportunity to write a chapter on Zuo Si’s literary collection. My friends in China, Canada, and the U.S. helped me in my Ph.D. studies, and I am particularly grateful to Dr. David Chai, Lulu Chai, Dr. Dehong Meng, Dr. Ji Hao, Dr. Christina Han, and Dr. Darryl Sterk.

As I was writing this dissertation, I began a new academic and professional career and could not spend more time doing further research. However, I am responsible for all the mistakes that are present in this dissertation.
I would like to thank my parents for their consistent support and understanding! This dissertation is dedicated to them.
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Chinese characters are in traditional form and are transliterated in pinyin, except in citations from sources using Wade-Giles, to keep consistent with current usage in North America.

Introduction

China is a country that highly reveres its past and tradition. From oracle bones to rituals in the ancestral temples, from quoting classical poetry in diplomatic situations to citing past stories to admonish emperors, these rituals and ceremonies reflected in literature celebrate historical events and people, and demonstrate the Chinese people’s respect for the tradition.

Cultural memory and nostalgia play an important role in shaping the Chinese literary tradition, and the yongshi shi 詠史詩 (“poems on history”) subgenre of Chinese poetry represents these features explicitly. The poems in the section titled “Yongshi shi” in the Wen xuan 文選 were composed between the Jian’an Period (196–220) and the Liu Song Dynasty (420–479). The Wen xuan (Selections of Refined Literature), compiled and edited under the auspices of Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501-531) the Liang Prince Zhaoming 昭明, is not only the first extant collection of Chinese literature which was arranged in categories, but was also an important text for later scholars preparing for the civil service examination. In the Song, a popular saying reveals its importance among the literati: “The Wen xuan thoroughly done, /Half a licentiate won.”

As the earliest extant grouping of such poems, the “Yongshi shi” selection in the Wen xuan provides insights into the development of the subgenre in the pre-Tang period (before 618), and establishes it as a subgenre of literature with an explicit label. As for the form, the longer poems can be as long as forty-five couplets (Yan Yanzhi’s 顏延之“Qiu Hu Shi” 秋胡詩), while the shorter have only eight couplets (Wang Can’s 王粲...

“Yongshi” 詠史詩). Some of them are individual poems (Cao Zhi 曹植 “Sanliang shi” 三良詩), while others appear in groups (Zuo Si’s 左思 “Yongshi”). As for the subject, some are concerned with the upper class, including emperors, kings, nobles and officials (Zhang Xie’s 張協 “Yongshi”), while others are on commoners, including recluses and swordsmen (Bao Zhao’s 鮑照 “Yongshi”). Because of their wide range in form and subject matter, the corpus of yongshi shi in the Wen xuan were rich and influential exemplars for later writing in this subgenre.

The general development of poems on history has already been researched by scholars, who have reached a broad consensus that the Six Dynasties is one of the most important periods in the development of this subgenre. The Han dynasty, which comes before this period, is considered to be the formative period for poems on history; the Tang dynasty, which comes after, is regarded as the flourishing period. This standard literary-historical narrative is acceptable as a general narrative and also encompasses many different subgenres of Chinese poetry, such as landscape poetry and frontier poetry. However, such a broad narrative often fails to answer more specific questions such as: What are the turning points in the development of poems on history that allowed them to develop so rapidly in the Six Dynasties period? Why did these poems develop so rapidly during this time in particular? What cultural, social, and political factors contributed to their development? These questions led me to investigate the development of poems on history in more detail, with a focus on specific poems on history from the Six Dynasties and consideration of larger cultural factors, including political, historical, and social contexts. What kinds of historical events are remembered by poets? What approaches do they adopt to deal with historical lore? Besides praising historical people and articulating
their emotions, what other purposes do poets aim to achieve? As writers capture the essence of historical moments and employ them in a short-form literary genre such as poems on history, they must omit many narrative details. Why do they keep certain details and ignore others? Which historical moments inspire the poets to compose these poems? The answers to these specific questions are useful in broader research and understanding of the development and transformation of Chinese culture, and how writers use literature to both convey and shape their understanding of history.

My research builds upon previous scholarship and provides further analysis of poems on history, especially from a cultural perspective. In this dissertation, I focus on the yongshi poems as a prime example of the operation of historical memory in the reception and transmission of literature. I explore the literary and cultural factors that influenced the selection and canonization of poems on history in the Wen xuan on three levels: inter-textual links between these poems and other works that illuminate the poetic practices of the time; literary criticism that evaluates these poems; and narratives in anecdotal collections or standard histories that reveal how the educated elite employed these poems in their discourse. This research disproves the sweeping generalization of Six Dynasties poetry as simply exuberant images and ornamental styles, an exaggerated characterization made retroactively by later historians and literary figures who focussed on a narrow subgenre of poetry known as “palace style poems” (gongti shi 宮體詩). Through my research I hope to show that yongshi shi represents an alternative style, one that transforms historical figures into icons, one that is a powerful vehicle through which to understand and convey history, and one that allows poets to stake their own claims to
fame within the literary tradition by strategically associating themselves with historical figures. The outline of my dissertation is as follows:

Chapter 1: Review of Scholarship and Brief History of Poems on History before the Six Dynasties

This chapter conducts a survey of existing scholarship (written in Chinese and in English) on poems on history as a subgenre and on the Wen xuan. It identifies the lacuna in current research and explains how my dissertation makes its contribution. In order to lay a solid foundation for later chapters, this section explains three important issues used in my dissertation. The first issue is the definition of poems on history, which are often confused with poems of “meditation on the past” (huai gu 懷古) and poems on “singing of cares” (yong huai 詠懷). This section discusses this question based on actual examples in the Wen xuan and divides poems on history into four major categories, helping readers to better understand what kinds of poems were considered yong shi in the time of the compilation of the Wen xuan. Furthermore, it contributes to studies on poetic genres and the concept of history in early medieval China. The second issue is the development of poems on history before the Six Dynasties. This section delineates a brief literary history of this subgenre, exploring the most important and representative writers and collections. The third issue concerns the reasons for the flourishing of poems on history in the Six Dynasties. Scholars have noticed that the Six Dynasties witnessed a rapid development of poems on history in terms of both topics on and various approaches to historical lore. This section investigates the reasons behind this phenomenon: What
were the factors that contributed to the development of poems on history? Placing this issue in the cultural and historical context of this period, this section examines historiography, literary predilection, usage of allusions, social dislocation, and pure talk and dark learning, all of which enabled writers to make full use of lore and to compose poems on history to articulate their emotions. These factors help explain the formation and flourishing of poems on history in this period. Through this section, we can better comprehend the development of this poetic subgenre in its larger cultural context and see how different cultural factors shaped writers’ understanding of the past.

Chapter 2: Selection and Canonization of Poems on History in the *Wen xuan*

After setting up the background of poems on history and contextualizing them in early and early medieval periods, this chapter explores literary and cultural factors that influenced the reception of the poems that were eventually chosen by editors to be included in the “Yongshi” section of the *Wen Xuan*. This approach is particularly useful to see how the canonization of literary texts operates. The selection the editors made is both a powerful indicator and a significant shaper of poetic reception. As Wendy Swartz mentions in her book *Reading Tao Yuanming*, “Chinese literary reception has not been sufficiently conceptualized as a problem for study.”\(^2\) So far scholars have not adequately elucidated any of these poems on history from the perspective of their reception. I would like to fill in this lacuna by tracing the reception of these poems in the Six Dynasties *before* they appear in the *Wen xuan*. The main issues that this chapter deals with are:

What kinds of literary criticism and what sort of an intellectual zeitgeist influenced Xiao Tong and the other editors of the *Wen xuan*? Why did they select these poems rather than others? This chapter will take a close look at Xiao Tong’s literary criticism for clues as to his principles of selection.

To illustrate this argument, I will examine three major levels relevant to the historical reception of poems on history. The first level attaches importance to the inter-textual links between the poems selected in the *Wen xuan* and the works of other Six Dynasties poets, such as works by Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (ca.365-427) and Jiang Yan 江淹 (444-505), in order to uncover the similarities and discrepancies in their use of literary borrowings, assimilation, and manipulation (i.e. diction, imagery, and figures of speech). The second level highlights the hermeneutical evaluation, interpretation and comments regarding poems on history from literary criticism, such as the *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 and the *Shipin* 詩品. The third level focuses on the reception in terms of its effect on later readers. Materials relevant to readers’ response to poems on history can be found in anecdotal collections, standard histories, or other narratives. Researching the reception of poems on history also sheds light on essential interdisciplinary questions, such as why poets used history as a medium for poetic composition, what role history plays in poems, and what the distinctions are between history in poems and history in historiography. Investigating these questions allows us to understand how later readers responded to, criticized, and imitated these poems on history.

Xiao Tong’s selection in the *Wen xuan* is based on the intellectual trends of his age; he selected the most popular *yongshi shi*, those which were highly praised and
revered by his contemporaries. Xiao’s horizon of expectation was shaped by the available comments on *yongshi shi*, and his selections reflect prevalent opinions on literary achievement as much as his own preferences. For instance, although Ban Gu 班固 (32-92) was the first poet to compose an extant *yongshi shi*, it was not selected in the *Wen xuan* because of Zhong Rong’s 鍾嶸 negative review of this poem. Tao Yuanming was Xiao’s favorite poet and Xiao even compiled Tao’s individual collection; but none of his contemporaries spoke highly of Tao’s *yongshi shi*, and most scholars in the Six Dynasties considered Tao a recluse rather than a major poet. Therefore, despite his personal penchant for Tao’s *yongshi shi*, Xiao did not select any of them for inclusion in the “Yongshi” section of the *Wen xuan*. These are just two examples of the multiple factors that play into poetic reception and selection, which are explored in this chapter.

Chapter 3: Historical Lore and Poems: Approaches to Lore in Verse

For the selected poems on history mentioned above, how did the poets approach historical lore and situate its figures in poetry? Scholars have investigated this question by dividing *yongshi shi* into several types according to either literary technique (Robert Joe Cutter and Yuan Mei 袁枚), or the modes of expression (Cao Daoheng 曹道衡 and Wei Chunxi 韋春喜). This chapter, based on their endeavors, discusses how poets used three approaches to fashion their poetry from historical lore and represent the tradition in greater detail. The first is to simply paraphrase historical sources in poetic form. The second is not a retelling of historical narrative so much as an expressive use of stories to comment on historical figures in relation to the poets themselves. The third approach
strays farthest from historical sources by manipulating the images of received historical figures, often for the purposes of hyperbole and irony. Examining these approaches allows us to better understand how history is disseminated through poetry and reveals the intricacy of yongshi shi. Furthermore, it facilitates our comprehension of the function of history in Chinese poetry. This chapter illustrates the poets’ diverse approaches in writing these important poems on history.

Chinese history recorded in writing was passed down as part of a larger body of historical lore that is no longer extant, which was transmitted orally and in writing through various channels. Scholars in the Six Dynasties likely had access to a larger swath of historical lore than is available to us today. The term ‘history’ (shi, 史) in yongshi shi can refer to both this more expansive body of lore as well as the official history contained within it. It is impossible for us to reconstruct the lore that was available to the poets in the Six Dynasties, but one can search as broadly as possible in the written records for materials on certain figures or events using electronic resources such as the database maintained by the Institute of History and Philology of the Academia Sinica in Taipei. Although it is sometimes uncertain which particular historical accounts poets may have been aware of, this chapter, when possible, consults a variety of historical sources, both official and unofficial, as reference. Inter-textual analysis between the poems and historical accounts discovers many identical or similar words and suggests that poets may have read the historical sources, or that these sources and poets were all drawing on a common body of lore. The poets use these stories of the past to transform their emotions into words.
Chapter 4: Poetic-self vs. Historical-self: Zuo Si (ca. 250-ca. 305) as a Case Study

The concept of literary writings, especially poetry, truly reflecting one’s intention had been entrenched in the Chinese literary tradition since the claim recorded in the Book of Documents 尚書 that “poetry articulates what is intent upon the mind” (shi yan zhi 詩言志). Poetry, based on spontaneity, was considered an involuntary genuine expression of one’s feelings. This was the foundation for understanding classical Chinese poetry, but the practice of writing poetry provided space for discrepancies to grow and develop, which complicated the original functions and ideas of poetry. Self-presentation in poetry is certainly under the control of the poet, while the historical-self captured by records not written by the poet are usually beyond his control. This discrepancy between poetic-self and historical-self leads to variations and discrepancies in presentations of a given historical figure in written texts. This chapter, through exploring Zuo Si’s poems on history, discusses how a poet adopts historical lore as a vehicle for creating a poetic-self and ensuring his legacy in literary history, a legacy which sometimes includes dramatic discrepancies from his actual historical image. Zuo Si, after struggling for political fame without significant results, realized the importance of conveying his ambitions and ideals to later generations through a portrayal of self-constructed in his poetry, which used historical lore and figures as rhetorical resources. In these kinds of poems on history by Zuo Si and others, the poet’s feelings are not transparent and spontaneous but are mediated by their agenda of securing their literary reputation. Thus poems on history became the means by which poets employed historical figures to tacitly ‘mislead’ and influence their readers in order to shape their own reputation in literary history. Through
commemorating history, the poets not only pay their respect to or glean lessons from historical figures and events, they also articulate their own dreams of being famous to posterity. Many of the other poets in the “Yongshi” section of the *Wen xuan* beside Zuo Si were not politically successful; this chapter discusses how poems on history can be an alternate path to obtain an influential reputation.

Zuo Si makes an interesting case study as he adopts three major ways to guarantee and secure his reputation through poems on history. First, he depicts himself as having lofty visions to assure later readers that his actions stem from virtuous motivations. These visions include indifference towards material well-being and freedom from the desire to seek fame, qualities exemplified by figures such as Xu You 許由 and Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca. 340-278 B.C.E). Zuo Si’s poems on abandoning fame help these historical figures to be remembered in the long view of history, even if they were not celebrated in their own times. But in commemorating the virtues of these figures, Zuo Si is also indicating to readers that he had similar characteristics and should be compared favorably to them (and remembered alongside them). Being remembered by future generations is just compensation for the poet’s failure to achieve immediate fame in his own lifetime.

Another method that a poet such as Zuo Si adopts to secure his reputation is to emphasize his abilities as being comparable to those of historical figures, and to demonstrate that his case of not being able to use them adequately is not unique in history. He, as with his predecessors, was capable of handling important missions but was not given an opportunity to extend his talents due to the chaos of society, or to intense factional struggles. For instance, in Zuo Si’s 左思 second and fourth poems on history, Feng Tang 馮唐 (fl. 157 B.C.E) and Yang Xiong 揚雄 (ca. 53 BCE-18 CE) are cited as
figures who were not recognized by their contemporaries, but became famous posthumously. When Zuo Si invokes their names and describes their situations, it becomes a strategy of veiled criticism towards his own society. Because these historical figures were praised and remembered after their lifetimes (partly in Zuo’s own poetry), Zuo is tacitly indicating his belief that his case should be the same, and that is talents would be appreciated among his ultimate literary readership if not among his immediate political contemporaries.

The final rhetorical gesture that Zuo Si uses in his poems on history is irony: common tropes include the idea that those who nakedly aspire for money and power live short lives and die attempting to obtain them, while those who seek to transcend fame and greed reap the highest profit of being permanently remembered by later generations for their virtue. Being remembered by future generations appeals to the poet more than immediate fame, because he observes that one can become well-known quickly, but not without consequences. Only through good virtues and moral values can one be remembered forever without threat to one’s life in the short-term.

Chapter 5: Poems on History and Character Appraisal: Yan Yanzhi 颜延之 (384-456) as a Case Study

Twenty-seven of Yan Yanzhi’s literary writings were selected in the Wen xuan, putting him fifth among poets in terms of the total number of writings selected in the Wen xuan, next only to Lu Ji 陆机 (261-303), Xie Lingyun 谢灵运 (385-433), Cao Zhi 曹植 (192-232), and Jiang Yan 江淹 (444-505). Six of his poems appear in the section of
poems on history, second only to Zuo Si’s eight poems. These statistics demonstrate that the editors of the Wen xuan held a profound admiration for his writings, which would have reflected their contemporary literary tastes.

Five of Yan’s poems are on the “Five Lords”, who were five members belonging to the group known as the “Seven Sages of the Bamboo Groove”. They are different from other poems in this section, because they depict the five intellectuals in a more straightforward biographical style rather than with an allusive manner. These poems seem to be influenced by pure talk in general and the tradition of character appraisal in particular, in a way that recalls other art forms of this period, such as painting and calligraphy.

Most scholars researching these five poems have credited them with forming a style of poems on history with a biographical emphasis, and yet the aspects of character Yan Yanzhi chooses to emphasize must also give an indication of his own feelings. My research analyzes how Yan Yanzhi describes the spirited and unorthodox behavior of these five lords, because spirit was the most important aspect of character appraisal in the Six Dynasties. As Qian Nanxiu observes, “Character appraisal…is mainly a verbal practice, in which evaluators use words to express evaluatees’ personalities. Among the numerous terms devoted to this practice, [the] most significant and widely applied notion is shen, or ‘spirit.’”  

The five lords were all influenced by Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s thought, and were good at conducting pure talk and commenting on other people. Meanwhile, Yan Yanzhi uses the same method of character appraisal in his poetry, showing the close ties between the notion of character appraisal as it appears in poems on

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history and how it is expressed in the practice of pure talk.
Chapter 1: Review of Scholarship and Brief History of Poems on History before the Six Dynasties

Poems on history as a subgenre of Chinese poetry have been the subject of research for a long time. According to Zhao Wangqin 趙望秦 and Zhang Huanling’s 張煥玲 book about the studies on this subgenre, there were 229 articles written in mainland China in the 20th century about poems on history. Only 27 articles, 11.8% of the total number, are on the Six Dynasties. This is a far cry from the 151 articles on the Tang Dynasty which comprise 66.8% of the total articles. Meanwhile, from 2000 to 2010 (when that book was published), there were 160 articles written about the topic of poems on history. The percentage researching the Han and the Six Dynasties is gradually increasing and occupies 19.7%. Based on the above statistics, one can see that researching poems on history in the Six Dynasties remains overshadowed by more mainstream studies concerning poems on history specifically and Tang era poetry in general. However, the historical development of poems on history is continuous. Only if we first investigate the origin and gradual development of this subgenre can we better understand this subgenre in terms of the overall development of Chinese literature. My dissertation focuses on the poems on history selected from the Wen xuan but also includes an analysis of other poems on history relevant to the themes of my investigation.

4 Zhao Wangqin 趙望秦, Zhang Huanling 張煥玲, Gudai yongshi shi tonglun 古代詠史詩通論 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2010).
5 Zhao Wangqin, Zhang Huanling, Gudai yongshi shi tonglun, 9.
My literature review below includes scholarship written in Chinese and English on the topic of poems on history in the *Wen xuan*, and summarizes its major achievements and potential questions for further discussion. The term “Chinese scholarship” refers to publications written in Chinese from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, while “English scholarship” generally refers to articles and books written in English and published in North America. I will first briefly cover the range of scholarship in English and Chinese, then examine some key works in more depth.

### 1. Scholarship

#### 1.1 English scholarship

Scholars writing in English tend to discuss poems on history as a part of their larger works on the topic of Chinese literature. Hans Frankel wrote a chapter on poetry contemplating the past in his well-known book, *Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady: Interpretations of Chinese Poetry*. Later, Stephen Owen in his book *The Making of Classical Chinese Poetry* examines the uncertainty involved in attributing one poem on history to Ban Gu. He places this poem in the larger context of fluid manuscript culture and points out that later generations considered this poem to have been written by an anonymous scholar, doubting whether the original author was in fact Ban Gu, but that readers felt satisfied to accept his authorship simply because he was a great historian who
would plausibly be associated with such a poem. In another of his works, _The Late Tang: Chinese Poetry of the Mid-ninth Century (827-860)_ , Owen discusses Li Shangyin’s poems on history, which focus on the last Emperor of the Chen and Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang. Meanwhile, Tina Marie Harding’s dissertation, “Echoes of the Past: Yan Yanzhi’s (384-456) Lyric Shi,” includes a translation of Yan Yanzhi’s poems on history – the first English translation of Yan Yanzhi’s poems with detailed annotations. Although this dissertation was written in the United States, Harding adopts a traditional Chinese commentary method. For example, when addressing the Poem on Qiu Hu and the Poems on the Five Lords, she first comments on the poems as a whole – often quoting the commentary of later literati, especially Li Shan – and then translates the poems with annotations explaining their literary techniques and the meanings of certain words and phrases. Finally, Nicholas Morrow Williams’ dissertation, “The Brocade of Words: Imitation Poetry and Poetics in the Six Dynasties,” also deals with poems on history. He discusses how imitation poetry leads to a flourishing of poems on history because poets naturally express their respect for the past and their ancestors in their poetry, and consciously imitate the diction, rhetoric, and style of the past masters.

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1.2 Chinese scholarship

Books on poems on history from the Tang Dynasty—especially those concerning the Middle and Late Tang—make up a large number of the available monograph publications specifically addressing poems on history as a subgenre. Zhao Wangqin is a major scholar who has contributed three books about poems on history from the Tang. His Song ben Zhou Tan “Yongshi shi” 宋本周曇《詠史詩》and Hu Zeng “Yongshi shi” 胡曾《詠史詩》focus on the philological aspects of several series of poems on history, such as their editions, commentaries, themes, historical and philological values, and influences, and emphasize the late Tang. In another of his works, Tangdai yongshi shi zushi kaolun 唐代詠史詩組詩考論, Zhao explores nine poets’ series of poems, including the poets’ life backgrounds and experiences, the various editions of their collections, and the relationship between these series of poems and both historical novels and early Chinese education. Other works include Chen Jiahua’s 陳建華 Tangdai yongshi huaigu shi lungao 唐代詠史懷古詩論稿, Zhang Runjing’s 張潤靜 Tangdai yongshi huaigu shi yanjiu 唐代詠史懷古詩研究, Li Xiaoming’s 李曉明 Tangdai lishi guannian yanjiu 唐代歷史關係研究.

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10 Zhao Wangqin 趙望秦, Tangdai yongshi shi zushi kaolun 唐代詠史詩組詩考論 (Xi’an: Sanqin chubanshe, 2003).
11 Chen Jiahua 陳建華, Tangdai Tangdai yongshi huaigu shi lungao 唐代詠史懷古詩論稿 (Wuhan: Huazhong keji daxue chubanshe, 2008).
12 Zhang Runjing 張潤靜, Tangdai yongshi huaigu shi yanjiu 唐代詠史懷古詩研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian shudian, 2009).
There are two well-known books published on the topic of poems on history in the Song dynasty. Although Zhang Xiaoli’s 張小麗 Songdai yongshi shi yanjiu 宋代詠史詩研究 is titled “A Study of Poems on History in the Song Dynasty”, the author also delineates the development of poems on history before the Song. As for the Song Dynasty, the author provides a literary survey of poems on history, discusses their artistic value, and finally places these poems in the context of Song Dynasty political and intellectual culture. The other book on the Song is Ji Minghua’s 季明華 Nan Song yongshi shi yanjiu 南宋詠史詩研究.

A few monographs dedicate substantial space to poems on history in the Six Dynasties. Li Han’s 李翰 book Han Wei Sheng Tang Yongshi shi yanjiu 漢魏盛唐詠史詩研究 researches poems on history from the Han-Wei period to the High Tang. He divides the poems on history into two major categories: those following Ban Gu and those following Zuo Si. According to Li, these poems fulfill a practical function: praising
historical people and events to satirize contemporary society. The poets use them to express their emotions and complaints, which are often about their careers and their roles in society. Li believes that the subgenre of poems on history was developed through the efforts of several main literati, namely Ban Gu 班固 (32-92), Zuo Si 左思 (ca. 250-ca. 305), Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (ca. 365-427), Chen Ziang 陳子昂 (ca.661-702), and Li Bai 李白 (701-762).

2. Wei Chunxi’s *History of Poems on History in the Pre-Song Period*

Wei Chunxi’s 韋春喜 book, *Song qian yongshi shi shi* 宋前詠史詩詩史 (History of Poems on History in the Pre-Song Period), based on his Ph.D. dissertation at Shandong University, is the first to systematically discuss the literary history of this subgenre within a broad temporal scope from the pre-Qin to the Song dynasty. I will summarize and discuss its contents here as it has been an important work in informing my own approach to this topic.

Wei defines the term *yongshi shi* in his Introduction, “It is an important category/theme in ancient Chinese poetry. *Yongshi shi* are based on historical figures, events and relics--chanting and reflecting on them in order to articulate the poets’

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18 Li Han 李翰, *Han Wei Sheng Tang Yongshi shi yanjiu—Yanzhi shixue chuantong ji shiren sixiang de kaocha* 漢魏盛唐詠史詩研究--言志之詩學傳統及士人思想的考察 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2006).

emotions, express arguments and historical inspiration, or using history for entertainment, admonition, remonstration, or education” (p. 1). In his first chapter, he further explains this definition by comparing yongshi with the “meditation on the past” (huai gu 懷古) and “expression of my heart” (yong huai 詠懷) subgenres, as well as historicized myth and folklore, historical allusions, epics, and poetic history. This chapter also investigates the scope and origin of yongshi shi in the tradition of Chinese poetry (p. 13-34).

The main body of the book is arranged by chronological sequence and dynastic periods. After his introductory first chapter, Wei organizes the second to eighth chapters according to how he views the chronological evolution of the subgenre: the germination period from the Shijing 詩經 to the Warring states (Chapter 2); the formation stage in the Han Dynasty (Chapter 3); the development phase in the Wei-Jin era (Chapter 4); further progress in the Northern and Southern Dynasties, and Sui Dynasty (Chapter 5) and the flourishing period: the Early Tang (Chapter 6), High Tang (Chapter 7), and Mid-Late Tang (Chapter 8).

Wei feels that most of the available articles and books on yongshi shi center on several important literary figures who made tremendous contributions to the development of writing yongshi shi, such as Zuo Si 左思 (ca. 253–ca. 307), Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (ca. 365–427), Du Mu 杜牧 (803–ca. 852), and Li Shangyin 李商隱 (ca. 813–ca. 858). The extant scholarship also attaches more importance to a few historical periods, such as the Middle and Late Tang. This book fills the lacuna of current research by delineating the literary development of yongshi shi from the Shijing to Late Tang, and touching upon minor as well as major figures. Wei carefully delves into the overall arc of the subgenre’s development, and contextualizes crucial poets in their own milieu to comprehend their
contributions. This process provides background for the major poets and produces a concrete analysis grounded in literary history.

The primary sources of yongshi shi are addressed in great detail. Wei meticulously documents individual poets, the number of poems and specific titles for each period. He consults modern standard editions for essential poets under their own sections. For example, Liu Yuxi’s 劉禹錫 (772–842) yongshi shi are cited from Qu Tuiyuan’s 瞿蛻園 annotated edition Liu Yuxi ji jianzheng 劉禹錫集箋證 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1989), and Jiang Weisong and Zhao Weizhi’s 趙蔚之 et al. Liu Yuxi shiji biannian jianzhu 劉禹錫詩集編年箋注 (Jinan: Shandong daxue chubanshe, 1997). This lays a solid foundation for his later discussion and is also a valuable source for other scholars doing studies on yongshi shi. Wei aims to provide a comprehensive list, including all the authors and their yongshi shi in different poetic categories.

Wei’s argument and analysis occasionally challenges current scholarship and brings intriguing and interesting findings to the field. In Chapter Three, Wei employs a new perspective on yongshi shi in the Han Dynasty. Previously, scholars have mainly analyzed Ban Gu’s 班固 Yongshi shi as the first in literary history and the only example in the Han. Wei not only discusses Ban Gu but also departs from the standard narrative by collecting twenty-one music bureau (yuefu 樂府) yongshi shi from Guo Maoqian’s 郭茂倩 Yuefu shiji 樂府詩集. The current scholarly consensus is undecided as to when these poems were composed, but Wei, following Lu Qinli 逯欽立 (1910–1973), attributes them to the Han Dynasty. These poems establish the functions of yongshi shi:
drawing lessons from the tradition, admonishing and criticizing the poets’ contemporary world, expressing their emotions through adopting the persona of historical figures, and making discursive arguments (p. 46-51). Wei continues his discussion of historical yuefu in other chapters, expanding the scope of his analysis beyond the traditional corpus of yongshi shi.

Wei’s research on some overlooked questions and topics is especially welcome. His innovative arguments and analysis open a new field for scholars to do further investigation. For example, in Chapter Six he turns to yongshi shi in the Early Tang (618-712), which he divides into two periods. The former one, anchored by Taizong 太宗 (626-649) and his officials, is described by Wei as validating strong Confucian historical consciousness and utilitarian political moral value. Wei feels that the poets of this era paid too much attention to the relationship between history and their reality, such as praising and admonishing rulers or singing of a prosperous society, and thus they failed to express their own private emotions (pp. 149-156). The later period of the Early Tang was dominated by upper palace officials and scholars, who composed panegyric yongshi shi which, Wei believes, are not of high quality. In contrast, lower level scholars tried to restore the Wei-Jin tradition of expressing ambition and intention, with Chen Ziang 陳子昂 (ca. 661–702) being a famous example (p. 157-191).

For some difficult and complicated questions, Wei has his own ideas based on his thorough research on previous scholarship. For instance, in Chapter Four he deals with the time when the Western Jin scholar Zuo Si, one of the most influential poets, composed eight yongshi shi. It is highly debatable when this group of poems was composed, as there is very scant information. Wei first succinctly summarizes four
existing theories about the composition of these poems, which assign them to different stages of Zuo Si’s life. After acknowledging the value of each premise, Wei adeptly presents his own postulation based on both intrinsic evidence found in Zuo Si’s literary works—including his poems and rhapsodies, as well as extrinsic evidence found in various editions of Jinshu 晉書, Shishuo xinyu 世說新語, and the bibliographical treatise in Suishu 隋書. Using these materials, Wei examines Zuo Si’s life experiences and thought, along with the content, style and topics of his yongshi shi, to determine that these poems were written between 300 and 303. Though this is not a guaranteed answer, his logical analysis makes his arguments and ideas explicit.

In a book as comprehensive and detailed as this, it is always difficult to avoid certain problems. Readers from different perspectives may expect more critical analysis. They may wonder whether the term yongshi is a static notion or a changing conception in pre-modern China. Reception theory indicates that the connotation of such a term shifts depending on interpretations, hermeneutical practices, and varying tastes in different zeitgeists. While Wei’s synchronic definition of yongshi shi as a subgenre is thorough, analysis of its diachronic development would help readers understand this term over time in its historical reception. Furthermore, skeptical readers may raise questions about a few of his analyses. Some yongshi shi possess the same title as the subgenre itself. For example, the poets Ban Gu 班固 (32–92), Wang Can 王粲 (177–217), Zhang Xie 張協, Zuo Si, Yuan Hong 袁宏 (ca. 328–ca. 376), and Bao Zhao 鮑照 (414–466) all have poems on various specific topics titled “Yongshi shi”. One may ask whether it was the original title of these poems or a generic label applied later. Wei considers the title of “Yongshi shi” as a given historical fact, and takes it as the foundation for his argument.
However, recent studies on Chinese manuscript culture, such as Tian Xiaofei’s *Tao Yuanming & Manuscript Culture: the Record of a Dusty Table* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), demonstrate that this may not be the case. It is possible that the editors of anthologies and compendia or later literary critics gave the title “Yongshi shi” to such poems, because they were classified under the label of that subgenre. The fluidity of manuscript culture cautions us to remain aware of the unstable nature and multiple possibilities of literary history.

The major contribution of Wei’s book is in providing a comprehensive literary history of *yongshi shi* before the Song with a notable and comprehensive compilation of primary sources. The book is clearly written and the content is easy to follow. It makes a good companion to excellent publications in English on *yongshi shi*, such as Stephen Owen’s “Li Shangyin: The History Poems” in his book *The Late Tang: Chinese Poetry of the Mid-ninth Century* (827-860) (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), and Robert Joe Cutter’s article “On Reading Cao Zhi’s ‘Three Good Men’: Yong shi shi or Deng lin shi?” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*, Vol. 11, (Dec., 1989), pp. 1-11. In the epilogue of his own book, Wei outlines a plan to continue writing another history on *yongshi shi* from the Song to Qing Dynasties, and has already organized some materials for it. This would be another worthy contribution to the field.

3. *Wen xuan* studies

Despite the prominence of the *Wen xuan*, few scholars have touched upon the subgenre of “poems on history”. After the *Wen xuan* was compiled, many pre-modern scholars of
subsequent dynasties annotated this anthology. Most of them focused on the pronunciation of characters, the meaning of particular words or sentences, and the allusions and quotations used in the literary pieces. Modern scholars have continued these hermeneutical studies and exegesis on the Wen xuan. The various works have diverse primary focuses: its annotation and translation, such as David Knechtges’ excellent English translation of the rhapsodies; its compilation, such as Japanese scholar Shigeru Okamura’s 岡村繁 Monzen no kenkyū 文選の研究; its textual history, such as Fu Gang’s 傅剛 Wen xuan banben yanjiu 文選版本研究; and the synopsis of the Wen xuan research, such as Wang Liqun’s 王立群 Xiandai Wen xuan xue shi 現代文選學史. As for a comprehensive review of the study of the Wen xuan, David Knechtges delineates the development of this area of study in his introduction to the Wen xuan, which appears in the first volume of his 1982 translation of that anthology. Meanwhile, he updated recent studies on this important anthology in a bibliographical article published in 2004 in the journal Early Medieval China. In 2012, I published a long bibliographic article on studies of Six Dynasties literature, which includes a section of

20岡村繁, 文選の研究, 嶋波書店, 1999. This book includes a series of papers on the Wen xuan, containing its compilation, edition, influence and reception in the Six Dynasties, its annotation in the Tang, and the relationship between the Wen xuan and the Yu tai xin yong 玉臺新詠. Some of his ideas are different from the accepted opinions. For example, he believes that the Wen xuan selection was mainly decided by Liu Xiaochuo rather than Xiao Tong. Moreover, he believes that the Wen xuan did not select excellent poems and prose since the antiquity; rather it was based on some available anthologies.

21 Fu Gang 傅剛, Wen xuan banben yanjiu 文選版本研究 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000).


monographs on *Wen xuan* studies written by mainland Chinese scholars from 2002 to 2010.\textsuperscript{25}

Both Chinese and foreign scholars in the past and present have made useful observations regarding the *Wen xuan*, and also made passing remarks about *yongshi shi*. However, a contemporary scholar, Hu Dalei 胡大雷, stands out for his systematic research on *Wen xuan* poetry. His book *Wen xuan shi yanjiu* 文選詩研究 surveys different subgenres of poetry in this anthology.\textsuperscript{26} Hu Dalei’s main topic is the twenty-three subgenres of Chinese poetry in the *Wen xuan*, including the definition, content, and features of various subgenres. Concerning *yongshi shi*, he discusses the differences between this subgenre and poems that merely employ historical allusions, the types of *yongshi shi*, and the categories of historical figures who appear in the *Wen xuan*’s selection of *yongshi shi*. As for poems on history, Hu talks generally about this subgenre from the Six Dynasties, including its forms, the social expectations for it, and the historical figures who appear in these poems. He mentions many aspects, but writes only a few pages for each aspect, so it is hard to discern his positions in detail. In the last chapter of his work, Hu discusses a series of issues regarding the category and genre classifications of the poems in the *Wen xuan*. Furthermore, he illustrates the relationships among the *Wen xuan*, *Shipin*, and *Wenxin diaolong*, which also contain poems or criticism about poems on history which appear in the *Wen xuan*.


\textsuperscript{26} Hu Dalei 胡大雷, *Wen xuan shi yanjiu* 文選詩研究 (Gulin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2000).
4. Definition and Scope of Poems on History in the *Wen xuan*

It is notoriously difficult to make an explicit and clear distinction between “singing of history” (*yongshi* 詠史) and “yearning for antiquity” (*huaigu* 懷古). Many standards were established, among which two criteria were widely accepted by academics both in China and in the West. From the standpoint of content, *yongshi* poems result from the reflective contemplation of historical figures and events as accessed through historical lore (oral or written), while *huaigu* poems deal with the stream of thoughts and feelings evoked by viewing actual historical relics, ruins, and sites.  

*Yongshi* and *huaigu* poems also differ in their rhetorical characteristics. The writers of “singing of history” usually choose rational and analytical attitudes towards historical events and people, so these poems often display arguments that are more discursive in their expression. Meanwhile, “yearning for antiquity” writers usually display emotional and nostalgic attitudes towards historical issues; thus their writings are driven more by emotion than argument, and often focus on expressing personal thoughts and feelings.

Other synonyms for *yongshi shi* and *huaigu shi* were used throughout Chinese history. *Langu* 覽古, “perusing the past”, sometimes refers to poems composed based on reading historical books or visiting historical relics. It is hard to know whether a poem titled with *langu* belongs to *yongshi* or *huaigu*. To facilitate my discussion, I will incorporate poems from the genres above as either *yongshi* or *huaigu* when discussing their development. Zhang Runjing 張潤靜 summarizes various opinions on the

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differences between these two closely related subgenres and argues, “Theoretically speaking, we can point out many differences between the two subgenres of poetry: poems on history (yongshi) often reflect on the reading of historical accounts, while poems yearning for antiquity (huaigu) often express feelings when visiting the historical heritage sites; the former usually adopt narration and discursive arguments, while the latter frequently describe natural scenes and expresses the poet’s feelings; poems on history often write on specific historical events or figures, emphasizing certain ideologies or moral evaluations, while poems yearning for antiquity focus on expressing emotional attitudes and philosophical thoughts, etc. Although we can name many differences, in real practice, it is often difficult for us to draw a clear boundary between poems on history and poems meditating on the past. This is a fair assessment of the similarities and differences of the two poetic subgenres.”

Based on this scholar’s assessment, yongshi shi is more intellectually engaging; the poets’ emotions were stirred by reading history or thinking of historical events or people. Huaigu shi, in contrast, often deals with visiting historical places of interest. This standard can distinguish between most poems on historical topics, especially those with explicit subgenre names as their titles.

Most current scholarly works on ‘poems on history’ (yongshi shi) summarize the definition of the genre based on readings of the poems across centuries, using a set of

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**29** Zhang Runjing 張潤靜, *Tangdai yongshi huaigu shi yanjiu*, 3.

**30** Using this method can differentiate most poems, but for some poems it does not work well. After scrutinizing the title and content of the poems, we do not know, or at least the historical background does not provide enough information for judging whether the poet went to a place and wrote the poem or he thought of this place and composed the poem. Also, sometimes, the title shows that it belongs to one genre, however, when examining the content, one will find it belongs to another, because different poets had different concepts and definitions of the two genres due to their different standards, and depended on their own disposition, education, and also the intellectual zeitgeist.
general characteristics to apply to this subgenre retrospectively for each dynastic period. This approach suggests that the term ‘poems on history’ was static in pre-modern China. However, the concept and scope of this subgenre have changed over time. In the Wen xuan, the section of “Poems on History” includes poems yearning for antiquity (huaigu shi). Of the twenty-one poems included in the Wen xuan, three are based on the poet’s visiting sites of historical heritage and composing the poems accordingly. Two poems, attributed to Cao Zhi and Wang Can, reflect their experience of visiting the tomb of the “three good men,” while another poem, attributed to Xie Zhan, describes his imagination of cleaning Zhang Liang’s temple and making sacrifices to him.

The majority of the pieces titled “Poems on History” in the Wen xuan are based on reading historical records. These include Zhang Xie’s poem on the two Shu gentlemen and Lu Chen’s poem on Lin Xiangru. These are typical examples of historical figures stirring the emotions of poets who recalled their memories and wrote them down. Through commemorating the past, these poets showed that they were not alone in history. Through commenting on historical figures, they expressed their emotions and brought solace to themselves by inserting their own names into the history of Chinese literature.

Another category of poems on historical topics in the Wen xuan is yuefu poetry. Although yuefu poems sometimes adopt titles that refer to historical figures or events, the content may not have any explicit relation to historical figures. Possibly the poems only adopt the old music and fill in new lyrics. These poems, such as Cao Cao’s and Cao Pi’s “Poems on Qiu Hu,” should not be classified as poems on history. However,

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one work by Yan Yanzhi, “Poem on Qiu Hu,” is explicitly based on the historical lore of Qiu Hu and thus belongs to this subgenre.

5. A Brief Survey of Poems on History before the Six Dynasties (220-589)

The precursor of yongshi shi first appeared in the Shijing, the Classic of Poetry. Poems were often used to perform and praise the traditions of clans; poems became part of ceremony and memorial, the function of which was to unite the people in the same clan. These poems in the Shijing include the clan epics, ritual songs, and propaganda. For example, Sheng min 生民, and Gong liu 公劉 narrate Zhou history and praise Zhou ancestors for their contributions in leading their people to overcome difficulties and frustrations in order to found the Zhou Dynasty. Such poems narrate historical events or people through poetic forms and thus influenced writings of later historians and poets. The Grand Historian, Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145 B.C.-ca. 87 B.C.), for example, wrote the standard history of the Zhou Dynasty ancestors according to these narrations.

These Shijing poems represent collective thoughts rather than individual voices or emotions. Certain poems, which eulogized the Zhou people’s ancestors, were part of ceremony or ritual practice. At this stage, these early poems on history mainly played a liturgical narrative function, not one of keeping historical records, passing down a tradition of ritual practice through poetic form and voice.

The contemporary scholar, Wei Chunxi, provides other reasons that exclude the poems in the Shijing from being classified as poems on history, although he does note that some of these poems do contain elements of “poems on history”. He argues, “The
poems in the *Shijing* praise the Zhou people’s ancestors or comment on their contemporary society through allusions and allegories. These poems, to some extent, all express a certain element of poems on history. However, these poems are not part of this poetic subgenre for the following reasons: the majority of these poems consist of folklore that was composed and transmitted through collective efforts; their mythical and religious features are demonstrated in their use during the conducting of sacrifices for the ancestors and rituals for pursuing fortune; and the poems lack strong individually expressed emotions. These features constitute significant differences from those of poems on history in later ages. Therefore, these poems only have some elements of poems on history."

*Li sao* 離騷 and *Tian wen* 天問, both traditionally attributed to Qu Yuan 屈原 (340 B.C.-278 B.C.), can actually be read as poems on history—which grieve of Qu Yuan’s political difficulties—if we posit Qu Yuan as a historical figure behind these texts. In these poems, the Qu Yuan figure utilizes history as a tool to politely admonish the king or to express his own difficulties and frustrations. This influenced the later tradition of writing poems on history more than the *Shijing*. Modern scholars have not treated these poems as poems on history because history does not play an obvious role in these writings. For example, Wei Chunxi argues, “Comparing the elements of singing and praising historical events or people, Qu Yuan’s “Li Sao” 離騷, “Tian wen” 天問 and Xunzi’s 荀子 “Cheng xiang za ci” 成相雜辭 focus on borrowing historical lore to express poets’ emotions and historical and philosophical explorations. ... However, ‘history’ does not play a dominant role in these poems and is not the only content that the

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32Wei Chunxi, *Song qian yongshi shi shi*, 40.
authors focus on. Therefore, these poems cannot be treated as poems on history.\textsuperscript{33} Even though these poems may have contributed to the stance of principled complaint that is often encountered in later poems on history, these comments demonstrate that contemporary scholars take the content as a standard to judge whether a poem belongs to the generic category of poems on history.

Based on extant materials, Ban Gu seems to be the first identifiable historical figure to write a poem on history, which is usually cited under the title “Poem on History” (\textit{Yong shi}, 詠史). However, some scholars have questioned the attribution. For example, Stephen Owen asserts that the title of this early poem on history attributed to Ban Gu is uncertain. He places this question in the context of text fluidity and manuscript culture and cites other different titles for the same poem. Furthermore, later citations of the poem do not always attribute its authorship to Ban Gu. On the whole, the attribution does not invite many disputes perhaps because of Ban Gu’s reputation as a great historian himself; he is often regarded as the “authentic” writer, though authorship of many poems from this era cannot be definitively established.\textsuperscript{34}

The poem is as follows:

\textbf{On History}

The three kings’ virtue grew increasingly thin,  
only then were flesh-cutting punishments used.  
The Director of Granaries was charged with a crime  
and was arrested in Chang’an.

\textsuperscript{33}Wei Chunxi, \textit{Song qian yongshi shi shi}, 43.  
He was bitter that he had no sons of his own,
in his urgent distress he felt helpless and alone.
His youngest daughter was pained by her father’s words,
those who die cannot be brought back to life.
She went to the palace gates to present a letter to the throne,
thinking of antiquity, she sang “Cockcrow.”
Her anxious heart was breaking,
and she raised the stirring sounds of the “Dawnwind Hawk.”
Emperor Wen of the Sagely Han felt pity,
stirred by her intense feeling.
A hundred male children would be in such a muddle,
no match for a single Tiying.35
From examining this poem, one can see that Ban followed the *Shiji* account in narrating the story of Ti Ying’s attempt to rescue her father, without interjecting any personal comments. The poet’s voice does appear at the end of his poem, however, where he approves of Ti’s behavior with a concluding couplet. This was the same writing style he used in the *Han shu*: first narrating the biographies and then commenting on the protagonists’ deeds at the very end. Ban’s *yongshi shi* focus on narrating historical

36 Ibid.
personages and events through poetic form, rather than focusing on himself in relation to those historical figures; they become another vehicle for presenting standard official history.

Ban Gu was familiar with many great figures in history, but chose in this poem to write about a common lady, Ti Ying. Some scholars assert that there must be a reason behind it. Ban was put in prison in his later years because his sons did not follow the law and offended the mayor of Luo Yang city. Therefore, the mayor was angry at Ban for not teaching his sons well and put him in prison. His sons did not have ability to rescue him and one explanation is that Ban Gu was very frustrated and composed this poem. If this assumption is valid, the poem not only narrated history but also expressed Ban’s own feelings and emotions by using the historical narrative as a vehicle to express his own frustrations. This reading, while somewhat contrived, would match the nature of poetry as it is explained in the Greate Preface to the Classic of Poetry, “Poetry expresses what is in one’s mind” (shī yán zhì 詩言志). This reading would also make the poem closer to later examples of yongshi shi in which poets use historical stories to illustrate their own situations. One might say that such a reading of Ban Gu’s poem may have been constructed to satisfy expectations of this subgenre of poetry.

When later poets or critics discussed this poem, they laughed at Ban’s lack of literary talent. He was famous for writing history, but composing poems was not his strength. However, if we consider the literary zeitgeist of the Western Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-9 CE), or the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-220 CE) as a whole, very few poems were written, as we can ascertain, from the scarce extant number of poems in this period. Gong Kechang 龔克昌 argues that we should evaluate this poem in its milieu and find its
significant meaning and value there, “It was not only the first poem on history but also the first surviving complete five-character poem. Not many people write poems. It has never been easy to be the first one. The poem played an important role in the development of the five character poem and poems on history, although Zhong Rong criticized this poem for lacking literary artistic value.”

Zhong Rong was comparing it with later poems and not the contemporary background and environment when Ban Gu wrote this poem.

The first extant huaigu shi appeared in the period of disunion following the Han and is attributed to Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (ca. 365-427). Huaigu shi appeared much later than the first yongshi shi. Possibly only a few poets wrote in this genre, and that is why Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501-531) did not set up a separate category for them in his Wen xuan 文選. The first poems titled with the label huaigu were Tao’s Gui mao sui shi chun huai gu tian she shi er shou 癸卯歲始春懷古田舍詩二首, in which he reminisced and commemorated some reclusive figures in history in order to express his viewpoint on reclusion. This was not a typical later huaigu style, because he did not pay a visit to any historical relics. The content of the poem is closer to yong huai 詠懷.

6. The Reasons for the Flourishing of Poems on History (yongshi shi) in the Six Dynasties

Poems on history further developed during the Six Dynasties (220-589). Many poets traveled to different places due to social chaos and disturbances at the time. They passed

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37 Gong Kechang, David Knechtges trans., Studies on the Han Fu, 54.
places of interests, thinking of historical people and events and composed poems
dedicated to them. In the Six Dynasties, many historical accounts were compiled, which
provided more materials for writers to utilize. Paper was widely circulated and scholars
could easily write down their thoughts on it. It was relatively convenient, compared to
prior ages, for scholars to access to historical writings and various kinds of
commentaries, such as *Shiji yinyi* 史記音義 (twelve juan); *Shiji yin* 史記音 (three
juan); *Han shu yin* 漢書音 (two juan); *Han shu zhu* 漢書注 (one juan); and *Han shu
xu xun* 漢書續訓 (three juan). 38

The concept of “history” in the Six Dynasties was much broader than in previous
dynasties. Examining the bibliographical article in *The History of Sui*, one can find the
bibliographical treatise was already arranged by major categories: classical canon,
historical accounts, master works, and individual collections. The section of historical
accounts includes standard histories, such as *Shi ji* and *Han shu*, but also contains
anecdotes and unofficial accounts, such as *the Story of the Emperor Wu of the Han
Dynasty* 漢武故事 and *A New Account of Worldly Affairs* 世說新語. The section of
historical accounts also includes Gan Bao’s *In Search of the Supernatural* 搜神記 and
*Classics of Mountains and Seas* 山海經, suggesting that what modern readers would
view as ghost stories, myths, and legends were also treated as history at that time. This
concept of history can also be confirmed by the preface to *In Search of the Supernatural*,
where Gan Bao stated that his purpose of compiling these stories was to preserve
historical accounts not included in the standard histories as proof of the historical

38 Zhang Yajun 張亞軍, *Nanchao sishi yu Nanchao wenxue yanjiu* 南朝四史與南朝文學研究
(Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2007), 13.
existence of the supernatural. Literati in this period evidently could access a broad range of historical accounts and anecdotal collections of both an orthodox and unorthodox nature.

Another factor that contributes to the development of poems on history is the frequent adoption of an ornate literary writing style replete with allusions. Using allusions was a way to show off one’s talents and attract the attention of superiors. They also had the advantage of avoiding the dangers brought by stating issues too directly. The Six Dynasties was a chaotic period with rapid changes; many scholars and poets lived through two or three short dynasties in their lifespans. They were often worried about their own safety and did not want to become the target of political jealousy or sacrifice themselves in the struggles among political clans. Historical allusions provided a less direct way to express one’s frustrations while maintaining plausible deniability.

Various encyclopedias were compiled to cater to the needs of using historical allusions. As Xiaofei Tian argues, “one reason for the flourishing of encyclopedias was the increasingly heavy use of references and allusions in writing. ……In the early years of the Liang it was fashionable to employ a large number of recondite allusions in one’s poetry. The compilation of encyclopedias in this period was therefore very much a response to practical needs.” 39 Not all scholars were satisfied with this literary phenomenon; for example, Zhong Rong in his Shipin criticized this literary tendency and emphasized the importance of seeking images directly rather than through allusions.

The further development of poems on history in this period is also related to contemporary philosophical developments, particularly “dark learning” (xuanxue 玄學).

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39 Xiaofei Tian, Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502-557) (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), 97.
and “pure talk” (qingtan 清談) which played a major role in influencing poems on history in this period. Pure talk develops from pure discussion in the Han Dynasty, often commenting on people’s appearance and abilities. Many poems on history include portraits of human figures; the most famous group of poems on history in this category is Yan Yanzhi’s “Poems on the Five Lords”, which comment on five virtuous men among the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove during the transition between the Three Kingdoms and the Western Jin. Many records that were dedicated to evaluating people’s abilities and performance (such as Liu Shao’s Renwu zhi 人物志) were ready source material for the writing of poems on historical figures.

7. Inclusion of Poems on History in the Wen xuan

The Wen xuan was “complied by Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501-531), known posthumously as the Crown Prince of Resplendent Brilliance (Zhaoming taizi 昭明太子).”  40 The Wen xuan is the oldest surviving collection of Chinese literature arranged generically. It contains 761 pieces of prose and verse by 130 writers, covering the period from the late Zhou to the Liang dynasty. It includes masterpieces of early Chinese literature from thirty-seven different genres. 41 It was the first time that yongshi shi (poems on history) was established as an explicitly labeled sub-genre of literature. Although the selection itself represented the tastes of Xiao and his editorial team, it was also influenced by the intellectual atmosphere of the Southern dynasties.

41 David Knechtges, “Introduction” in the Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature, 1.
Furthermore, in the *Wen xuan* selection, we can also see the development of *Yongshi shi*: from paraphrasing official history (i.e. Lu Chen’s 盧諶 “Lan Gu” 察古) to commenting on history (i.e. Yu Xi’s “Yong Huo Jiangjun Beifa Shi”), to making full use of cultural symbols as tools to express the poets’ emotion and satirize society (i.e. Zuo Si’s 左思 “Yongshi shi II”). Because of the wide range of form and subject matter, the *Wen xuan* corpus became the prototypical example of the *yongshi shi* subgenre, and established its generic label. Although poets already wrote poems on history before Xiao’s period, and some of them even titled their works as *yongshi shi*, it was Xiao who first explicitly established this label as a literary subgenre. Because of Xiong’s status as a crown prince, he had access to many literary works and likely was familiar with many pre-Tang poems on history. It is likely that he knew which poems were popular and selected the ones he saw to be most representative of what he discerned as a distinct subgenre of poetry. Moreover, his selection influenced later poets practicing in the same vein, as can be seen from the form, content and imagery in their poems on history, which tend to echo this early selection.42

8. Major Primary Sources Used in this Dissertation

All the poems from the section of Poems on History in the *Wen xuan* are from the modern edition of *Wen xuan* published by Shanghai guji chubanshe. This modern edition is based on Hu Kejia’s 胡克家 (1756-1816) edition with Li Shan’s 李善 (630-689)

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During the Jiaqing reign 嘉慶 (1795-1820), Hu Kejia, used You Mao’s 尤袤 (1127-1202) edition of the Wen xuan from the Southern Song Dynasty, but corrected many mistakes in You’s edition by cross-referencing it with other Wen xuan editions.

Other poems cited in this dissertation are from Lu Qinli’s Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbei chao shi 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩. This compendium, compiled and edited by Lu Qinli over the course of twenty-four years, includes poetic works from the Pre-Qin to the end of the Sui 隋 (581-618) Dynasty, but it does not include the Shijing 詩經 and Chuci 楚辭. It consists of 135 juan 卷: seven juan for the Pre-Qin 秦 (before 221 B.C.E.); twelve juan for the Han 漢 (202 B.C.E.-220); twelve juan for the Wei 魏 (220-60); twenty-one juan for the Jin 晉 (265-420); fourteen juan for the Northern Dynasties 北朝 (386-581); fifty-nine juan for the Southern Dynasties 南朝 (420-589); and ten juan for the Sui. This collection is based on Feng Weirui’s 馮惟訥 (1513-72) edition of Gui shi ji 古詩紀, and takes Yang Shoujing’s 楊守敬 (1839-1915) Gu shi cun mu 古詩存目 as a reference.

44 Lu Qinli 逯欽立 ed., Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbei chao shi 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1983).
Chapter 2: Selection and Canonization of Poems on History in the Wen xuan

After discussing preliminary issues of the scholarship and short history of poems on history before the Six Dynasties, this chapter investigates how the editors of the Wen xuan selected and canonized poems on history in this important anthology. The “Poems on History” section of the Wen xuan includes a corpus of twenty-one poems that were composed between 196 and 479 A.D. What criteria did Xiao Tong and other editors of the Wen xuan adopt in selecting these twenty-one poems out of a larger corpus of at least 213 poems that were likely available to them?

Reception studies is a good approach to answer this question. I will first lay out the theory and its application to Chinese literary studies, then summarize the main points of the selection criteria through close reading of the preface to the Wen xuan as intrinsic evidence. To further deepen our comprehension of these criteria, I will explore the reception of Zuo Si’s eight “Poems on History” specifically as an example of extrinsic literary and cultural factors that contributed to selection and canonization of these poems in the Wen xuan from four perspectives: intertextual links between these poems and other literary works, literary criticism in this period, narrative that uses Zuo Si stories, and selection of these poems in the Wen xuan.

Zuo’s poems comprise more than one third of the “Poems on History” section, and have been considered essential in the development of this subgenre. Before tracing the selection and canonization of these poems on history, I will first outline a useful theoretical framework for consideration the issue of literary reception.

45 For example, Wei Chunxi 韋春喜 in his book, Song qian yongshi shi shi 宋前詠史詩史 (Beijing: Zhongguo shenhui kexue chubanshe, 2010), using his own definition of poems on history, has collected a total of 213 poems that appeared at all the available sources upon to the compilation of the Wen xuan.
1. Theoretical Background: Jauss’ Reception Theory and Its Application to Chinese Literary Studies

The main approach I will adopt is “Rezeptionsästhetik”, which has been translated into English as “reader-response criticism”, “affective stylistics”, and “aesthetics of reception”; the last one being the most popular. Hans Robert Jauss, along with his colleagues Wolfgang Iser and Jurij Striedter at the University Konstanz worked on this approach. This section deals with Jauss’ reception theory to illustrate how it challenges conventional ways of writing literary history, and how the reception theory might apply to Chinese literary studies.

The provenance of reception theory is from structural analyses carried out by the Prague linguistic circle using the concepts of phenomenology. This group of scholars was gathered together by methodological concerns. In 1967, Jauss delivered a speech titled “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory”, which was considered the manifesto of reception theory. In that paper, he pinpointed the problems in the current way of writing literary history. He expressed his arguments on rewriting literary history by directly opposing the three ways of referring to the history of literature: “An idealist conception of history as a teleology; the positivist bias of nineteenth-century historicism, which has to forgo questions of relevance in order to save objectivity; and Geistesgeschichte, a history of ideas based on an irrationalist aesthetic.”

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46 Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, Timothy Bahti trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).
Jauss’ research started where his predecessors stopped (most of whom referred to Marxist and Formalist scholars and their methods). They had separated literature from the social milieu and limited the role of the audience in literary theories. Jauss filled this lacuna by claiming that the literary work is primarily written for the readers, and emphasized “the historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees.” 48 He wanted to establish a new literary writing model in aesthetics of reception and influence, and focused on readers’ active participation in understanding literary works.

Jauss asserts that the relationship between literature and reader has aesthetic as well as historical implications: aesthetically, the reader would understand a work in comparison with other works he/she has read before; historically, early readers’ expressed opinions after reading a work would influence later readers and set the tone for later reception.49

How could readers’ experience influence the writing of literary history from a reception aspect? Jauss believes, “The historicity of literature rests not on an organization of ‘literary facts’ that is established post festum, but rather on the preceding experience of the literary work by its readers.” 50 The meaning of a literary work can be fully appreciated only by those readers who know the author’s other works or similar works. In other words, how much one can comprehend or how deeply one can understand a literary

49 Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, Timothy Bahti trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).
work is determined by one’s reading horizon or “horizon of expectation”, which is conditioned by familiarity with similar works, shared diction, figures of speech, allusions, etc. The horizon of expectation accompanies the text into the realm of subjective interpretations and reinterpretations: “It mediates between the private inception and the public reception of the work.” 51 Jauss also notes that a larger gap in aesthetic distance can actually change the readers’ horizon of expectations either “through negation of familiar experiences or through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness.” 52 Thus, readers may have literary experiences that are so different from previous ones that they must expand their horizon of expectation to accommodate them. In this way, literary history is gradually and progressively developed for its readers and audiences, and for subsequent writers who would write for them.

In his 1967 paper, Jauss places his reception theory in the context of rewriting and reconsidering literary history: “The step from the history of the reception of the individual work to the history of literature has to lead to seeing and representing the historical sequence of works as they determine and clarify the coherence of literature, to the extent that it is meaningful for us, as the prehistory of its present experience.” 53

Some scholars have applied these reception theories to pre-modern Chinese literary studies. Useful reviews of this scholarship can be found in Wendy Swartz’s Phd dissertation “Reclusion, Personality and Poetry-Tao Yuanming’s Reception in the Chinese Literary Tradition” (UCLA 2003), and in her recent book Reading Tao Yuanming:

51 Paul De Man, “Reading and History,” in The Resistance to Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 60.
52 Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, 25.
*Shifting Paradigms of Historical Reception (427-1900)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), which was the first full-length monograph in English that utilizes reception theory to analyze premodern Chinese literature. Swartz’s book was directly influenced by Jauss’ assertion that a reader’s active participation plays a crucial role in better understanding a literary work. Swartz states the purpose of her book as follows, “This book is an examination of the processes behind the making of a model poet and cultural icon. A study of the construction of the posthumous reputation of a central figure in Chinese literary history, the mechanisms at work in the reception of his works, and the canonization both of Tao Yuanming himself and of particular readings of his works can shed light on the transformation of the literary field and cultural sphere in pre-modern China.”

Chapters 4 and 5 of this monograph examine the literary reception of Tao’s poetry from the Six Dynasties to the end of Qing Dynasty. Tao Yuanming is actually similar to Zuo Si in that both of them were poets who lived within a hundred years of each other and were fond of writing poems on history rather than an ornamental style more typically associated with the Six Dynasties. It is even likely that Zuo influenced Tao in terms of literary style and form.

In the past twenty years, many Chinese books on how to apply reception theories to Chinese literature were also published. Chen Wenzhong 陳文忠 in his survey paper of Chinese reception studies mentioned that from the 1980s to 2002, scholars in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan have published three hundred papers and thirty monographs on this topic. Fifteen of these monographs adopted the term “reception history” in their book titles. There are three major ways Chinese scholars have utilized

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this theory: research into the reception of single literary work; investigating the reception of a writer’s entire oeuvre; and using reception theory to rewrite Chinese literary history generally. Chen Wenzhong himself has also published a book on the history of reception in Chinese literature, which includes chapters on how to apply reception theories to classical Chinese poetic studies. In the first chapter, Chen tries to establish the various Chinese poetic reception theories and approaches in detail. This is the first Chinese book systematically discussing the relationship between Chinese poetic studies and reception theory. However, he did not specify the drawbacks and disadvantages of these applications in the Chinese context. Based on my own readings of much Chinese reception theory, I notice that most Chinese scholars have a tendency to simplistically equate it to a more conventional diachronic approach to literary history. A thorough application of reception theory therefore still presents challenges to writing the history of Chinese literature.

In adapting reception theory to Chinese literary studies, one has to reconsider the relationship between readers and authors. According to reception theory, readers do not passively accept the meaning of a literary work. Readers’ interpretations and reinterpretations make the meaning of a literary work rich and diverse. From this perspective, readers are authors without signing their names on the book covers. When and if these readers later act as writers, they will borrow imagery, diction and style from their predecessors, reworking and rewriting them to form their own works with a similar

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theme or in a similar genre, or in different themes and genres.\textsuperscript{56} By doing this, later writers not only make their works easily understandable for their contemporary readers, but they also place their own literary works more convincingly in the lineage of a great tradition; in some situations, the influence of a later literary work surpasses its predecessor model.

In applying reception theory to write Chinese literary history, one has to examine reception practices in three ways that pre-modern Chinese reader/writers would be more likely to actively receive from their predecessors and put into practice in their own works: imitating imagery, employing allusions, and adopting known styles. As Jauss states, “A literary work, even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions.”\textsuperscript{57}

Image borrowings (including single or compound, natural or social images) were widely used in Chinese literature, especially in Chinese poetry. How and why did poets borrow images from other poets? James Liu’s book \textit{The Art of Chinese Poetry} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) provides a comprehensive view of poetic tradition, and includes many examples of various styles of Chinese poetry. According to Liu, there were three main ways of borrowing images, “First, a poet can use a conventional compound image but develop the comparison further, or add subtle variations to the

\textsuperscript{56} Here later readers refer to a broad concept, including everyone who read a particular literary work, including common readers, writers, and literary critics.

\textsuperscript{57} Hans Robert Jauss, \textit{Toward an Aesthetic of Reception}, 23.
central analogy. Second, a borrowed image can be given a twist in a new context. Third, one can use conventional images in antithesis so as to give them some fresh force.”

Another way later reader/writers often draw from their models is through allusion. Different kinds of allusions contribute differently in terms of understanding the meaning of the poems. Through allusion, a later poet can borrow the meaning from its original setting to deepen the meaning of his new poem. Without knowing the allusion, one can often still understand the poem from its more literal meaning, but if one knows the allusion, one can better appreciate the poem in terms of content and poetic technique. A good article in this regard is James Hightower’s “Allusion in the Poetry of T’ao Ch’ien”, which describes seven major types of allusions, establishing the use of allusion as a major reference for receptions studies on poetry. 59

Later reader/writers fashioned their own literary style based on their reception of writing styles from their predecessors. However, they did not want to slavishly imitate their predecessors. They also wanted to build their own distinct reputations through later readers’ active reception of their works. If they simply wrote in the same style as their predecessors, how could their works seem important to later readers, and how could they show their distinctiveness?

Professor Liu Qianmei 劉千美 talks generally about the artists’ (including writers) impulse to innovate and she argues, “The dream of the contemporary artists lies in incessantly utilizing new artistic forms to pursue an unattainable dream, and this is the

source of desire which leads artists to non-stop innovation.” This desire also applies to pre-modern Chinese writers, who had a desire to surpass their predecessors and pursue their dreams. I would like to add that this desire also led them to have a series of anxieties: how could they not be overshadowed by their predecessors even as they learned from them? 

Apart from readers who also act as writers, Jauss articulates the significant role that readers alone play in producing meaning in literary works, “for it is only through the process of its mediation that the work enters into the changing horizon-of-experience of a continuity in which the perpetual inversion occurs from simple reception to critical understanding, from passive to active reception, from unrecognized aesthetic norms to a new production that surpasses them.” However, one should not ignore the author or the text. The meaning of a work is fulfilled through the dialectical communication between writers and readers, and through readers’ interpretation and re-interpretation in a myriad of ways.

While reception theory can help in addressing how imagery, allusions, and style may be shared through texts between writers, readers, and subsequent writers, there is also the danger of over-interpretation, of granting the text and its reader too much autonomy at

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60 Liu Qianmei, Cha yi yu shi jian: dang dai yi shu zhe xue yan jiu 差異與實踐: 當代藝術哲學硏究.
61 Stuart Sargent notes that Song poets faced a challenge from the formidable reputation of the Tang poets who preceded them. How could they survive in this competition for literary distinction? Sargent outlines six general strategies deployed by the Song poets to shape their own voice in the history of poetry: 1) imitation and completion; 2) antithetical correction; 3) identification with the predecessor; 4) revelation of the precursor's precedents; 5) elevation of the self as the source of poetry and inclusion of the predecessor in one's isolation from the world; and 6) replacement of or anteriority to the predecessor, who is now admitted into poems only on the latecomer's terms. See Stuart Sargent, “Can Latecomers Get There First? Sung Poets and T'ang Poetry,” Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews 4 (1982), 165-198.
the expense of the writer. As Umberto Eco says in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, “I was studying the dialectics between the rights of texts and the rights of their interpreters. I have the impression that, in the course of the last decades, the rights of the interpreters have been overstressed.” Eco’s lectures in this volume explore ways of limiting the range of admissible interpretations and hence of identifying certain readings as “overinterpretation”. The reader has the right to read in one’s own way, but when one puts this right into application, one unconsciously puts oneself in a context, limited by a social and intellectual atmosphere, which can change over time. This can explain why Tao Yuanming was dismissed, and received a modest reception in the first few centuries after his death, but then later was ensconced as major figure in the history of Chinese literature.

To summarize, scholars practicing literary history may adapt Jauss’ theory as a means to re-examine literary history, but much preparation is required to establish “local conditions” in a given historical moment before writing literary history from a reception perspective. Zhu Liyuan 朱立元 argues, “It is hard to rewrite the whole of Chinese literary history now, but through a reception perspective, one can start researching an important work, an essential writer, or a genre in a certain period.” It is certainly better to pay attention to the role of readers in interpreting literary works, especially if these readers have a role in transmitting these works (as is the case with anthology editors), or in producing new literary works (as is the case with poets).

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The following section will apply reception theory to illustrate the selection and canonization of poems on history in the *Wen xuan*. I will first examine the Preface to the *Wen xuan* as intrinsic evidence to investigate the selection standards of the *Wen xuan* and then take Zuo’s poems on history as an extrinsic example to trace their reception in the Six Dynasties to illuminate how certain poems on history were selected and canonized in the *Wen xuan*.

2. Anthology Selection Criteria: Close Reading of the Preface to the *Wen xuan*

The *Wen xuan* is not only the first extant anthology of Chinese literature arranged into categories, but also an important text for later scholars preparing for the civil service examination in the Tang Dynasty. It contains a section called “Yongshi shi” 詠史詩 (Poems on History), which includes twenty-one poems composed between 196 and 479 A.D. In this section, Zuo’s poems on history take up more than one third, and have been considered very important in the development of this subgenre. Why did the editors of the *Wen xuan* select Zuo’s poems on history for inclusion in the collection? This section will summarize the main points of the selection criteria through a close reading of the preface to the *Wen xuan* as intrinsic evidence, and will examine how Zuo’s poems on history match these criteria. This will help us to understand the canon formation of these poems on history.

It is not certain why Xiao selected these poems, since he did not explicitly mention the reasons and principles pertaining to in particular set of poems in the preface to the *Wen xuan*. We do know that many poems that were extant in his time were
subsequently lost due to natural or manmade disasters. Even though the scant remaining materials cannot give us a complete picture of the larger corpus of poetry from which Xiao Tong selected, I will discuss the possible reasons behind the selections.

The methods of compilation of the Wen xuan are debatable:—for example were the selections from a general corpus of uncollected texts or from other available anthologies, or a combination of the two?—but many scholars do agree that Xiao Tong played a central role in selecting literary pieces for this anthology, and other scholars in the Eastern Palace and close officials provided advice or helped him to read and select some writings. One document that gives indications of the standards for Xiao’s selection is the preface to the Wen xuan, which provides an explanation for the selection standards. In the opening of the preface, Xiao draws a connection between natural phenomenon and literary writings, and claims:

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65 Recent scholarship on the compilation of Wen xuan (Okamura Shigeru, Wang Liqun, and Tian Xiaofei) emphasizes that it is a selection of literary pieces based on the previous anthologies; as Tian Xiaofei argues, “In recent years, some scholars have argued that it was compiled on the basis of previous anthologies. Liu Liang 劉良, one of the ‘Five Ministers’ who annotated Wen xuan in the early eighth century, first mentioned that Wen xuan followed ‘the editorial method of the previous worthies’ in the case of Zhang Hua’s poem ‘Da He Shao’ 答何劭. Okamura Shigeru (‘Wen xuan’ zhi yanjiu, pp. 59-95) speculated that Wen xuan was compiled on the basis of previous anthologies. This view is endorsed by a number of Chinese scholars, most notably Wang Liqun, who provided new supportive evidence in his ‘Wen xuan’ chengshu, pp. 24-49, 266-77.” See Xiaofei Tian, Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502-557), 106.

Continuing the process increases ornament,
Changing the basic form adds intensity.
Since things are like this,
Literature is appropriately so.
But because it changes with time,
It is difficult to describe in detail.\textsuperscript{67}

The passage demonstrates that the main issue of this preface is to delineate literary development over time. Xiao Tong noticed that literary development is complicated and acknowledged ornament and increasing intensity were the trends, though it was difficult for him to describe the evolutionary process specifically. This is the first standard of his anthology: literature changes over time, so the pieces that he selected for the \textit{Wen xuan} should represent this changing and convoluted reality, including various genres and features. Xiao further explains this sophisticated literary history from the beginning to his time, and stresses the necessity of anthologizing literary works. He also briefly describes his personal situation at that time:

During spare moments from my duties supervising the state and tending the army,
I have spent much leisure time
Reading through the garden of letters,
Extensively perusing the forest of literature.
Always my mind was enraptured and my eyes were absorbed in what they saw,

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 75.
And as time went by I was oblivious of fatigue.\textsuperscript{68}

He depicts himself as an assiduous crown prince, who made full use of his spare time scrutinizing literature and compiling this anthology. In Xiao’s time, there was a large amount of books and manuscripts available, and the number of literary writings was increasing. There was a need to gather and select the best literary output. As he mentions:


\begin{quote}
Unless one omits the weeds,
And collects only the purest blossoms,
Though one doubles his effort,
It will be difficult to read more than half.\textsuperscript{69}
\end{quote}

Xiao believed that some literary works were of low quality, and to facilitate scholars’ reading, he wanted to exclude them. Therefore, the second standard for his selection is to choose and preserve the best and most representative works of literary writings. He then elucidates the principles of his selection, and the reasons for excluding other writings: he excluded Confucian classics because they are sacrosanct writings that cannot be excerpted; he did not choose philosophical writings, because they are more concerned with establishing doctrines and theories than skilful/ornamental writings; he did not select historical writings that simply narrate accounts of figures and events as they are already included in official histories and do not emphasize literary writing skills.

\textsuperscript{68} Knechtges, \textit{Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature}, 87.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
However, he did mention four subgenres of historical writings, which demonstrate literary value, and selected them in the Wen xuan. He asserts:

As for [historical accounts]: Their Judgments and Treatises with an intricate verbal eloquence,
And their Postfaces and Evaluations interspersed with literary splendor,
Their matter is the product of profound thought,
And their principles belong to the realm of literary elegance.
Therefore, I have mixed and collected them with the poetic pieces.

The previous discussion informs us that Xiao intended to select a variety of materials that reflect literary development, represented by the very best pieces among them. How did he judge literary qualities? The passage above reveals the criteria for judging quality in literary work as emphasizing “profound thought” and “literary elegance”. Although these are comments on specific subgenres of historiography, this is the only place that Xiao touches on his selection standards explicitly. However, it is still ambiguous what the terms “profound thought” and “literary elegance” mean, though there is some consensus that literary elegance refers to verbal parallelism, rhyme, diction and allusion.

70 Knechtges, *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature*, 89.
71 For example, Wang Yunxi 王運熙 has pointed out, “In the Southern Dynasties, a flourishing period of rhythmical literature, the majority of scholars believed that the beauty of literary writings lies in various language levels, such as verbal parallelism, rhyme and rhythm, diction, and allusion, which are the connotations of terms, such as ‘literary ornament’, ‘excellent literary works’, and ‘elegant writings’ used in the preface to the Wen xuan. 在駢體文學高度發達的南朝，大多數文人認為，文章之美就表現在語言的對偶、音韻、辭藻以至用典諸方面。《文選序》所謂辭采、文華、翰藻，也就是指的這些。”
We may conclude that based on the analysis of the preface, Xiao aimed to choose the best and most representative literary works from a broad range of genres, which include the features of “profound thought” and “literary elegance”. These selection standards are in line with the intellectual trends of his era, as have been seen in the contemporary statements by Jiang Yan 江淹 (444-505), Xiao Zixian 蕭子顯 (487-537) and Xiao Gang 蕭綱 (503-551). This has also been confirmed by recent scholars’ findings. For example, Pauline Yu asserts, “Suffice it to say that Xiao Tong’s standards are not idiosyncratic but represent values shared by contemporary readers, although countless bones have nonetheless been picked with them.” Although scholars in later dynasties criticized Xiao for leaving out some literary works that would be judged as excellent based on his standards, they did acknowledge that to a large extent, he selected the literary writings that represent the tradition. Xiaofei Tian also found that Xiao adopted the retrospective approach to choose representative works of the tradition up to his own time, “Wen xuan illustrates the Liang consensus regarding the literary canon, but it reflects not so much the contemporary Liang literary scene as the Liang conception and


72 Jiang Yan in his *Preface to Poems of Various Forms* 雜體詩序 discussed the problems that his contemporary scholars encountered, and urged them to open their mind and have a balanced perspective towards various styles. Xiao Zixian in “Account of Literature” 文學傳 from *History of Southern Qi* 南齊書 acknowledged and celebrated different styles. Xiao Gang states, “Only by reading widely can one understand its [poetry] principle. Whether ancient or modern, classic or popular, one must read them all without discrimination and learn their ways; then one can write beautiful poems on one’s own and produce untrammelled tunes.” See Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang* (502-557) (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), 150-160.

evaluation of the literary past.”⁷⁴ Based on literary practices in the Six Dynasties and interpretations of modern scholars, we may conclude that Xiao Tong’s intention of compiling this anthology was to reflect a broader concept of aesthetic value and representation of the literary tradition and achievements, rather than his personal preferences alone. ⁷⁵

Xiao was likely familiar with many of the poems on history before the Tang, since he lived close to the time when these poems were produced. According to Knechtges, “Although none of these fourth and fifth century anthologies is extant, they were known in the Liang dynasty (502-556) and were available in the state libraries and possibly even in private collections.”⁷⁶ In another article, Knechtges also mentions, “Xiao Tong also was an avid book collector, and largely through his efforts, his Eastern Palace library grew to some 30,000 juan.”⁷⁷ It is highly possible that the Xiao Tong and his editors were aware of the critical consensus on available literary writings, knew which

⁷⁴ Xiaofei Tian, Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502-557), 107.

⁷⁵ For instance, although Ban Gu 班固 (32-92) was the first poet to compose a poem on history based on extant materials, he was not selected in the Wen xuan because of Zhong Rong’s 鍾嶸 negative review: “During the two centuries in which the capital was in the east there was only Ban Gu’s ‘On History,’ which was plain wood lacking adornment” Stephen Owen, The Making of Early Chinese Classical Poetry (Cambridge: Harvard University East Asia Center), 53. Tao Yuanming was Xiao’s favourite poet, and he compiled the individual collection of Tao’s works; but most of his contemporaries did not speak highly of Tao’s poems and regarded him a recluse. For Tao’s case, see Wendy Swartz, Reading Tao Yuanming: Shifting Paradigms of Historical Reception (420-1900) (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), 145-160. Therefore, despite Xiao’s personal preference for Tao’s poems, only eight of Tao’s poems were selected in the Wen xuan, none of which are in the section of Poems on History.

⁷⁶ Knechtges, Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature, 4.

poems were esteemed and selected the ones that they saw to be most representative of established and nascent subgenres. It is reasonable to assume that Xiao Tong would choose poems on history that were highly praised and revered by his contemporaries.

While Xiao discusses his selection standards in the Preface, he put those standards into practice when making choices for the *Wen xuan*. To better understand that selection practice, we need to reconstruct as far as possible the reception and canonization process of these poems before their inclusion in the *Wen xuan*. The following section takes Zuo Si’s poems on history as an example to explore how Zuo Si’s poems became well-known enough to be considered for inclusion at all in the section of Poems on History of the *Wen xuan*.

3. The Reception of Zuo Si’s Poetry as a Case Study

A group of “Poems on History” attributed to Zuo Si are often read as being a means to “ruminate on historical themes in order to criticize contemporary affairs and reflect Zuo’s

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78 This research approach is corroborated by David Knechtges and Li Zhi. Knechtges mentions, “The *Wen xuan* preface and Xiao Tong’s extant remarks on literature are of only limited relevance as definitions of the genres included in the *Wenxuan*. To obtain a more precise understanding of the criteria Xiao Tong applied in the process of selection, one must examine the *Wen xuan* itself.” Knechtges, *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature*, 19. This is echoed by Chinese scholar Li Zhi 力之 “As for finding the selection standards of the whole anthology, we can only rely on the Preface to the *Wen xuan* and the selected literary works in it to do comprehensive research. 至於全書的選錄標準是什麼，那只能就《文選序》與《文選》作綜合研究才有可能得出。Li Zhi, “Guanyu Wen xuan de xuanwen fanwei yu biaozhun wenti” 關於《文選》的選文範圍與標準問題, *Henan daxue xuebao (shehui kexueban)*, 3(2005): 64-69.

79 See chapter 4 for Zuo Si’s background.
frustration at his inability to advance politically or socially in Luoyang.” In these poems, Zuo argues against the traditional acceptance of social status as a function of birth, and believes that it is moral value and high ambition that deserve merit and respect rather than titles and ranks. To make these arguments, he drew upon a vast body of lore, including historical accounts and oral transmission to create a literary space in the present of his poetry to commemorate and invoke worthy figures from the past. He selected which figures or events ended up in his poems and which aspect he wanted to emphasize for his readers. His personal feelings and attitudes necessarily affected the selection process, and played an essential role in shaping history as it is presented in his poems. Thus he did not simply transmit historical records as a means of maintaining and preserving them, but related history to his own contemporary issues and personal encounters. Through his poems on history, historical lore is transformed from a dead record of the past to become a living expressive mode for the present.

Zuo’s poems on history have been considered very important in the development of poems on history. Scholars acknowledged that the style of Zuo’s poems on history is different from that of most other poets in the Six Dynasties, who paid more attention to elaboration of forms and exuberant words. Normally, if poems do not fit in comfortably with the horizons of expectation among contemporary readers, they will not be appreciated or even preserved. However, Zuo’s poems on history were well received in the Six Dynasties and preserved in its most important anthology of literature. Therefore, it seems that there is a contradiction. Is Zuo an anomaly or does our narration of literary history for this period need to be amended to reflect the complexity of literary

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development? The case of Zuo Si may help to shed light on changing intellectual horizons and literary styles at the time.

Up to this point, scholars have not adequately elucidated Zuo’s poems from the perspective of their reception. I will examine the reception of these poems in literary and cultural contexts on three levels: the first emphasizes the poetic practice of intertextual links between Zuo Si’s poems and other literary works in the Six Dynasties, such as Jiang Yan’s (444-505) “Poems of Various Forms” (Za ti shi 雜體詩); the second highlights the primary sources of literary criticism to address the evaluations of Zuo Si’s poems, such as Literary Mind and Carving of Dragons (Wenxin diaolong 文心雕龍) and The Gradations of Poets (Shipin 詩品); the third focuses on narratives in anecdotal collections or standard histories to reveal how the educated elite employed these poems in their discourse, such as in the History of the Northern Dynasties (Bei shi 北史). Investigating the three levels allows us to understand how poets, critics, readers, and editors imitate, evaluate, respond to, and select these poems during the process of their canonization, showing how changing horizons of expectation lead to shifts in interpretation. Furthermore, reception theory can help to uncover similarities and discrepancies in literary borrowings, assimilation, and manipulation (i.e. diction, imagery, and figure of speech) in poetic composition and transmission. Let us turn to how Zuo Si’s poems were known and circulated closer to his own time.
3.1 Poetic Intertextual Links: Jiang Yan’s Imitation of Zuo Si’s Poems on History

The earliest extant imitations of Zuo’s poems on history were composed by Jiang Yan (444-505), who was a famous writer and an important official in the Song (420-479), Qi (479-502) and Liang (502-557) Dynasties. At the end of the fifth century he composed a series of poems, imitating thirty representative poets ranging from ancient anonymous old poems to his contemporaries. According to Cao Daoheng 曹道衡, this series of poems was composed when Jiang was employed by Xiao Ze 蕭赜 (440-493) and promoted to a high position in his later years. In the Preface to his poems, Jiang explained that his intentions and motivations for imitating these poems were to provide laudatory examples as a basis on which to criticize literary taste in his own time: “Each is mired in what beguiles his fancy” 各滯所迷. Jiang complains that his contemporaries ignore plain but worthy literary styles in favour of superficially attractive ones: “All favour the sweet and shun the bitter, love the cinnabar red and reject the plain white”. He also noted the problem of bias in his literary environment, a tendency to “value the previous poets and

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81 Stephen Owen believes that this series of poems were “probably written toward the end of the fifth century”. See his book *The Making of Early Chinese Classical Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University East Asia Center, 2006), 36.


despise the current ones” 責遠賤近.\textsuperscript{85} Jiang argued for a more realistic and independent standard for evaluating poems rather than the simplistic model of old poems being good.

Jiang held a balanced perspective on literature and believed that whether poets were from ancient or recent times they could be equally important, because although literary styles in various regions and times were different, “they have their own merits and advantages” 各具美兼善.\textsuperscript{86} Based on his standards, he wanted to demonstrate various worthy writing styles from across the literary tradition. Therefore, Jiang’s imitation poems and accompanying preface establish a standard and guide for writing poetry. Jiang chose poems to imitate that he felt were representative of the ideal models of pentasyllabic poetry throughout literary history. His selection of just thirty poets as being worthy of imitation is an implicit judgment on the literary quality of their poetry. His position as a senior official lent his choice greater authority among his scholar-official peers.

For Jiang Yan’s imitation of the subgenre of poems on history, he chose Zuo Si and the title “Secretary Zuo Si, Poems on History” (Zuo Jishi yongshi 左記室思詠史).\textsuperscript{87} Although Jiang did not offer any direct comments on Zuo’s poems, his explicit mention of them in the title indicates that he holds up Zuo’s poems on history as the most representative and a prototypical example of this subgenre.

\textsuperscript{85} Hu Zhiji 胡之驥, Jiang Wentong ji huizhu, 136.

\textsuperscript{86} Hu Zhiji 胡之驥, Jiang Wentong ji huizhu, 136. Mei 美 refers to the outside expression, such as words or diction; shan 善 refers to the exemplary moral values and thoughts that are reflection of the inner disposition of the poets.

\textsuperscript{87} In Jiang’s own rhapsodies, such as “Rhapsody on Bitter Regret” (Hen fu 恨賦) and “Rhapsody on Parting” (Bie fu 別賦), he makes full use of historical people or events to describe his own emotions, so he may have an affinity of Zuo using history in his poetry.
左記室思詠史  Secretary Zuo Si, Poems on History

1 尹公淪賣藥。  Sir Han sank to selling medicine,

2 梅生隱市門。  Mr. Mei was hidden at the city gate.

3 百年信荏苒。 The years of one’s life passed by quickly indeed.

4 何為苦心魂。 Why did they suffer in their hearts and spirits?

5 當學衛霍將。 One should study from Generals Wei and Huo,

6 建功在河源。 and complete a grand work at the head of the Yellow River.

7 珪組賢君眄。 Jade tablets and silk bands show the regard of the worthy ruler.

8 青紉明主恩。 Green and purple sashes demonstrate the kindness of the enlightened lord.

9 終軍才始達。 Zhong Jun’s talent just became prominent.

10 賈誼位方尊。 Jia Yi’s position just rose to be respectful.

11 金張服貂冕。 Jin and Zhang wore marten crowns.

12 許史乘華軒。 Xu and Shi rode magnificent carriages.

13 王侯貴片議。 Princes and marquises value the slightest suggestions.

14 公卿重一言。 Dukes and earls esteem the briefest of words.

15 太平多歡娛。 Great peace often entails happiness and pleasure.

16 飛蓋東都門。 Carriages were quickly gathered around the Gate of the Eastern Capital.

17 顧念張仲蔚。 I cast my thoughts back to Zhang Zhongwei,
His garden was full of wild grass.

The style of imitation poetry was already well established in the Six Dynasties. Jiang’s imitation of Zuo’s poems on history uses linguistic and stylistic allusions through intertextuality. The direct intertextual link between Zuo and Jiang’s poems lies in lines 11 and 12. This couplet clearly includes linguistic borrowings from Zuo’s second and fourth poems, where Jin, Zhang, Xu and Shi are mentioned: “The Jin and Zhang families inherited their ancestors’ achievements. / Seven generations wore marten ear-ornaments [in the Han Dynasty]” 金張藉舊業。七葉珥漢貂 (lines 9 and 10 of the second poem) and “At dawn they gathered in Jin and Zhang’s houses. / At sunset they slept in Xu and Shi’s villas.” 朝集金張館。暮宿許史廬. (lines 5 and 6 of the fourth poem). These affluent noble members ascended to high positions and held them for a long time because of their eminent family background: Jin and Zhang obtained hereditary power from their predecessors, and Xu and Shi were the emperor’s relatives. On the contrary, the talented

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88 According to Cao Daoheng 曹道衡, imitation poems have two major styles: one is a literary imitation, using the same structure, similar diction and imagery, such as Lu Ji’s 陸機 (261-303) “Imitation Poems”; the other style is written under the title of imitation, but in reality the poets only express their own emotions and concerns without explicitly referring to any previous poems, such as Tao Yuanming’s 陶淵明 (ca. 365-427) and Bao Zhao’s 鮑照 (ca. 415-470) “Imitation Poems”. See his book Nanbei chao wenxue shi 南北朝文學史 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1991), 111-12.

89 Xiao Tong, Wen xuan, 445.

90 Wen xuan 21.989-990.

91 This poem draws upon a common repertoire of images, and Zuo was not the first poet to use these allusions, as they appeared in Zhang Hua’s poem “Qing bo pian” 輕薄篇. However, from the context, this specific mention seems to associate more with Zuo, since he also mentions “marten ear-ornaments”, which is from Zuo’s poem.
poor did not have an opportunity to extend their abilities. This was an important component of Zuo’s poems on history, in which he revealed social unfairness.

To a large extent, Jiang’s imitation of Zuo’s poems on history does not include many words and images borrowed directly from him, but shows more influence in terms of its style and theme. This imitation poem captures the features of Zuo’s eight “Poems on History”, including changing attitudes towards fame and reputation, arguing for the talented poor, and pinpointing historical circumstances and family backgrounds as important factors for one’s political endeavours in a hierarchical society. Jiang echoed the essential message of Zuo’s poetry in his own poem, because he found himself in a similarly complex situation of court politics. Therefore, Jiang, examining past figures and their lessons, urges people to stay away from politics and enjoy their lives.

Jiang’s imitation in one poem grasps different stages of development in Zuo’s life attitudes that are displayed across all eight of his poems. In Jiang’s imitation, lines 1-4 encourage people to make contributions to the nation, and yet lines 5 and 6 focus on historical circumstances that create uncertainties for one’s political endeavours. This seeming contradiction relates to a theme found in Zuo’s poems on history, where he had an ambitious agenda as a youth in the first poem, “Looking askance to the left, I purified the Yangze and the Xiang Rivers,” Glaring to the right, I conquered the Qiang barbarians.” 左眄澄江湘。右䀹定羌胡。 After encountering difficulties and frustrations, he eventually abandoned his political aspirations in his fifth poem, “I am not

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92 The Yangze River and Xiang River refer to Wu territory.
93 巖 and 䀹 both mean look sideways.
a dragon-mounting guest.  

Why do I suddenly come here to travel?” 自非攀龍客。何為歘來遊。

Jiang condenses Zuo’s life experiences expressed over eight poems into a few couplets, which can be summarized in this way: when young people always want to achieve great political accomplishments, and Generals Wei Qing and Huo Qubing serve as examples for them. After years of social experiences and struggle, they gradually doubt the feasibility of their lofty aspirations. Here, Jiang demonstrates the contrast between young idealism and adult realism in terms of political desires, a contrast he found repeatedly in Zuo’s poems.

Both Zuo and Jiang focus on the uncertainties inherent in political endeavours. Jiang employs examples of Zhong Jun 終軍 and Jia Yi in lines 9 and 10: the moment they became successful, they died. He indicates that people who were engaged in politics took risks for their future due to the rapidly changing political environment. Jiang experienced three short tumultuous dynasties (Song, Qi, and Liang) in his life, and when he composed this poem in his own age, it was natural for him to express his concerns over the dangers of political struggles. Therefore, Jiang ends his poem with a reference to Zhang Zhongwei, who was a well-known recluse, skilled in literary writing, but in order to keep his high moral values intact, he stayed in his cottage and did not want to be involved in politics. These two lines of Jiang’s imitation poem are not directly borrowed

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94 Dragon-climbing guest refers to those who follow princes and marquises to obtain benefit and reputation.

95 Wen xuan 21.990.

96 Family background and network, as well as historical opportunities were some of the important factors that one could not understand when they were young.
from Zuo Si, but the meaning and connotation are very similar to what Zuo argues in his eighth poem on history:

Zuo expressed his worries about political uncertainties through commenting on Su Qin and Li Si, both of whom obtained and lost power quickly. Zuo suggested that one should not indulge in fame and reputation, as they vacillate in a chaotic milieu; instead one should be like the mole and wren in the *Zhuang Zi*, and value self-sufficiency above all. Zuo tried to find a way for the talented poor to survive in society. Both Zuo and Jiang argued that people should cherish their lives and separate themselves from malicious politics. Daoist ideals of sufficiency are highly praised in their writings.

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In Zuo and Jiang’s poems, they both highlight the critical role that historical circumstances play in the rise and fall of one’s official career. In lines 13 and 14 of Jiang’s poem, Lou Jing and Tian Qianqiu were promoted to senior positions because their slight suggestions were fortunately adopted by their rulers. This reminds readers of Zuo’s second poem on history, where he argued for the talented poor, who, like Feng Tang, was not given an opportunity to extend his abilities. Therefore, Zuo claims, “How could Sir Feng not be great? White haired, he was still not summoned (by the Emperor)” 馮公豈不偉，白首不見招.\(^98\)

Jiang imitated the theme of Zuo’s poems on history, and utilized historical figures to express his own emotions. His imitation poem has literary borrowings not only from Zuo, but also from other poets who composed poems on history, such as Zhang Xie 張協 and Tao yuanming 陶淵明. Lines 15 and 16 of Jiang’s poem imitate the first two couplets of Zhang Xie’s 張協 “On History” 詠史.

昔在西京時。 Long ago they were in the Western capital,
朝野多歡娛。 The court and the country often enjoyed happiness and pleasure.
藹藹東都門。 Many thronged the Eastern Gate of the capital,
群公祖二疏。 While a group of officials prepared a farewell feast for the two Shu.

Jiang employed the exact same words as Zhang did: “often enjoyed happiness and pleasure” and “the Eastern Gate of the capital”. These couplets refer to Shu Guang 疏廣

\(^98\) Wen xuan 21.988.
and Shu Shou 疏受, who were welcomed by both officials and the populace. When they left the capital, many people were willing to see them off. Although Zhang’s approach to historical lore is different from Zuo—the former summarizes historical accounts and provides his comments at the end; while the latter includes less historical narrative in his poem and more emotional elements—Zhang inherited Zuo’s essential argument that one should be satisfied with sufficiency, not be too greedy or obsessive about fame and reputation.

At the end of Jiang’s poem in lines 17 and 18, he imitated a couplet from Tao Yuanming’s “Poem on Impoverished Scholars”: “Zhongwei loved to live alone, around his house wild grass grew.” 仲蔚愛窮居，饶宅生蒿蓬. In Jiang’s imitation, he mentioned Zhongwei and wild grass, which were representative images in Tao’s poem. Both Tao and Jiang address the idea of the talented poor using the voice very similar to that found in Zuo’s poems. For example, in Zuo’s fourth poem, he praised the lonely scholar Yang Xiong who held fast to his august moral value and focused on scholarly endeavours in a world filled with educated men eagerly pursuing fame and reputation: “How empty Master Yang’s residence is! / There were no high officials’ carriages in front of the door. / In his lonely empty house, / his teaching dwells upon the mysterious void.”寂寂楊子宅。門無卿相輿。寥寥空宇中。所講在玄虛。

Under the guise of imitating Zuo Si, Jiang is actually integrating his understanding of Zuo Si’s poems along with those of Zhang Xie (fl. 307) and Tao Yuanming (ca. 365-427), whose works share the same features in terms of theme and style as Zuo. Although

99 They played an important role during Emperor Xuan 宣 of Han’s reign.
100 Wen xuan 21.989-990.
Jiang borrows from at least three poets, by explicitly referring in his title to Zuo’s poems on history, he marks them as the paragon of this subgenre, responding to and continuing a lineage of transmission and reception of Zuo’s poems, securing their place in the canon. It is possible to argue that Jiang’s imitation of Zuo’s poetry may have influenced and shaped Zhong Rong’s 鍾嶸 (ca. 468-ca. 518) comments on Zuo’s poems in the Shipin and Xiao Tong’s (501-531) selection and prominent placement of these poems in the Wen Xuan.  

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101 When Jiang Yan was an instructor in the imperial academy, Zhong Rong was a student, who might have learnt from Jiang. It is possible that Zhong read and was familiar with Jiang’s writings, and in writing Shipin, Zhong might have taken a reference of Jiang’s imitation poems in his comments on the poets and their pentasyllabic poems. The poets that Jiang imitated were highly praised in the Shipin. The preface to the Shipin and the preface to Jiang’s imitation poems mention almost identical representative poets and their typical poems. In the Wen xuan, Xiao Tong selected all of Jiang’s thirty imitation poems, which demonstrates his appraisal and high regards about Jiang’s imitation and its literary value, and twenty-four topics in Jiang’s imitation poems are the same as Xiao’s choice in the Wen xuan. For example, Jiang chose Zuo Si’s poems on history as a representative of this topic, and in the Wen xuan, poems on history became a subgenre, under which there were twenty-one poems. See Wang Daheng 王大恒, “Jiang Yan Wenxue chuangzuo yanjiu” 江淹文學創作研究, Northeast Normal University Dissertation, China, 2007, 19-39. A discussion on Jiang’s influence on Zhong Rong, also see Wang Fengxian 王豐先, “Jiang Yan ‘Zati shi sanshi shou yu Zhong Rong Shipin guanxi kaobian” 江淹雜體詩三十首與鍾嶸詩品關係考辨 (Gansu Gaoshi xuebao, vol.10 No.3 (2005), 5-7. A convincing discussion on Jiang’s influence on Xiao can also be found in Fu Gang 傅剛, Zhaoming wenxuan yanjiu 昭明文選研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2000).
3.2 Literary Criticism: Zhong Rong and Liu Xie’s Comments on Zuo’s Poems on History

Modern studies on early medieval Chinese literature have discovered that the *Wenxin diaolong* and *Shipin* may not have been as important or influential for their contemporary readers in the Six Dynasties as we might expect. However, these, as the only extant works of literary criticism from that era are still valuable as a reflection of scholars’ literary values and their attitudes towards the literary tradition.

In the *Wenxin diaolong*, Liu Xie 刘勰 (ca. 465-520) significantly praised Zuo’s poems by saying, “Zuo Si was a man of extraordinary talent, deeply accomplished in his literary works, and of profound vision. He was completely focused on writing the ‘Three Capitals Rhapsody’ and outstanding in his ‘Poems on History’; exhausting all his energy in them.” 左思奇才，業深覃思，盡銳於三都，拔萃於詠史，無遺力矣.

102 As Pauline Yu argues that this point was initially made by Wang Yao in his paper, “Zhongguo wenxue piping yu zongji” 中國文學批評與總集 in *Guanyu Zhongguo gudian wenxue wenti* 關於中國古典文學問題 (Shanghai: Gudian wenxue chubanshe, 1956), 46. This notion was confirmed by Pauline Yu, “To be sure, there are other more obviously ‘theoretical’ texts that one could consider, ranging from Liu Xie’s (ca. 465-523) The Literary Mind: Dragon-Carvings (*Wenxin diaolong*) or Zhong Hong’s (469-518) Classification of Poetry (*Shipin*) to the numerous ‘poetry-talks’ (shihua) written from the eleventh century onward, which might seem more cogent and interesting (to the modern reader), but the fact remains that those works were either virtually unknown during their own time or were looked at seriously, if at all, only much later in the tradition.” See her article, “Poems in Their Place: Collections and Canons in Early Chinese Literature”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Jun., 1990): 165. This thought was further developed by Xiaofei Tian, “It is, however, quite uncertain how much impact Liu Xie’s work, or Zhong Rong’s for that matter, had at the time it was written. Both Liu and Zhong were minor literary figures in their time.” See her book *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang* (502-557) (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), 150.

103 See Zhou Ming 周明, *Wenxin diaolong jiaoshi yiping* 文心雕龍校釋譯評 (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue
quote above, we can see that Liu considered Zuo to be a dedicated writer. His “Rhapsodies on the Three Capitals” became popular after Zhang Hua 張華 (232-300) and Huangfu Mi’s 皇甫謐 (215-282) recommendations, though these rhapsodies encountered criticism initially. Liu elevates the status of Zuo’s “Poems on History” by mentioning them along with his better known “Rhapsodies on the Three Capitals”. Furthermore, Liu only mentions that Zuo spent enormous effort on writing the Rhapsodies; however, for his “Poems on History”, he uses exceptionally positive words to demonstrate that Zuo’s highest talent lies in these poems. Liu’s argument demonstrates his support for these poems, and heightens the expectations of his contemporary readers.

Some fifteen years after the Wenxin diaolong, Zhong Rong wrote the Shipin 詩品 around 513, in which he discusses the pentasyllabic poems before his time and ranks one hundred and twenty two famous poets into three gradations: top, middle, and bottom, giving short comments on the provenance, strengths and shortcomings, and status of their poems. Zhong Rong placed Zuo Si’s pentasyllabic poems in the top rank with this comment, “His poems stem from those by Gonggan [Liu Zhen 劉楨, d. 217], and use literary allusions to express his resentment. They are quite refined and precise, and attain the peak of admonition through allegory.” 其源出於公幹. 文典以怨, 頗為精切, 得諷諭之致. Many scholars believe that these comments mainly refer to Zuo’s poems on history, since there are only fourteen poems left and the characteristics of other poems do not reflect these comments. The word dian 典 can mean allusion or elegance. In the Shipin, Zhong Rong uses the same character to comment on Pei Ziye 裴子野; as
Knechtges mentions, “The term ‘classically chaste’ (dian 典) as applied to Pei’s writings probably refers to his adherence to the classical ideal that stressed a sober, plain style in which content was more important than form.”104 The use of the term dian demonstrates that Zhong emphasized authenticity and genuine feelings, a claim made at the beginning of his preface to the Shipin, in which he discusses the mechanical process of making a poem: “The spirit of Nature influences the particular objects in Nature, and the particular objects in Nature affect men. Men, having their natural attributes and feelings moved and swayed, give them defined expressions in dance and song.” 105 氣之動物，物之感人，故搖蕩性情，行諸舞詠。106 Because of Zhong’s preference of expressing emotions directly and straightforwardly, he did not like excessive use of allusions, claiming, “When singing of one’s own feelings, why attach so much importance to allusions? ‘I long for you like the flowing stream waters’ lays the scene right before the eyes…. In looking over superior verses through the ages, we find that most of them are not padded with borrowed words, but are all direct expressions.” 107 至乎吟詠情性，亦何貴於用事？‘思君如流水’，既是即目。……觀古今勝語，多非補假，皆由直尋。108 Since this is the case, why did Zhong place Zuo’s poems in the top rank along with eleven other excellent poets before his time? Zhong Rong appreciates Zuo’s poetry, even though he

104 Knechtges, Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature Volume One: Rhapsodies on Metropolises and Capitals, 13.
106 Cao Xu 曹旭, Shipin ji zhu 詩品集注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1994), 1.
108 Cao Xu, Shipin ji zhu, 174.
alludes substantively to historical people or events, for he uses these allusions to transform the historical figures and events into timeless cultural icons through which he expresses his own emotions in direct, unrestrained, and passionate language.

Zuo’s poems appeal to some of Zhong’s other preferences as advocated in his preface. Based on the analysis of the “Preface to the Shipin,” scholars have interpreted Zhong’s critical standards as follows: “intoning of feeling” (yinyong qingxing 吟詠情性), “force of inspiration” (fengli 風力), and “literary embellishment” (dancai 丹彩).\textsuperscript{109}

The “force of inspiration” is a prominent feature in Zuo’s poems. Contemporary scholar Ye Jiaying describes the concept of Zuo’s force as that “which arises from the depths of the heart in order to stir up and support the poetic effect [force of inspiration] 風力.”\textsuperscript{110}

In further elucidating this concept, Gu Nong 餘農 outlines three components in the force of inspiration: “the ambition of pursuing great accomplishments, the thought of dissatisfying influential families, and a new reclusive mode of having no alternative but to withdraw and feel contented within his own mind—all these factors are all relevant to Zuo Si’s special family background and particular experience.” 追求建功立業之志、不滿門閥觀念之意和不得已而退避並安于個心靈自由小天地的新式隱居模式，都與左思個人特殊的家世及個人經歷有關。\textsuperscript{111}

Zhong Rong explicitly links the force of inspiration found in Zuo’s poems on history to the poetry of Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (ca. 365-427). Although some of Tao’s

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 78.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 57.
poems describe nature and his idyllic rustic life in a relaxed manner, another feature of his poems lies in his force of inspiration (\textit{feng li 風力}), which he learned from Zuo, as specified by Zhong Rong in the \textit{Shipin}, “It stems from Ying Qu and is guided by the force of inspiration in Zuo Si.” 其源出於應璩，又協左思風力。\textsuperscript{112} This term highlights this aesthetic value across time and creates a literary lineage around it, of which Zuo is the highest exemplar.

In the main preface to the \textit{Shipin}, Zhong identifies various subgenres and selects the best and most representative examples of each. He identifies Zuo’s “Poems on History” as the primary examples of the subgenre of poems on history, confirming that they hold the most important position in the development of this subgenre in the history of pentasyllabic poetry: “Zuo Si’s ‘poems on history’, Yan Yanzhi’s narrative of his ‘going to Luoyang’, Tao Qian’s piece on ‘poverty’ and Xie Huilian’s being inspired by the sound of the ‘pounding of clothes’. All these are ‘whips’ in poetry written in five-character lines; in poetry they are the stream in which pearls lie hidden, and constitute the gigantic Deng Forest of literature.”\textsuperscript{113} 太沖《詠史》，顏延入洛，陶公詠貧之製，惠連《擣衣》之作：斯皆五言之警策者也。所謂篇章之珠澤，文彩之鄧林。\textsuperscript{114} This high ranking places Zuo in an exalted literary lineage, and promoted him to a distinguished status along with twenty-one other poets before the Liang Dynasty. The \textit{Shipin} was where Zuo’s poems were put in the context of the development of the pentasyllabic poems, thus making him an integral part of a larger historical lineage.

\textsuperscript{112} Cao Xu 曹旭, \textit{Shipin jizhu 詩品集注} (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1996), 260.
\textsuperscript{114} Cao Xu, \textit{Shipin jì zhu}, 347.
In the *Shipin*, the origin of Zuo’s poems is established for the first time. Zhong Rong claims that Zuo Si’s poems originate from the work of Liu Zhen 劉桢 (fl. 217), who himself learned from the Old Poems (Gu shi 古詩), which in turn were derived from the “Guo Feng” (Airs of the States) in the *Shijing*. These airs of the *Shijing* are traditionally defined as dealing with “the affairs of a single state, rooted in [the experience of] a single person.” 115 Thus the origin of Zuo’s poems can be traced in the following way: A person’s emotion towards the state’s affairs -> Airs of the States in the *Shijing* -> Old Poems -> Liu Zhen -> Zuo Si. Thus, we can understand that although Zuo’s poems were titled “Poems on History”, they show his strong emotion towards society in the same manner as the “Guo Feng”; Zuo’s poems, by employing historical allusions, articulate his personal thoughts, express his ambitions, and satirize his contemporary political society. This technique of linking feelings in the present with allusions to the past became a model for later poets composing poems on history, especially in the Late Tang.

3.3 Historical Narrative: Xue Cheng’s Use of Zuo’s Poems on History in Articulating His Frustrations

Another source for understating the reception of Zuo’s poems on history closer to his own time can be found in historical narratives, including anecdotal collections and standard histories. For example, the Biography of Xue Cheng 薛憕 (fl. 520) in the *History of the Northern Dynasties* provides us a window through which to see how Zuo’s

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poems on history were adopted and received by scholars to express their difficulties and frustrations.

Xue Cheng, with a capping name Jing Qiu, was a native of Fenyin, Hedong [east of the Yellow River]. During the rebellion caused by Helian, his great-grandfather Hongchang led members of his lineage to escape from this disaster and stay in Xiangyang. Cheng’s father died when Cheng was young, and his family was poor. He ploughed the land himself in order to support his grandmother. When he had spare time, he flipped through books. He was free and at ease, not restrained, and his contemporaries did not consider him marvellous. The southern area mostly selected officials from influential hereditary families. Cheng's family did not have noble scholars, or official positions higher than Assistant Minister. Since he had migrated from elsewhere, he was not promoted. He often sighed, saying, “How could I wear a turban for fifty years and die in the position of Field Officer, lowering and leaning my head, bending and lifting it towards people!” He often felt melancholic and could not have his ambitions fulfilled. When dealing in social relations, he was arrogant and despised other people; he relied on his talents and was easily influenced by his emotions, and was never inclined to scurry to the door of the influential and wealthy families. The Left Military Officer in charge of the security of royal palace, Wei Qiandu, a native of Jingzhao, said to him, “Your family status is not low, and your talent is not inferior. Why do you not obtain a position in the Ministry of Official Personal Affairs?” Cheng replied, “so scions of great houses climb to high positions, while men of talent are buried as petty clerks.”
Even people in ancient times lamented and regretted this; I cannot extend my abilities.” Qiandu told other people, “This young man is indeed passionate, but has not encountered a suitable time.”

薛憕字景猷，河東汾陰人也。曾祖弘敞，值赫連之亂，率宗人避地襄陽。憕早喪父，家貧。躬耕以養祖母，有暇則覽文籍。疏宕不拘，時人未之奇也。江表取人，多以世族。憕世無貴仕，解褐不過侍郎。既羈旅，不被擢用。常歎曰：‘豈能五十年戴幘，死一校尉，低頭傾首，俯仰而向人也!’常鬱鬱不得志，每在人間，輒陵架勝達，負才使氣，未嘗趨世祿之門。左中郎將京兆韋潛度謂曰：‘君門地非下，身材不劣，何不裾數參吏部?’憕曰：‘世胄躡高位，英俊沈下寮，古人以為歎息，竊所未能也。’潛度告人曰：‘此年少實慷慨，但不遭時耳。’

The narrative above tells us that Xue read extensively, and was knowledgeable, but was not offered a good position because power was held by aristocratic families. When asked the reason that he did not try to obtain a position in the Ministry of Official Personal Affairs, he quoted a couplet from Zuo Si’s second “Poem on History”, “So scions of great houses climb to high positions, while men of talent are buried as petty clerks.” Xue was frustrated by his contemporary political situation during the Northern Wei, but did not yield his principles for a position. Zuo’s original poem in its entirety reads as follows:

Zuo first adopts comparison between tall pine trees at the bottom of the ravine overshadowed by short sprouts on the top of the mountain to demonstrate unfairness in nature. This natural contrast evokes Zuo’s emotions about the strict social hierarchy he observed and experienced during the Western Jin. He complained that this unfair situation had existed in society for a long time, which led to noble family members controlling politics and occupying important positions and the talented poor sinking to the bottom of society. In Zuo’s poems, he further identified with the figure of Feng Tang who, despite being a great person according to Zuo’s belief, was not given the opportunity to prove his abilities and talents in service. It seems that through commenting
on Feng Tang, the poet adopts a veiled criticism about the hereditary system in his own
time. Zuo Si had high ambitions in his early years, and expressed his ideals in the first
*Yongshi shi*: “Looking left, I cleanse the Yangzi and Xiang,/ Gazing right, I pacify the
Qiang tribes”. 117 His aspirations reached an apex when his sister Zuo Fen 左棻 (d. 300) was chosen to become Emperor Wu of Jin’s (236-290) concubine; his whole family
moved to the capital. However, Zuo Fen was summoned by the Emperor Wu of the Jin
not because of her beauty but for her literary talents. The Emperor asked her to compose
literary writings and did not have as intimate and close a relationship with her. Zuo Fen
could not meet the Emperor often and did not enjoy the lonely and monotonous palace
life. She articulated her emotions explicitly in the “Rhapsody on Thoughts of Separation”
(*Li si fu* 離思賦):

In loneliness it knots up, having no one to confide in.

My feelings are in chaos, with nothing to rely on,

My thoughts are tangled up, making me more anxious.

Deep into bright night I cannot sleep,

With an agitated soul I await the coming of dawn.118

Based on Zuo Fen’s resentful and frustrated tone about palace life, it is unlikely that Zuo
Fen could help Zuo Si substantially in terms of his political career, which must have

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constituted a poignant contrast with Zuo Si’s anticipation. After years of struggle and competing for his ideals, the restrictive system did not allow Zuo Si to obtain a high position. Feng’s story easily becomes a reflection of Zuo’s own life; though he was capable of both civil and military service, he felt both unappreciated and abandoned by the powers of the day. Zuo used poems as a medium to articulate his frustrations, and adopted his literary talents to express his criticism about aristocratic society; so his poems on history became the vehicle by which to vindicate his own poetic far-ranging genius. The poet plays (or could play) just as important a role as the historical figure in the poem. Zuo’s poem, to a large extent, articulates the common concern of the talented poor in an society dominated by aristocratic families, which surely led to the popularity of his poems among scholars. Xue Cheng’s bitter citation of the key lines from Zuo Si’s poem provide a potent critique of injustice in a society where one was chosen as a high official not because of his ability but because of his family’s status. That Xue would readily cite Zuo’s line above all others shows how prevalent knowledge of Zuo Si’s poetry had become.

4. Conclusion

Prior to their selection to appear in the Wen xuan, as the first important reader, Jiang Yan picked Zuo’s poems on history as the best and most representative of this subgenre. Later, Liu Xie praised Zuo’s talent and gave these poems a high status among all of Zuo’s literary writings. Shortly after Liu, Zhong Rong, in his Shipin, ranked Zuo’s poems on the top with eleven other great poets in history and, as with Jiang Yan, Zhong chose

119 Fang Xuanling 房玄齡, Jin Shu 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1974), 2375-77.
Zuo’s poems on history as the best example of this subgenre—all of which confirms the high status of these poems in literary development. Many scholars, especially from lower classes such as Xue Cheng, chanted Zuo’s poems on history to articulate their veiled criticism against a society that ignored the talented poor. These poets, literary critics, and scholars were actively engaged in shaping the reputation of Zuo’s poems on history. These facts surely influenced Xiao Tong’s selection of these eight poems to appear in his grand anthology of literature, thus ensuring the preservation and transmission of these poems in its pages.\textsuperscript{120} Xiao’s selection of Zuo’s poems on history kept them in circulation across the dynasties. Although Zuo’s individual collection was lost after the Sui Dynasty, these poems were well preserved and circulated among later scholars because of the \textit{Wen xuan}.\textsuperscript{121}

The reception of Zuo’s poems on history informs us of how changing horizons of expectation can lead to shifts of interpretation. In their general literary taste, scholars of the Western Jin attached more importance to forms of ornamental amplification and beautiful words. This is reflected in comments made by Zuo’s peer, Lu Ji 陸機 (261-303), in his \textit{Wen fu} 文賦: “Poetry and poetic exposition aspire to beauty.”\textsuperscript{122} Zuo Si’s

\textsuperscript{120} In the Southern Dynasties, the major anthology \textit{Yu Tai Xin Yong} 玉臺新詠 did not include any of Zuo’s Poems on History, simply because of the nature of this anthology: most of the selection deals with erotic topics. However, Zuo’s poems expressed his strong feeling about his ambitions, through direct, unrestrained, and impassioned features, which were inspired by the Jian’an 建安 (196-220) poets.

\textsuperscript{121} We cannot find any materials about the Zuo’s individual collection in the literary treatise section from standard history after the Sui Dynasty.

\textsuperscript{122} Stephen Owen, \textit{Readings in Chinese Literary Thought} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 67. According to Yuan Xingpei 袁行霈, during the Western Jin (referring mainly to Taikang’s 太康 reign, 280-290), “The poetry world, represented by Lu Ji 陸機 (261-303) and Pan Yue 潘嶽 (247-300), was devoted to poetic form and complex descriptions; their diction was very flowery, and their poetic style
style is dramatically different from this, as is noted by Japanese scholar Kozen Hiroshi 興膳宏:

We are unlikely to find in his works the superior writing skills in line with contemporary tastes and fashion. Generally speaking, Zuo Si’s works are not relevant to the ornamented beauty and the complex parallel couplets. He did not emphasize the restrained emotional expression, rather his writing style and diction are very direct and clear.\(^\text{123}\)

The style of Zuo’s poems on history does not match the expectations of his contemporary readers. Zuo was not alone though; he is often paired later with Liu Kun as representatives of an alternate poetic style of the Western Jin, which focused on poetic substance and continued the style of Jian’an 建安 (196-220) writers rather than emphasizing ornament and form. However, this group of poets was much smaller than those in the mainstream of ornate writing in the Western Jin.

However, in the Southern Dynasties, many literary scholars held an open attitude towards the literary past and accepted and advocated different styles. Under such a zeitgeist, Zuo’s plainness and seriousness in his poems can emerge as an attractive alternative to the decorousness of his contemporaries. Zuo’s poems on history were

highly valued in imitation by Jiang Yan; in exegesis by Liu Xie and Zhong Rong; and in
citation as can be seen in the anecdote about Xue Cheng. All of these men were
contemporaries of the editors of the *Wen xuan* and thus provide clues to literary tastes at
the time that may well have informed the *Wen xuan* editors.

Thus, we might identify three factors that went into shaping the literary tastes of
the *Wen xuan* editors: (1) practice of other poets, (2) critical appraisals of poems, (3) use
of poems in other forms of writing and in general discourse among the educated elite.
The *Wen xuan* should not be seen so much as a snapshot of a static literary canon as a
reflection of a complex process of literary reception, selection and transmission. It is an
unfolding of changing literary interpretations and collective opinions held among
Southern Dynasties elites regarding their literary past. Because of the status of the *Wen
xuan* as the most important anthology of pre-Tang literature, the choices made by its
editors shaped subsequent critical understanding of all pre-Tang poems—even the ones
not included in the anthology were still read against the standards of taste articulated and
practiced in that collection.

Furthermore, the reception of Zuo’s poems on history demonstrates a major
development of this subgenre in the pre-Tang era. Although writing poems on history did
not start with Zuo, he created a new influential style with his *personal* reading of history
(relating historical figures to his own situation rather than simply celebrating them), and
his poems exemplified standards of composition in terms of plainness, substance, and
direct expression.

In “Poem on History” by Ban Gu 班固 (32-92), the writing style is a poetic
recasting of the official historian’s voice: first narrating the biographies, and then
commenting on the protagonists’ deeds at the end. This implies the narrator’s impartiality as a judge of history. However, Zuo Si broke away from this norm of writing poems on history in a number of ways. In terms of form and structure, he was the first poet to write a series of poems on history. Although these poems may have been written at different times, they share the same theme, and Zuo compiled them into a collection, some of which ended up in the *Wen xuan*. In terms of content, he transformed the historical figures and events into timeless cultural icons that he could then use to express his own views and emotions. For example, in the seventh poem of his “Poems on History,” Zuo mentions four great historical figures and their stories from the Western Han Dynasty 西漢 (202 B.C.E-8): Zhufu Yan 主父偃 (fl. 127 B.C.E), Zhu Maichen 朱買臣 (fl. 115 B.C.E), Chen Ping 陳平 (fl. 178 B.C.E) and Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (ca. 179-117). However, Zuo’s real intention was not to embellish their deeds and their life experiences, but to utilize these figures and their events to express his own frustrations. This feature of composing *yongshi shi* was widely accepted by later generations. For instance, Shen Deqian 沈德潛 (1673-1769) makes the following comments on the literary style and status of Zuo’s “Yongshi”:

Taichong’s [Zuo Si] poems on history do not exclusively sing of particular persons or events. He sings of the ancient people, yet his own nature and emotions are fully apparent. His poetry was the pinnacle of poetic perfection for a thousand years. Later only Mingyuan [Bao Zhao 鮑照, ca. 415–470] and Taibo [Li Bo 李
Shen Deqian highly extolled Zuo Si’s poetic talent, and put him in the same league with the great poets Bao Zhao 鮑照 and Li Bo 李白. In the hands of a poet with the skill and motivation of Zuo Since, historical figures in poems on history become a powerful means of self-expression.

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Chapter 3: Historical Lore and Poems: Approaches to Lore in Verse

For the selected poems on history mentioned in chapter 2, how did poets relate historical lore to poetry? This chapter explores this question through discussing three approaches that poets adopted to disseminate history into poetry.

1. Introduction

Cultural memory and nostalgia for tradition play an important role in shaping Chinese literature, and the yongshi subgenre of poetry represents these tendencies explicitly. Many pre-modern scholars have made passing remarks about poems on history, but the Qing dynasty scholar Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–1797) stands out for his systematic approach in dividing this subgenre into three types:

The first type uses past deeds of historical characters to express what is in one’s own heart, an example of which is Zuo Si’s poems on history. Another is to summarize the events subtly, expressing them with a plaintive melody, as with Zhang Xie’s poem on the two Shus and Lu Chen’s poem on Lin Xiangru. The third uses antithetical parallelism. Li Shangyin’s use of the phrase “leading ox” is parallel to “stopping horses,” while Wei Zhuang’s use of the name “Wuji” is parallel to “Mochou”.  

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Although Yuan discusses the forms of poems on history on the large scale of Chinese literary history, his categories can be used as a reference for my specific research on poems on history found in the *Wen xuan*. In Yuan’s division, the first approach is the use of historical events to express one’s own emotions, and the second is a summary of historical events in poetic form. However, the third is a literary technique more concerned with form than substance, which he illustrates with specific citations of poems by Wei Zhuang 韋莊 (836-910) and Li Shangyin 李商隱 (813-58), where the use of antithetical parallelism has a dual function: the words are harmonized to create an analogous structure in terms of not only word class, but also historical allusions.128

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127 Yuan Mei 袁枚, *Suìyuán shíhuà* 隨園詩話 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1982), 467.

128 As an example of the last point, Yuan Mei cites couplets in Wei Zhuang’s poem “Remembering the Past”: “The Prince of the West Garden was called Don’t Be Envious,/The beauty from the southland was named Don’t Be Sad” (Yates 1988, 90). The words “Don’t Be Envious” and “Don’t Be Sad” are matched well to create a parallel structure in terms of word class. Furthermore, the historical allusions behind the names also correspond, because “Don’t Be Envious”, referring to the Prince of Wei, and “Don’t Be Sad”, referring to a singing lady in the Tang are widely known as symbols to represent luxurious palace life. The same parallel principle applies to Li Shangyin’s poem that Yuan Mei cited in his analysis of the types of *yongshi shi*, which is from the second “Mawei” poem: “On this day the sixfold army/ stopped their horses in unison;/ back then on the Seventh Eve/ they had mocked the Oxherd [literally, herding ox].” Stephen Owen, *The Late Tang: Chinese Poetry of the Mid-ninth Century (827-860)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 434.
A contemporary scholar, Zhang Xuecheng 張學成 follows Yuan’s first two categories in his discussion of the function of history in poems on history: either to express the poets’ emotions or to record historical events. Another contemporary scholar, Wei Chunxi 韋春喜 also uses these first two approaches and develops a new point to mediate between the two. In addition to identifying poetry used to express emotions and record historical events, he adds a third category of using poetry to comment on history.

My research builds upon the scholarship of Yuan Mei, Zhang Xuecheng, and Wei Chunxi and further develops their standards with a more detailed and concrete analysis of the relationship between historical accounts and what is presented in poems on history. This relationship is not easy to summarize as it is more like a spectrum with completely personal expression and neutral historical accounts at either end. In my own formulation of the relationship between historical lore and poems on history (appearing in the Wen xuan), I have identified three approaches taken by poets who fashion their poetry based on historical figures and accounts. In the first approach, poets do little more than paraphrase historical sources in poetic form; in the second, they do not retell historical narratives so much as comment on history’s figures and events in relation to their own situations; in the third approach, poets stray furthest from historical sources by manipulating them, often through exaggeration to criticize and satirize their contemporary society.

In each case, poetry is using history to express poets’ opinions and emotions through the use of historical allusions, but the degree to which the poet’s own opinion is foregrounded is different. In the first case, the history is in the foreground, while the poet’s opinion is tacitly expressed through which historical events and figure he chooses to select and emphasize; the poet may occasionally express an explicit opinion in the closing lines of the poem. In the second case, the historical material is being used more rhetorically, as relevant examples to bolster the opinion being expressed by the poet. In the last case, the poet may go so far as to manipulate or distort historical records to put them in service of making his point.

An examination of these approaches can lead to a better understanding of how history is disseminated through poetry and will reveal the complex nature of poems on history, which will help to illuminate a larger issue of the function of history in Chinese poetry.

Poets in the Six Dynasties (220-589) could access both historical accounts, and a larger body of lore, which was passed down orally and in writing in Chinese culture. The term ‘history’ (shi, 史) in yongshi refers to this expansive body of lore and official history contained within it. It is impossible for us to reconstruct the lore that was available to the poets in the Six Dynasties, but I have collected primary sources on certain figures and events before the poets’ time, including standard history, pseudo-history, anecdotes, and regional history. Although it is sometimes not certain which particular historical accounts poets were aware of, I have consulted a variety of historical sources as reference—both official and unofficial—with preference given to the former. Intertextual analysis between the poems and historical accounts does reveal many similar words and
phrases, suggesting that poets may have read historical sources, or at the very least, that the historical sources extant today drew upon the same body of historical lore that was available to the poets (who, we should not forget, were often involved in historiography themselves).

2. Three Approaches

2.1 Paraphrasing Historical Records in Poetry

In the section titled “Yong shi” in the Wen xuan, the first approach a reader encounters by which poets integrated history into their poems is through paraphrasing historical sources. A prime example of this is Zhang Xie’s 張協 “Yong shi”, which appears to be based on passages in the Han shu (The History of the Han Dynasty). It mimics the format of standard histories by narrating a biography and providing comments on it in closing.

1. 昔在西京時，
   In the past, they were in the Western capital.
   朝野多歡娛。
   The court and the public often enjoyed happiness and pleasure.

2. 蕭藹東都門，
   Many thronged the Eastern Gate of the capital,
   羣公祖二疎。
   While a group of officials prepared a farewell feast for the two Shus.

3. 朱軒曜金城，
   Vermillion carriages illuminated the invincible city.
   供帳臨長衢。
   Tents were raised near the long thoroughfare.
4. 達人知止足, Learned men know to stop at enough.
        遺榮忽如無。 Bestowed glory, they regard as nothing.

5. 抽簪解朝衣, Taking out hairpins, removing court robes,
        散髮歸海隅。 They spread their hair and returned to a corner of the sea.

6. 行人為隕涕, Passers-by shed tears for the two Shus,
        賢哉此大夫! “How virtuous these two masters are!”

7. 揮金樂當年, Brandishing money, revelling in their age,
        歲暮不留儲。 Being old, they exhausted their savings.

8. 顧謂四座賓, They talked with surrounding guests,
        多財為累愚。 “Excessive wealth could become a burden for fools.”

9. 清風激萬代, Cool breezes surged for ten thousand generations,
        名與天壤俱。 Their fame is everlasting like heaven and earth.

10. 咄此蟬冕客, How impressive the sable wearing gentlemen were!
        君紳宜見書. On officials’ sashes, their words should be inscribed.

This poem praises the two Shus, which refers to Shu Guang 疏廣 (d. 45 B.C.E) and his nephew Shu Shou 疏受 (d. 48 B.C.E), both of whom were Emperor Xuan’s 宣 (91–49 B.C.E) tutors. When they decided to retire, people and officials voluntarily saw them off in the capital. They two men went back home, spent their fortunes on their fellow

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131 A detailed account of the two Shus’ story before Zhang Xie’s time is recorded in the Han shu, which is well acclaimed and popular among scholars after it was compiled.

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villagers, and did not leave anything for their descendants.\textsuperscript{132} This story was highly revered by later generations, and the moral of their deeds is that after contributing to the court and achieving affluence, one should shun fame and reputation, and leave court to enjoy one’s life and success rather than continually seek more.

In this poem, Zhang Xie adopted different ways to paraphrase a historical source. He uses compact literary images to evoke a larger story behind them. The fifth couplet vividly depicts the two Shus’ actions of resigning their high positions and beginning a new life by using the metonymy of taking off robes and removing hairpins to represent their retirement. The historical source, however, gives the whole story behind this retirement, especially narrating the pretext they used to withdraw from court and the favor they received from the Emperor and Heir Apparent:

On the very same day both uncle and nephew reported that they were suffering from illness. When the customary three months waiting period had passed, they were granted a leave of absence, but Shu Guang, pleading that his illness was critical, submitted a memorial asking that he be released from government service. In view of the fact that he was old and in precarious health, the emperor agreed to release both him and his nephew, in addition presenting them with a gift of twenty catties of gold. The heir apparent for his part presented them with fifty catties.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{132} Michael Loewe, \textit{A Biographical Dictionary of the Qin, Han and Xin Dynasties} (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 2000), 481.

\textsuperscript{133} Pan Ku (Ban Gu), Burton Watson, trans. \textit{Courtier and Commoner in Ancient China: Selections from the History of the former Han} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 164.
即日父子俱移病。滿三月賜告，遂稱篤，上疏乞骸骨。上以其年篤老，皆許之，加賜黃金二十斤，皇太子贈以五十斤。134

Zhang’s poem recounts historical facts differently from the historical narration, which goes through the sequence of the events step by step, while the poem is able to encapsulate a long historical narrative in a few lines. He employs literary images to succinctly express the same ideas as found in the historical source but with an added sense of aesthetic enjoyment for his readers.

Another strategy of using terse poetic language to rephrase long narratives is that Zhang Xie can employ a synoptic view to summarize the behaviour of the main characters alone, leaving out the supporting figures and narrative details. For instance, the seventh couplet mentions that Shu Guang and Shu Shou enjoyed their retirement in their hometown. This couplet is a synopsis of a relatively long historical description, which can be found in the *Han shu*:

After Shu Guang had returned home, he would each day order his family to prepare wine and food, and would invite relatives, old friends, and their guests to join him in making merry. From time to time he would ask his family how much of the gold was left and then would send them scurrying off to sell some more of it to buy provisions. After a year or so of this, Shu Guang’s sons and grandsons took one of Shu Guang’s cousins aside, an elderly man whom Shu Guang loved and trusted, and said to him, “We had hoped while the old gentleman is still alive

to lay the foundations for something of a family fortune, but with all this drinking and eating every day the money is almost all used up...".  

Zhang Xie, knowing that poetry is a short form literary genre that cannot accommodate all the narrative details above, leaves out the details of how the two Shus entertained relatives and guests, and ignores the trivial talk between Shu Guang’s relatives. However, Zhang Xie did select some comments from the supporting figures in the *Han shu* account, when they help to highlight the virtues of the two Shus. For example, the sixth couplet comments on people’s emotional reaction when seeing that the two Shus were leaving the capital; one would think this comment was made by the poet mimicking the people’s voice, but in fact it was borrowed directly from the *Han shu*, “Those who saw them passing along the road all exclaimed, ‘How virtuous the two masters are!’ and some

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135 Pan Ku, Burton Watson, trans. *Courtier and Commoner in Ancient China: Selections from the History of the former Han*, 164

sighed and shed tears for them” 137 及道路觀者皆曰：“賢哉二大夫！”或歎息為之下泣。138

The poem and the historical narrative use the same or similar phrases--such as “passers-by” 行人, “how virtuous these masters are” 賢哉此大夫, and “shed tears for the two Shus” 為隕涕 in the poem; and their counterparts in the narrative “Those who saw them” 道路觀者, “How virtuous the two masters are” 賢哉二大夫, and “shed tears for them” 為之下泣. It seems that Zhang Xie read the historical source carefully, and cited the words in his poetic lines. The function of the direct quote from the historical account is to assure the readers that his poem reveals the two Shus’ deeds in an authentic manner based on known accounts.

When we compare the poem and the historical account in general terms, they are virtually identical in their portrayals; the poem even has a strong narrative element, including dialogue and comments from the historical source. The poet has read the historical account, but did not participate in the historical event himself. It appears that history was rehearsed or reimagined through his reading, and he was moved by its echoes, subsuming his emotional response into the language of poetry. Although it is not stated explicitly, Zhang Xie’s poetic vision of history probably reflected a similar experience that he went through in his own life. Zhang Xie was talented when he was young and held different civil and military positions throughout his career. At the end of Emperor Hui’s 惠 reign (290-307), society was in chaos. Zhang Xie abandoned his

137 Burton Watson, Courtier and Commoner in Ancient China: Selections from the History of the former Han, 164.
138 Ban Gu, Han shu (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 3040.
official life and withdrew to become a recluse. Accounts describe him as one who valued
the Dao highly and did not compete for political power; instead he composed poems to
entertain himself.\textsuperscript{139} It is tempting to relate this poem to later stories of Zhang Xie’s life.
Modern scholar Pauline Lin points out that this theme of aspiring for reclusion is typical
of Zhang, “Praise for and desire of retirement is a prominent theme in Zhang’s poetry,
especially in his ‘Za shi.’ Alongside the desire for reclusion, however, there is a sense of
loneliness, longing, regret, frustration, unachieved ambition, and unmet aspirations and
goals, reflecting Zhang’s inability to attain a powerful official position.”\textsuperscript{140} It is not
implausible that Zhang Xie’s depiction of the lofty vision, unassailable virtues, and pure
motivations of the two Shus was meant to reflect on himself. He adopted specific words,
language, and stories from the historical record to fit his personal context by association
if not by specifically claiming his affinity.

There are other poems in the “Yong shi” section of the \textit{Wen xuan} that adopt this
associative approach, for example, Lu Chen’s 魯諶 “Lan Gu” 覽古, Yan Yanzhi’s 顏
延之 “Qiu Hu Shi” 秋胡詩, and Yu Xi’s 虞羲 “Yong Huo Jiangjun Beifa Shi” 詠霍
將軍北伐詩. These poems open a new way to manifest history and its significance
through the more reflective and expressive writing of poetry.

\textsuperscript{139} Fang Xuanling 房玄齡, \textit{Jin Shu} 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000), 1518-1524.
\textsuperscript{140} Pauline Lin, “Zhang Xie,” in \textit{Classical Chinese Writers of the Pre-Tang Period}, edited by Curtis
Dean Smith, (Detroit: Bruccoli Clark Layman / Gale, 2011), 320.
2.2 Highlighting the Poets’ Personal Situations through Commenting on Historical Figures

The first approach of paraphrasing narrative is largely faithful to the historical record, but the second approach found in the yongshi poems in the Wen xuan of commenting on history the poets is inspired by certain historical events or people, and make their own opinions known through commenting on them. Perhaps, they believed that the readers already knew the history; therefore they do not take the time to narrate historical figures in great detail. The sixth of Zuo Si’s “Yong shi” preserved in the Wen xuan is a useful example to explore:

VI
1.荊軻飲燕市，
酒酣氣益振。
Jing Ke drank in the Yan market,
Intoxicated, his vigor became ever greater.

2.哀歌和漸離，
謂若傍無人。
His sang sadly to accompany Jianli’s playing,
As if there were no people around.

3.雖無壯士節，
與世亦殊倫。
Though he lacks heroic principle,
He was different from his contemporaries.

4.高眄邈四海，
豪右何足陳?
Haughtily he surveyed the world on high,
There were no nobles worth mentioning!

5.貴者雖自貴，
視之若埃塵。
Although superiors regarded themselves valuable,
He saw them as dust and dirt.
Although inferiors regarded themselves lowly,
He looked upon them as thirty thousand gold.

The detailed story of Jing Ke can be found in three accounts before Zuo Si’s time:
Zhanguo ce 戰國策 (The Strategies of the Warring States), and Shi ji 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian), and Yan Danzi 燕丹子 (Master Dan of Yan). Since his encounters in the Yan market are not mentioned in the first and third account, Zuo Si probably composed this poem based on his reading of the Shi ji account. Actually Zuo Si’s characterizations of Jing Ke in the first two couplets largely follow the historical record about Jing Ke found in the Shi ji:

Having reached Yan, Jing Ke became fond of a dog butcher and a skilled dulcimer player, Gao Jianli. Jing Ke was fond of wine, and every day he drank with the dog butcher and Gao Jianli in the marketplace of Yan. After they were well into their cups, Gao Jianli would strike his dulcimer and Jing Ke would sing in harmony in the middle of the marketplace. They would enjoy themselves, then after a while they would weep, as if there was no one around. 141

141 Nienhauser, 326.
Hsüeh Ke arrived in Yan, he loved the dog-slaughterer at Yan and the good musician Gao Jianli. Hsüeh Ke liked to drink, he would often drink with the dog-slaughterer and Gao Jianli in the Yan market. Drunk, Hsüeh Ke would sing, and Gao Jianli would play the筑, and they would laugh together, and then cry, as if there were no people around.

Compared to this, the initial two couplets almost reiterate the Shi ji and encompass the same words and images, such as, “Jing Ke drank in the Yan market”, “intoxicated”, “as if there were no people around”. Furthermore, the poet did not mention who Jing Ke and Gao Jianli were, or why Jing Ke came to the Yan state, and only selected a historical moment of Jing Ke’s drunkenness in the market to illustrate his unconventional disposition.

The rest of the poem focuses on expressing Zuo Si’s emotion through commenting on Jing Ke. The third couplet remarks on Zuo Si’s observation of Jing Ke’s maverick temperament, which was echoed in the Shi ji:

Although Jing Ke associated with drinkers, he was by nature recondite and fond of reading. In the [states of] the feudal lords to which he traveled, he established ties to all the worthy, powerful and respected men. When he went to Yan, Venerable Tian Guang, a retired knight of Yan, treated him very well. [Tian] knew that he was not an average fellow. 

Jing Ke 荊軻 虽游於酒人乎, 然其為人沈深好書；其所游諸侯，盡與其賢豪長者相結。其之燕，燕之處士田光先生亦善待之，知其非庸人也。

142 Sima Qian 司馬遷, Shi ji 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 2528.
143 Nienhauser, 326.
144 Ibid.
Based on this account, Zuo Si confirmed Tian Guang’s observation of Jing Ke, who, though he behaved strangely, had potential to become a great figure. The theme of Jing Ke being different from his contemporaries is further developed in the next three couplets. A much more general state of mind and attitude are displayed in the fourth couplet, which demonstrates Jing Ke had contempt for nobles and mentioned his heroic decorum. Although it is difficult to tie any specific events to his attitudes, they were consistent with stories of him and readers are reminded of his gallant assassination attempt on the King of Qin, which is the essence of the Jing Ke story. The knowledge of the story of Jing Ke that readers bring to the poem serves as a background for Zuo Si’s explicit comment that Jing Ke is different from his contemporaries. Through stating Jing Ke’s attitudes towards the world and nobility rather than narrating his specific deeds, Zuo Si’s poem on the past encourages the reader to reflect on the meaning of historical deeds and events when evaluating a man’s character.

Zuo Si’s comments on Jing Ke reach a zenith in the last two couplets, which present a contrast using a parallel structure. Zuo Si comments on Jing Ke’s different attitudes towards the noble and the poor, and argues that although superiors considered themselves as valuable, Jing Ke treated them as nothing, and was not intimidated by their power and status. This is reminiscent of the story in the Shi ji when Qin Wuyang trembled in the Qin court, while Jing Ke maintained his composure. Although the poor thought themselves low, Jing Ke highly reveres their unyielding and loyal spirit, demonstrated by his admiration of the lowly Gao Jianli in the Yan market. The Shi ji records the story of how Gao

145 Sima Qian, Shi ji, 2534.
Jianli cherished his friendship with Jing Ke. Even after Jing Ke died, Gao tried again to assassinate the King of Qin in honour of him, but failed and was killed.\textsuperscript{146}

The understanding of Zuo Si’s general comments is augmented by the readers’ preconceptions of Jing Ke based on knowledge of his famous biography. Zuo assumed his readers were aware of the background and knowledge, and therefore he could transcend biographical details and concentrate his efforts on providing his interpretation of the significance of Jing Ke’s character and discussing what kind of person he was. A larger story behind Zuo Si’s last three couplets is recorded in the \textit{Shi ji}, where Sima Qian, the historian, focuses on the details of Jing Ke’s life and deeds in Yan; Zuo Si, the poet, shifts from narrative details to evaluative comments, from particular cases to universal characteristics.

Zuo Si critically engages in expressing his opinions by arguing against the traditional acceptance of social status as a measure of man’s worth, advocating moral values and high ambition as deserving merit and respect rather than titles and ranks. It seems that through commenting on Jing Ke, the Zuo Si launches a veiled criticism against the hereditary system in place in his own time. Zuo Si had high ambitions in his early years, and expressed his ideals in his first “Yongshi shi”: “Looking left, I cleanse the Yangzi and Xiang, / Gazing right, I pacify the Qiang tribes”.\textsuperscript{147} His aspirations reached an apex when his sister Zuo Fen (d. 300) was chosen to become Emperor Wu of Jin’s (236-290) concubine; his whole family moved to the capital. However, Zuo Fen was summoned by the Emperor Wu of the Jin not because of her beauty but for her

\textsuperscript{146} Sima Qian, \textit{Shi ji}, 2537.

literary talents, and therefore the Emperor only summoned her to compose literary writings and she did not have an intimate and close relationship with him. It is unlikely that Zuo Fen was ever in a position to help Zuo Si substantially in terms of his political career, and this constituted a poignant contrast with Zuo Si’s anticipation. After years of struggle and competing for his ideals, Zuo Si gave up trying to obtain a high position.148

This technique of composing poems on history as a vehicle for expressing one’s own opinions and criticisms was widely acknowledged by later generations as a feature of Zuo Si’s poetry. For instance, Shen Deqian 沈德潛 (1673-1769) made these comments on the Zuo Si’s “Yong shi”:

Taichong [Zuo Si]’s poems on history do not exclusively sing of particular persons or events. He sings of the ancient people, yet his own nature and emotions are fully apparent. His poetry was the pinnacle of poetic perfection for a thousand years. Later only Mingyuan [Bao Zhao 鮑照, ca. 415–470] and Taibo [Li Bo 李白, 701–762] could write poems like him.

The expression of opinions and criticism through historical reference that I have outlined in detail for the sixth of Zuo Si’s poems on history is found in other poems in the “Yong shi” section of the Wen xuan, including, for example, Wang Can’s 王粲 “Yongshi shi”

2.3 Exaggerating and Manipulating Historical Accounts

The two approaches that poets used to deal with history that I have discussed so far are based on historical narration: either paraphrasing historical records into poetic forms, or articulating their own opinions through commenting on historical events. The third approach, however, is a fundamentally different relationship with historical lore, in that poets manipulate historical accounts and alter or exaggerate them for their own purposes. Bao Zhao’s 鮑照 “Yong shi” is a good example of this.

1. 五都矜財雄,  The five capitals boasted their wealth and grandness.
   三川養聲利。  The three rivers cultivated their reputation and benefit.

2. 百金不市死,  People with a hundred pieces of gold did not die in a market.
   明經有高位。  People who mastered the canons obtained high positions.

3. 京城十二衢,  Twelve thoroughfares were in the capital,
   飛甍各鱗次。  Flying eaves were in order like fish scales.

4. 仕子彯華纓,  The magnificent ribbons of officials fluttered in the wind,
   遊客竦輕轡。  While travelers gave free rein to their nimble horses.
5. 明星晨未稀，
The bright stars were sparse and the morning had not yet come.
軒蓋已雲至。
Lofty carriages had already arrived, like clouds gathering.
6. 賓御紛颯沓，
Guests and their retainers rustled in the crowd.
鞍馬光照地。
The lustre from horses and their saddles shone on the roads
7. 寒暑在一時，
Winter turns into summer in the space of a single season,
繁華及春媚。
A profusion of blossoms arrive in spring enchantment.
8. 君平獨寂寞，
Only Junping was lonely,
身世兩相棄。
He and this world abandoned each other.

Scholars are not sure when this poem was composed.¹⁵⁰ Bao Zhao depicts the people who pursued fame and reputation through their great endeavours in the capitals, but describes Yan Junping 嚴君平 (86 B.C.E-10) as being above and apart from these worldly pursuits. However, the accounts we have about Yan Junping before Bao Zhao’s time, such as the Han shu, Bowu zhi 博物志 (The Treatise on Manifold Subjects), Gaoshi zhuàn 高士傳 (The Biographies of the Lofty Figures), and Hua yang guo zhi 華陽國志 (Records of the States South of Mount Hua), differ from his portrayal of Yan Junping as a complete recluse with high moral values.

The last couplet states that Yan Junping was lonely and abandoned the world, which he thought did not appreciate him. However, both assertions are not completely consistent with historical records, since Yan Junping was not lonely spiritually nor did he

live in complete isolation. The *Han shu* mentions that Yan Junping made a living through performing divination in the city of Chengdu. After earning enough money, he closed his curtain and taught the *Laozi*, a canonical text of Daoist philosophy, to his disciples. One of his disciples was Yang Xiong 扬雄 (53 B.C.E-18), who later became an illustrious official in the capital and was famous for his literary writings. Yang Xiong himself is quoted in the *Han Shu* speaking of his successes:

> During the reign of the Filial Emperor Cheng, there was an [imperial] retainer who recommended my compositions as resembling the style of [Sima] Xiangru. The emperor was about to perform the suburban sacrifices at the Grand Altar in Sweet Springs and to the Sovereign Earth at Fenyin, in order to seek an heir to succeed him. He summoned me as Candidate for Appointment in the courtyard of the Hall of Received Brilliance.\(^{151}\)

In the capital, Yang Xiong praised Yan Junping, which ensured that the latter became a well-known figure. Therefore, Yan Junping’s fame and reputation was spread by his disciples, and was famous among officials. For instance, the magistrate of Shu once wanted to invite Yan Junping to become an official, but Yang Xiong warned the magistrate that he should treat him with courtesy and respect, and not restrain him. Although the magistrate did not dare ask Yan Junping for public service, he did take the extraordinary step of visiting him in person, which illustrates Yan Junping’s popularity and widely acknowledged virtues.\(^{152}\) Therefore, far from the world abandoning him as Bao Zhao described, he was well respected in social circles.


\(^{152}\) Ban Gu, *Han shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 3056-3057.
Although Yan Junping did not serve in court, he was actively involved in educating people about filial piety, loyalty and deference through his divination. According to the *Han shu*, Yan Junping said, “When there is a query about something perverse and unjust, then I [Junping] address its advantages and harm according to divination with milfoil and tortoise. What I say to sons concerns filiality, to brothers I speak of deference, and to servitors loyalty. Each according to his particular circumstances, I direct them toward goodness, and more than half have followed my words”.

Thus, he did not abandon his social responsibilities, but performed them in the public space of the market rather than in the closed court. Yan Junping may not have wanted to serve the government as an official (*shi* 仕), but Bao Zhao’s characterization of him as abandoning and being abandoned by “the world” (*shi* 世) can be read as a use of hyperbole to highlight Yan Junping’s lofty ideals.

When writing his poem, Bao Zhao has the power to adapt or change historical accounts to express his own concerns. Bao Zhao wanted to portray himself as a person who did not want to frantically seek fame and reputation, but instead preferred to remain lonely and destitute as long as he could maintain his moral integrity. In depicting Yan Junping as a lonely scholar apart from the world, Bao employs a rhetorical strategy to use Yan Junping as a symbolic figure (shaped by the poet) rather than presenting him as a historical person. Bao Zhao’s attitude was likely due to his numerous failed attempts to fulfill his political ambitions. As the modern scholar Qian Zhixi 錢志熙 concludes based on reading historical accounts on Bao Zhao: “He was born in a poor family, but he

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did not want to stay in lower offices with his great talents; so he did not yield to his fate, and pursued his dream and political ambitions. However, once he encountered difficulties, he felt frustrated and depressed.‖

Bao Zhao felt that influential and powerful families in control of court politics obstructed and resisted his desire to pursue his own ideals. By adopting Yan Junping as a literary touchstone, Bao Zhao established his moral worth in the arena of literature instead of politics.

The image of Yan Junping as a lofty hermit presented in Bao Zhao’s poem became more widespread than the one in historical accounts that show him to be well connected socially. This poetic portrayal was widely accepted by later poets, which demonstrates that literary representation of historical figures is often more influential than historical accounts. For instance, Li Bai (701-762), influenced by Bao Zhao’s comments on Yan Junping, begins with an identical couplet in terms of its connotation and structure, “Since Junping abandoned the world, the world abandoned him as well.”

Zuo Si’s “Yong shi II”, preserved in the “Yongshi Shi” section of the Wen xuan, also uses this approach of distorting historical accounts to stress that the historical figure Feng Tang was unappreciated by the powers of the day. Zuo Si uses Feng Tang as a rhetorical figure to express his opinions about malicious politics in his time.

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154 Qian Zhixi 錢志熙, Wei Jin Nanbeichao shige shi shu 魏晉南北朝詩歌史述 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2005), 137.

155 Li Bai 李白, Qu Tuiyuan 瞿蜕園, et al., eds. Li Bai ji jiao zhu 李白集校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980), 116.
1. 鬱鬱澗底松。 Luxuriant pines [grow] at the bottom of a ravine.
離離山上苗。 Lush sprouts [grow] on the top of a mountain.

2. 以彼徑寸莖。 The sprouts use their inch diameter stems,
蔭此百尺條。 To shade the pine branches of a hundred feet long.

3. 世胄躡高位。 Noble descendants ascended to high positions.
英俊沈下僚。 The outstanding talented sank to lower offices.

4. 地勢使之然。 The differing terrain made it so.
由來非一朝。 With time passing, it gradually became this way.

5. 金張藉舊業。 The Jin and Zhang relied on the legacy of their ancestors.
七葉珥漢貂。 Seven generations wore the sables of Han.

6. 馮公豈不偉。 How could it be possible that Sir Feng was not great?
白首不見招。 White haired, he was not summoned by the Emperor.

In this poem, Zuo Si mentions Feng Tang in his old age, and therefore it is possible that this poem was composed later in Zuo Si’s life, when he taught the *Han shu* to the Director of the Palace Library, Jia Mi (d. 300), and became one of his “Twenty-four Friends”.156 The last line of this poem has two possible explanations due to the relationship between “white haired” and “not being summoned by the Emperor”. The first can be rendered as “White haired, he was not summoned by the Emperor”, which conveys the theme of social hierarchy in the poem. Zuo Si uses a natural image of short

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sprouts on top of a mountain versus tall pine trees at the bottom of a ravine to capture the idea of social inequality. The image evokes the poet’s emotions about this unfairness in society, where noble families, like Jin and Zhang, ascend to high positions effortlessly, while the talented poor, like Feng Tang, were not given an opportunity even in old age. This reading follows Zuo Si’s previous couplets, makes the entire structure of the poem consistent and expresses his opinion clearly and powerfully. The alternative reading of this line is: “He was not summoned until his hair turned white”, indicating that Feng Tang was not appointed until later in life, which softens the tone of Zuo Si’s direct social criticism. If this is the case, Zuo Si would likely have used a more explicit verb like shi 始 to convey this connotation rather than adopt a complete negative word bu 不.

Zuo Si’s final couplet suggests that Feng Tang was a great man, unappreciated either for his entire life or at least the majority of his life, but when one returns to historical records, such as those found in the Shi ji, Wang Fu’s 王符 Qian fu lun 潛夫論 (Comments of a Recluse), Ban Gu’s Han shu, and Yang Xiong’s “Fa yan” 法言 (Exemplary Figures), there is evidence that contradicts this claim. For instance, the Shi ji and Han shu do not describe Feng Tang as a great man when he was young, only referring to his reputation of filial piety. Because of his moral value, he procured a position and “became the Chief of the Bureau of Palace Attendants, serving Emperor Wen”.157 While this appointment demonstrates that he was not overlooked as Zuo Si claims, his status could not be considered “great”. In fact, this appointment may have been made due to Feng Tang’s strong family background rather than any inherent greatness. As noted in the Shi ji and Han shu, “his grandfather was commandant of the

157 Nienhauser 2008, 364; Sima 1959, 2757; Ban 1962, 2312.
grand masters of a battalion in the Zhao”, and “his father was the Chancellor of Dai”, both of which were relatively high positions.¹⁵⁸

Neither the *Shi ji* nor *Han shu* mentions that Feng Tang was ignored by the Emperor. Actually, Feng Tang was already a lieutenant in his old age, and it was Emperor Wen who saw him with white hair in the crowd and took the initiative to talk with him. During the conversation, Feng Tang insulted the Emperor by saying that even though he had great military figures, like Lian Po and Li Mu, he could not use them. This comment was a direct criticism of the Emperor, who was irritated at first, but appreciated Feng Tang’s candour and sincerity in criticizing his policy of light rewards and strict punishments; therefore, the Emperor ultimately accepted Feng Tang’s remonstration and promoted him to be “Chief Commandant of Chariots and Cavalry with authority over the palace guards and the carriage-men of the commanderies and kingdoms”.¹⁵⁹ Upon presenting a good idea to Emperor Wen, Feng Tang was promoted immediately. This record praises both Feng Tang and Emperor Wen’s virtue and demonstrates that the Emperor was a generous and open-minded ruler, and Feng Tang was a loyal subject, who sincerely presented his strategy about state affairs. Sima Qian in the *Shi ji* comments at the end of his biography, “They [Zhang Shizhi and Feng Tang] stuck to the law and did not miss the great order, they talked about the worthies of old and enlarged the brightness of the ruler”.¹⁶⁰ This shows that the purpose of compiling this biography is to praise this ideal harmonious relationship between the Emperor and his subjects.

¹⁵⁹ Nienhauser 2008, 367; Sima 1959, 2759; Ban 1962, 2314.
¹⁶⁰ Nienhauser 2008, 368.
Moreover, after Emperor Wen, succeeding rulers continued to treat Feng Tang with respect, “Seven years later Emperor Jing acceded to the throne and made [Feng] Tang Chancellor of Chu. [Feng Tang] was dismissed. When Emperor Wu was enthroned and searched for worthy and capable men, he raised Feng Tang. [Feng] Tang, however, was at that time already over ninety years old and was not able to become an official again, whereupon [the Emperor] appointed Tang’s son, Feng Sui, Gentleman”.\textsuperscript{161} From this account, it seems that the three Emperors kept providing Feng Tang opportunities, and based on the historical records, we do not have the impression that Feng Tang was abandoned by his rulers. However, Zuo Si, who was surely familiar with this history, overturned this verdict, and claimed that Feng Tang did not have a chance to extend his abilities, though he was talented. By depicting Feng Tang’s situation as a failure, the poet expresses his own feelings of being unappreciated and lacking opportunities due to historical circumstances.

The image of Feng Tang in Zuo Si’s poem may differ from major historical accounts, but it is similar to a description of Feng Tang that appears in Xun Yue’s 荀悦 (148-209) \textit{Qian Han ji} 前漢紀 (Record of the Former Han). Xun mentions that “when old, Feng Tang stooped to occupy a low office” 馮唐白首，屈於郎署 (Xun, 54). Zuo Si might have read Xun Yue’s comments, since the \textit{Qian Han ji} was composed at the end of the Han dynasty to explicate the \textit{Han shu}. Zuo Si and Xun Yue’s depiction of Feng Tang narrowed later scholars’ perception of the Feng Tang story, focusing on his being unappreciated rather than the virtues of the Han Emperors who continued to employ him

\textsuperscript{161} The \textit{Han shu} records this event took place ten years after Emperor Jing ascended to the throne rather than seven years appeared in the \textit{Shi ji}. See Nienhauser 2008, 367; Sima 1959, 2761; Ban 1962, 2315.
in various positions. This was at odds with the mainstream historical accounts found in the *Shi ji* and *Han shu*, which provide multiple dimensions in their narration, praising Feng Tang’s boldness and sincerity, Emperor Wen’s open-mindedness, Emperor Jing’s generosity, and Emperor Wu’s eagerness to employ talented men. Only the first element became the recurring theme in later literary writings. The depiction of Feng Tang as a typical example of a frustrated talented man by Zuo Si circulated via the *Wen xuan* and seems to affect a wide range of literati in the Tang Dynasty, such as Wang Bo’s 王勃 (ca. 649-ca. 676) “Teng wang ge xu” 滕王閣序 (Preface to the Prince of Teng’s Pavilion) and Du Fu’s 杜甫 (712-770) “Chui bai” 垂白, also known as “Bai shou” 白首 (White Hair), and Yao He’s 姚合 “Ou ran shu huai” 偶然書懷 (Expressing My Emotions in Spontaneity):

> Alas! Fortune is unevenly distributed, and life suffers many setbacks. Feng Tang rapidly grew old, and Li Guang found it difficult to be conferred marquis. 唉乎！時運不齊，命途多舛。馮唐易老，李廣難封。①62

> White haired, Feng Tang became aged; in crisp autumn, Song Yu was melancholic. 垂白馮唐老，清秋宋玉悲。①63

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①63 Du Fu 杜甫, Qiu Zhaoao 仇兆鰲, ed. *Du shi xiang zhu* 杜詩詳注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 1462.
The Han has Feng Tang while Tang has me, who else still holds a minor position of lieutenant in old age?

漢有馮唐唐有我，老為郎吏更何人。  

These Tang poets noted that even during great emperors’ reigns of the flourishing Han dynasty, talented men were still ignored: Feng Tang continued to hold a minor position of lieutenant in old age. This poetic image of Feng Tang—which deviates from historical accounts—appealed to the literati and their sense of self-worth when encountering political difficulties and frustrations themselves. Through him, they lament being unappreciated, and are waiting for the discovery of their worth. In the Tang, although the civil service examination allowed a few scholars to advance to official positions from the lower classes, there was still much inequality. Even though the official historical accounts state that Feng Tang was offered the opportunities by three Emperors during his official career, the Tang poets are more attracted to this unappreciated literary figure as shown in Zuo Si’s poem and alluded to in Xun Yue’s record. This attitude towards the re-evaluation of history became increasingly explicit in the subgenre of fanan shi 翻案詩 (―precedent-overturning poetry‖) in the Tang Dynasty.

The label “precedent-overturning poems” refers to writing that seeks to master historical events, giving fresh comments and verdicts on people and issues from the past. This iconoclastic tradition in the Late Tang (827-860) can trace its deep roots to the Six Dynasties. Many poets living in the Late Tang preferred to use this technique, through which they could transcend the judgments of the ancients and discuss what predecessors

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164 Yao He 姚合, Yao Shaojian shi ji 姚少監詩集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1994), 31.
did not say; it is a striking and effective strategy as it defeats its “enemy” by a surprise attack, going against received historical accounts and opinions. With this approach, poets could engage in a thorough re-evaluation of history, discussing the origin and significance of historical matters from diverse sides. Du Mu’s poem is a representative example:

題烏江亭                                   An Inscription on the Wujiang Pavilion

勝敗兵家事不期,                      Military strategists cannot predict victory or defeat,
包羞忍恥是男兒。                    He who can accept shame and endure humiliation is a true man.
江東子弟多才俊,                      Among the sons of the eastern Yangtze region the able and talented abound,
卷土重來未可知。165          Whether they could sweep over the land and stage a return remains unknown.

Wujiang Pavilion, also named Xiang Pavilion 項亭, lies in He 和 Prefecture, Anhui Province. This pavilion commemorates Xiang Yu 項羽 (232-202 BCE), who was defeated by Liu Bang 劉邦 (256-195 BCE) and committed suicide there. After ten years of vagrant living, Du Mu went to the capital from Xuanzhou 宣州. When he crossed the river, he dropped by this pavilion and wrote the poem. With respect to the defeat of Xiang Yu, a myriad of commentators believe that because Liu Bang, the founder of the

165 *Fanchuan wenji*, 72.
Western Han (202 BCE- 8 AD) knew how to appease the people and rewarded those who had served him well, everyone was willing to submit to him. By contrast, Xiang Yu was such a self-willed and headstrong person that he was bound to fail. This was the historical judgment. We can see from as early as Xiang Yu’s biography (Xiangyu benji 項羽本紀) in Records of the Historians (Shiji 史記) that, “He boasted of his conquests, trusted only his personal judgment and did not follow ancient precedents. Considering himself the overlord, he tried to win his empire by military conquest, so that within five years he lost his kingdom and met his death at Dongcheng. Yet he never realized his mistake or blamed himself for his folly.”

Du Mu, familiar with the art of war, rejected popular historical conclusions and pointed out that winning and losing is common during war. If Xiang Yu had undergone self-imposed hardships and nursed vengeance, he might have eventually had the opportunity to win the war. Later critics after Du Mu commented on his fresh idea in a different voice. For instance, Hu Zi/Zai 胡仔 (1110-1170) once remarked,

As for Du Mu’s “Passing Wujiang Pavilion”, it is so unusual that it violates common sense. Xiang Yu led almost eight thousand warriors across the river. At the end of the war, very few of them survived. He experienced a severe loss in public support. Who could trust him and join his army anymore? Obviously, he was not able to attempt a comeback.

166 Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145-89 BCE), Yang Xianyi 楊憲益 and Gladys Yang tran., Shijixuan 史記選 (Beijing: Waiwen chubanshe, 2001), 68.
Hu Zi kept a very traditional outlook towards Xiang Yu. The same attitude is in Hu Zeng’s poem “Wujiang” 烏江.\(^{167}\) These two critics, not understanding the idea of *zhiren lunshi* 知人論世 (know the people and their background, then discuss their works”), were a little narrow-minded: they did not adequately value the intention of Du Mu’s poem. They only talked about the historical record and forgot that Du Mu wanted to articulate his own feelings, combining meditation on history with reflection on his own life.

Besides “An Inscription on the Wujiang Pavilion”, there were many other masterful precedent-overturning poems. Zhang Jie’s 章碣 (836-905) poem “The Pit Where Confucian Books Were Burned” (*Fen Shu Keng* 焚書坑)\(^{169}\) adopted a new perspective to reflect on the demise of the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE). “Xishi Shoal” (*Xishi Tan* 西施灘), written by Cui Daorong 崔道融 (fl. 895), reversed the historical verdict on Xishi by voicing grievances for her rather than blame for her role in the downfall of a kingdom.

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\(^{168}\) Chen Xinxian 陳新憲, et al., eds. *Yongshi shi* 詠史詩 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1987), 42.

\(^{169}\) Gao Wen 高文, et al., eds., *Quan Tang shi jianbian* 全唐詩簡編 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1993), 1641.
3. Conclusion

In discussing ways to make friends, Mencius said,

The best Gentleman of a village is in a position to make friends with the best Gentlemen in other villages; the best Gentleman in a state, with the best Gentlemen in other states…And not content with making friends with the best Gentlemen in the Empire, he goes back in time and communes with the ancients. When one reads the poems and writings of the ancients, can it be right not to know something about them as men? Hence one tries to understand the age in which they lived. This can be described as ‘looking for friends in history’.  

All the poets examined above seemed to feel no one in their contemporary world could understand them, and were compelled to trace their role models back to ancient figures. The first part of the passage from the Mencius tells readers that one should first enlarge one’s circle of friends from a local to national level and then from contemporary to ancient people. In poems on history poets pass over their contemporaries and go directly to commune with ancient figures, commenting on their life and behavior to express their own contemporary concerns.

The poets’ intimate relationship with the past is demonstrated in their poems through their three approaches to historical lore: the first is to paraphrase historical sources in poetic form; the second is not a retelling of historical narrative so much as an expressive use of stories to comment on archetypes as a way of commenting on oneself; while the third strays farthest from historical sources by manipulating them, often through exaggeration and/or omission. This third approach becomes especially prominent.

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170 D.C. Lau, Mencius (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2003), 237.
in the Chinese literary tradition after the Six Dynasties. Later poets altered historical accounts and challenged the traditional reception of historical events or people to attract the attention of their readers; by breaking the received horizon of expectations they created a kind of alienation or de-familiarization effect. Once historical figures and events have been de-familiarized, the poets are free to engage in a re-evaluation of history by providing a different perspective and interpretation of the significance of historical matters and figures. Speaking about the old becomes a way of saying something new.

The *yongshi shi* poets included in the *Wen xuan* adopt these three approaches of paraphrasing, commenting, and manipulating historical sources to fashion their poetry as a way of making new sense of the past. Although they composed poems on the historical figures events of bygone eras, the past becomes present again in the poets’ imagination as expressed in their poems. They selected which figures or events ended up in their poems and which aspect they wanted to show their readers. Their feelings affected the selection process, and played an essential role in shaping history in their poems; thus they did not simply transmit historical records as a means of maintaining and preserving them, but related history to their own contemporary issues and personal encounters. Through *yongshi shi*, historical lore is transformed from a record of the past to become an expressive mode for the present.

The poets in the section of Poems on History in the *Wen xuan*, after struggling for political fame, realized the importance of conveying their ambitions and ideals to later generations through a poetic-self constructed by commenting on historical people. They drew upon a vast body of lore, including written accounts and oral transmission, to create
a literary space in the present to commemorate the physical absence of the past as something that is still relevant, still alive, in the present. Through this they are able to convey their intimate relationship with history. The poems are more than an expression of their feelings, but also a means by which these poets sought to secure their reputations in Chinese literary history as men of sensitivity, talent, and moral worth.
Chapter 4: Poetic-self vs. Historical-self: Zuo Si (ca. 250-ca. 305) as a Case Study

The second and third chapters discuss the section of Poems on History from the perspectives of reception studies and dissemination of historical lore. As the previous chapter discussed, the editors of the *Wen xuan* wanted to select the best and most representative literary works with “profound thought” and “literary elegance” from history. Through adopting close reading approach, the following two chapters take Zuo Si and Yan Yanzhi’s poems on history as specific examples to shed light on the characteristics of poems on history in the *Wen xuan*. To the editors of this anthology, Zuo’s poems on history serve as an earlier example and Yan’s poems as a recent case.

1. Introduction to Zuo Si and His Poems on History

Zuo Si’s eight “Poems on History” were all selected in the section of Poems on History in the *Wen xuan*. They played a fundamental role in the development of the *yongshi shi* subgenre. Qing Dynasty scholar He Zhuo 何焯 (1661-1722) pinpointed Zuo Si’s radical departure from previous poems on history when he delineated the development of this subgenre,

The poets who wrote poems on history just embellished the historical events and sang about them, paraphrased and summarized the biographies, without any

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artistic innovation. This was the standard form. Taichong [Zuo Si] often expressed his own feelings and emotions, and this was a change of the genre.

詠史者不過美其事而詠歎之，隱括本傳，不加藻飾，此正體也。太沖多自摅胸臆，乃又其變。172

Not only are Zuo Si’s poems crucial with regard to the development of poems on history, but they are also exceptional in providing an alternative to the ornamental amplification style current at that time. Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619-92) commented on the Western Jin’s literary atmosphere,

After the Three Kingdoms, it was the Western Jin. At that time, [old] literary style was largely destroyed. [However,] the ancient system and heart was not lost to future generations. If this literary contribution was not Taichong’s [Zuo Si], to whom else could it be attributed?

三國之降為西晉，文體大壞，古度古心，不絕於來茲者，非太沖其焉歸？173

Zuo Si’s poems attach a greater importance to the content of the poems, utilizing a direct, unrestrained, and impassioned style. He was inspired by the Jian’an 建安 (196-220) poetic style, but even the Jian’an poets, although very creative in their individual poems, still often imitated the earlier classical poems by using stock phrases to express their emotions. According to both He and Huang’s comments, before Zuo Si, poems on history focused mostly on narrating the stories of historical persons and events through the poetic form, thus serving as merely another way of presenting the standard, official history.

172 He Zhuo 何焯, Yimen dushu ji 義門讀書記 juan 46 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 889.
Qing Dynasty scholar Huang Ziyun 黃子雲 (1691-1754) highly praised Zuo Si’s poetic ability,

Taichong followed Han and Wei’s examples, but his creative diction and well-crafted syntax did not imitate any previous poets at all. He wrote the poems out naturally and gracefully, which made himself a great writer.

太沖祖述漢魏，而修詞造句，全不沿襲一句。落落寫來，自成大家。” 174

Before we examine the relationship between Zuo Si’s historical self as it has been captured in extant records and his poetic self as he presented it in his poetry, let us pause to examine what we know of his life and how his works were transmitted to the present day.

Zuo Si 左思 (ca. 253–ca. 305), a native of Linzhi 臨淄 (modern Zibo 淄博, Shandong) was a famous literary figure of the Western Jin. He was styled Taichong 太沖 (alternately written 泰沖). 175 His father Zuo Yong 雍 (elsewhere, Zuo Xi 熹) served in the capital as an attendant censor responsible for surveillance over palace personnel (dianzhong shiyushi 殿中侍御史). In 272, when his sister Zuo Fen 芬 (alternately, 菲, ca. 255–300) was chosen for her literary talent to be a lady of the imperial harem, the whole family moved to Luoyang. 176 Zuo Si occupied the positions of Palace Library Assistant (mishulang 秘書郎) and Libationer (jijiu 祭酒). He taught the History of the

174 Huang Ziyuan 黃子雲, “Ye hong shi de” 野鴻詩的 in the Qing shi hua 清詩話 (Taibei: Muduo chubanshe, 1988), 221.
175 Linzhi 臨淄 is currently Zibo 淄博, Shandong Province.
Han Dynasty to the Director of the Palace Library (mishujian 秘書監), Jia Mi 賈謐 (d. 300), and joined his group of “Twenty-Four Friends.” In March 300, Zuo Fen died. In April of that year, the Prince of Zhao, Sima Lun 司馬倫 (d. 301), led a coup d’état, cast out the Empress Jia 賈皇后 (256–300), and killed Zhang Hua 張華 (232–300) and Jia Mi.\(^{177}\) Zuo Si withdrew from public life to Yichunli 宜春裏, a town east of Luoyang, and focused upon writing and editing documents. The Prince of Qi, Sima Jiong 囍 (d. 302), offered him a position as Record Keeper (jishidu 記室督) but he declined it. When Zhang Fang 張方 (d. 306) attacked Luoyang in 303, Zuo Si’s family moved to Jizhou 冀州 (the site of modern Jizhou in Hebei). He died of illness several years later. His biography is found in the “Wen yuan” 文苑 section of the surviving *Jin shu*,\(^{178}\) and preserved in fragments from other editions of that history. Other accounts about him are in the *Shishuo xinyu*.

We know from the “Bibliographical Treatise” in the *Sui shu*, which records that there was a five-juan edition of Zuo Si’s collected works, that Zuo Si’s writings were available in the Six Dynasties. However, many of his writings have been lost and only three rhapsodies (fu 賦) and fourteen poems are left to us today.\(^{179}\) The best known of

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\(^{177}\) For the historical background of the second half of the third century, see Anthony Bruce Fairbank, “Kingdom and Province in the Western Chin: Regional Power and the Eight Kings Insurrection (a.d. 300–306),” M.A. thesis, University of Washington, 1986.


\(^{179}\) Zuo Si Si’s biographical background appears in *Wen xuan*’s Biographical Sketches, which follows the conventions of *Jinshu* 晉書 92.2375. See Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501-531), David Knechtges trans., *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature Volume One: Rhapsodies on Metropolises and Capitals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 483. Otherwise the source will be indicated.
these are the “Three Capitals Rhapsodies” (San du fu 三都賦) and his “Poems on History”. According to Robert Joe Cutter, “Although only fourteen of Tso Ssu’s poems survive, he is considered one of the better poets of early medieval times.” More than half of his surviving poems are a series of eight “Poems on History”. The first time that Zuo Si’s poems on history were selected was in Xiao Tong’s Wen xuan under the subgenre heading of “Poems on History”. Although the selection itself represented Xiao and his editorial team, it was also influenced by the intellectual atmosphere of the Southern dynasties (as was discussed in the previous chapter). The editorial team selection of eight of Zuo Si’s poems on history make up more than one third of the poems in this section, and the subgenre title of the section itself was probably named after Zuo Si’s poems. Now let us turn to an examination of the origins and subsequent usage of the term “poems on history”.

2. On the Composition of Zuo Si’s “Poems on History”

2.1 “Poems on History” as a Title

According to Tian Xiaofei’s arguments on the fluidity of Tao Yuanming’s manuscript culture, the titles of literary works were not fixed in the Six Dynasties. Before Zuo Si’s time, there were poems titled “Poems on History” (yongshi), but some of these title

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181 Tian Xiaofei, Tao Yuanming & Manuscript Culture: The Record of a Dusty Table (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005).
attributions are questionable. For example, Stephen Owen mentions the case of Ban Gu’s Poem on History. As he explains, we do not have the confidence to attribute an exact title to Ban Gu’s poem.\(^{182}\)

Zuo Si’s poems are titled yongshi shi, but it is uncertain whether it was the original title for this group of poems or how many yongshi shi he actually composed, because much of Zuo Si’s collection was lost at the beginning of its transmission and the reconstruction of his collective works appeared much later.\(^{183}\) In fact, the first definitive edition of Zuo Si’s collective works was only compiled and edited by Ding Fubao in the early 20\(^{th}\) century. The title yongshi is also used to designate an entire subgenre of poetry as well as individual poems within that subgenre; it might have been added by later editors of certain anthologies or literary critics to poems attributed to Zuo Si.

The earliest instance of using yongshi to refer to a group of poems by Zuo Si is mentioned in the *Wenxin diaolong* (501-502), “Zuo Si was a man of extraordinary talent, deeply accomplished in his literary works, and of profound vision. He was completely focused on writing the ‘Three Capitals Rhapsody’ and outstanding in his ‘Poems on History’; exhausting all his energy in them.” 左思奇才，業深覃思，盡銳於三都，拔萃于詠史，無遺力矣.\(^{184}\) Liu mentions the yongshi explicitly and parallels it with the *Sandu fu*. This indicates Zuo Si’s works that had been seen by Liu already had the current


\(^{183}\) The “Bibliographical Treatise” (juan 35) in The Book of the Sui 隋書 records that there were Jin Qiwang fu Jishi Zuo Si ji 晉齊王府記室左思集, 2 juan, in the Sui and the commentary refers that there were 5 juan in the Liang. See Wei Zheng 魏徵, *Suishu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 1063.

title, or Liu ascribed this generic title to these poems, which either had no title or the original title had been lost. It is impossible to say with any certainty at what point the term *yongshi* became associated with Zuo’s poems, as from Zuo Si’s time to the time of the *Wenxin diaolong*, there is no extant record that discusses whether the original title for this group of poems is *yongshi* or not.

By the time of Zhong Rong’s *Shipin* (502-513), Zhong Rong chooses Zuo Si as a representative poet for the entire subgenre *yongshi* shi, and ranks him as a top poet. In the Preface to the *Shipin*, Zhong mentions twenty-two poems as the finest representatives of pentasyllabic poems. He selects Zuo Si’s “Poems on History” as the prime example for that literary subgenre.

Based on the available records, these eight poems were first selected into the *Wen xuan* under the section title “Poems on History” (*yongshi*). Ten out of the twenty-one poems in this section possess the same title as the subgenre; for example, the poets Wang Can, Zhang Xie, Zuo Si, and Bao Zhao all have poems simply titled “Poem on History”. Previous scholarship considered this title as belonging to these texts at their points of origin, and takes it as the foundation for their arguments. However, recent studies on Chinese manuscript culture—particularly that by Stephen Owen, Xiaofei Tian, and Christopher Nugent—demonstrate that this may not be the case. It is possible—even probable—that the editors of anthologies and compendia or later literary critics gave the title “Yongshi” to such poems, because they were classified under the label of that subgenre. In other words, the distinction between a title given to a specific poem and a specific poem being known simply by the label of its subgenre is unclear. Robert Joe Cutter mentions his concern about the certainty of poem titles in this era:
A few poems on history exist from Chien-an times. While it is sometimes difficult to know just when Chien-an poems acquired the titles they have today, it does not appear that the “Yung-shih shih” (Poem on History) title attached to Pan Ku’s old piece was common then. Juan Yü and Wang Ts’an each have a piece by that name about the three courtiers who went to the grave with Duke Mu of Ch’in about 620 BCE, but it is more usual for poems dealing with historical events to bear other kinds of titles, and Ts’ao Chih’s poem on the Duke Mu incident is entitled “San liang” (Three Good Men).185

It seems that the editors of the Wen xuan possibly added the titles for these poems, largely because they discuss different kinds of historical events and figures. Before the time of the Wen xuan, no accounts mention how many poems Zuo Si actually wrote on historical topics. When earlier records referred to “Poems on History”, they only mentioned yongshi and did not specify the number. It is possible that Zuo Si wrote more than the eight poems that appear in the Wen xuan. One piece of evidence for additional poems was found by later scholars as a two couplet fragment of a poem titled “Poem on History” (yongshi) attributed to Zuo Si in a Northern Song compendium called Beitang shuchao 北堂書鈔 (Excerpts from Books in the Northern Hall). The two couplets mention figures from the Three Kingdoms period; however, the extant eight poems in the Wen xuan do not allude to any figures from this period. Overall these fragments do not match the content and atmosphere of the rest of the poems, but they do remain as

tantalizing evidence that Zuo Si may have written more poems on history that those that eventually ended up in the *Wen xuan*.

### 2.2 Time of Zuo Si’s “Poems on History”

It is notoriously difficult to determine precisely when such poems may have been composed, but the scant information found in various surviving editions of the *Jin shu* along with accounts in unofficial histories provide slightly more information about Zuo Si’s life experiences that can shed light on the question of when he might have composed his poems. It is an important question as the time of composition of these poems can lead to different interpretations of their content. There are several theories based on both internal evidence from Zuo Si’s poems and external evidence from examining documents dealing with his life and times.\(^{186}\) However, discrepancies and contradictions do appear among the different records.

The first theory, based on the lines “Looking to the left, I pacify the Yangze and Xiang rivers. Glaring to the right, I subdue the Qiang barbarians.” 左眄澄江湘，右盻定羌胡 in the first poem, contends that this series of poems was written before the Western Jin unified the country, roughly between 270 and 280. The representative scholar of this assumption is Lu Kanru 陸侃如, who believes that the couplet above

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\(^{186}\) In the History of the Jin Dynasty, the author wrote much about the whole process of writing Rhapsodies on the Three Capitals, including its preface, commentaries, and readers’ response to his Rhapsodies. Nevertheless, his biography does not include any information about Zuo Si’s poems on history. See *Jin shu* 92.2375.
discusses Zuo Si’s early life. The logic of this supposition is that the first poem was written when Zuo was young, and because these poems are presented as a series, we can assume the whole group had been composed around the same time. This is partially right because the first poem does seem to discuss Zuo Si’s ambition in his youth, although this could have been written in later years looking back on his youthful ambitions. However, other poems in this group describe Zuo Si’s entire life experience into old age. These poems express different psychological states and have very different life experiences; so it is rather unlikely that they were written in the same period or during his young age.

The second theory of time of composition cites the desultory styles, moods, and spirit of these poems, arguing that this indicates they were written in different periods during Zuo Si’s life. However, scholars have different answers to this question. Here are some representative voices:

Xu Gongchi 徐公持 argues that the first, third, fourth and sixth poems were composed in his early life; the fifth and seventh poems were composed in his middle age; the second and eighth were written in his late years.

Wen Qinying 文擒鹰 holds that the first, third and sixth poems were composed when he was young (from 275 to 285); the second, fourth, and seventh poems were composed in his middle age (from 296 to 298); and the fifth and eighth poems were written in his later life (from 300 to 302).

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187 Lu Kanru 陆侃如, et. al., Zhongguo shishi 中國詩史 (Jinan: Shandong daxue chubanshe, 1985), 287.
188 Xu Gongchi 徐公持, Wei Jin wenxue shi 魏晉文學史 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1999), 393-394.
Hui Jingxia 惠景俠 states that the first and third poems were composed at the beginning of the Taikang reign (280-289); because the theme of the third poem matches the first one and both of them mention that after making a great contribution to the country, one shouldn’t focus on one’s fame and reputation. The second and seventh poems were composed at the middle and late period of the Taikang’s reign, because both poems refer to Zuo Si’s unsuccessful experience in the capital Luoyang. Although he was talented, he was not given a chance to demonstrate his abilities. The fourth and sixth poems were written at the end of the Taikang reign; this prediction is based on the intertextual links between Zhang Hua’s “Qing Bo Pian” 輕薄篇 and Zuo Si’s fourth poem on history. Zhang’s writing was composed in 287 and Zuo Si’s poems adopt the same allusions that Zhang used. Hui believes that the fifth and eighth poems were written at the end of Zuo Si’s life. These two poems show his attitude towards official life and his desire to become a recluse.  

Liu Wenzhong 劉文忠 mentions that the first poem was written between 272 and 279, possibly around 275; most of other poems were composed in his middle life; a few of them, such as the eighth poem, were composed after the year 300.  

Ye Riguang 葉日光 mentions that the first poem was composed between 272 and 280. The rest of the poems were not written within a short period but during various life stages.

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The scholars above all agree that the first and third poems were written earlier in Zuo Si’s life, the seventh around middle age, and the eighth later in his life. The different assumptions of composition time lie in the second, fourth, fifth, and sixth poems, in which Zuo Si demonstrates his idea of ending his pursuit of political achievements and his desire to become a recluse.

Another hypothesis asserts that these poems were all written in his later years, looking back on his life. This claim is based on the coherent content of these poems: the first poem serves as a preface and the next seven poems expound the first poem using a variety of historical and literary allusions to articulate Zuo Si’s feelings.

The most thorough research on the poems’ time of composition has been done by Xu Chuanwu 徐传武, who argues that the fifth poem mentions Zuo Si wanted to leave the capital; therefore, this took place much later than the first poem in which Zuo wants to make political contributions to the country. Xu believes the poems were composed at various stages in Zuo’s life. He explains that in terms of the logical connections between the eight poems, the first poem demonstrates his excellent talents and extends this to serve for the country. The second poem states that because of the strict social hierarchy, his dream could not come true. The third poem pays respect to the talented but impoverished, who, although situated at the bottom of the ravine, do not desire fame and reputation and only wanted to solve the actual problems for the country; the fourth poem further develops the comparison between the luxuriant sprouts and pine trees demonstrated in the second poem through comparing the noble family members and the

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193Mou Shijin and Xu Chuanwu, 30.
talented poor folk, like Yang Xiong. The fifth poem is the pinnacle of this series of poems, which demonstrates Zuo Si’s detachment of fame and desire to become a recluse through passionate language. After comparing the fourth and fifth poems, he uses the historical allusions of Jing Ke to conduct a rational analysis to inform his readers who the real ‘noble’ man is in Zuo Si’s view of point. At the same time, he also notices the difficulties of the talented but impoverished, which becomes the topic of his seventh poem. The approach for these historical figures to deal with the current situation is to become recluses to achieve preserve lofty ideals. Xu also mentions other evidence to confirm his hypothesis: the first and fifth poems do not use any historical allusions, but the title for the whole group is poems on history; therefore, one has to treat them as an integrated group.

Other contemporary Chinese scholars have a similar assumption. Ge Xiaoyin 葛曉音 mentions that these poems are his reminiscent poems.194 Qian Zhixi 錢志熙 also believes, “As a series of poems, it reflects Zuo Si’s entire career, literary writings, disposition and behavior. The first poem serves as a preface and the other seven poems appear in the form of praising other figures in verse. The first poem demonstrates his literary talents, disposition, principles, fame, contribution, and transcendent disposition.”195 Qian feels that these poems were composed in Zuo’s later years, especially during the period that he taught the Han shu to Jia Mi. Later he moved to Jizhou and focused on writing and editing documents.196

194 Ge Xiaoyin 葛曉音, Badai shishi 八代詩史 (Xi’an: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1989), 121-126.
195 Qian Zhixi 錢志熙, Wei Jin shige yishu yuanlun 魏晉詩歌藝術原論 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1993), 308-09.
196 Qian Zhixi, 307.
In my opinion, the reminiscent tone and autobiographical style, which gives readers a summary of Zuo Si’s life, indicates that the poems must have been written in Zuo Si’s later years. The coherent structure and systematic tone reveal that they were possibly composed during a short period. Many historical figures in the poems are from the Western Han. This is probably related to his experience of teaching the Han shu to Jia Mi. The ideas and thoughts connecting these poems are highly consistent, which demonstrates that he had obvious and strong motivations. Although it remains mysterious how many poems on history Zuo Si actually composed and in what timeframe, there is still a very tight and coherent structure among the eight poems. It is more likely that he composed these poems to review his whole life in his later life after he moved to Yichun li, where he edited and wrote many documents. It is also possible that these poems were composed in different life periods, but they were highly edited and revised later in his life. Now let us review the current scholarship on Zuo Si’s “Poems on History” themselves.

3. Literature Review of Studies on Zuo Si and His Poetry

3.1 Current Translations of Zuo Si’s “Poems on History”

According to A Research Guide to English Translation of Chinese Verse (up to 1977), some of Zuo’s Poems of History have

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been translated into English several times, i.e., Arthur Waley, “Day Dream” (Poems on History I); 199 J.D. Frodsham and Cheng Hsi “Three Historical Poems 2” (Poems on History II); 200 Frodsham and Cheng Hsi “Three Historical Poems 5” (Poems on History V); 201 Frodsham and Cheng Hsi “Three Historical Poems 6” (Poems on History VI); 202 James Liu, “On History”; 203 Arthur Waley, “The Scholar in the Narrow Street” (Poems on History VIII). 204

3.2 Secondary Scholarship on Zuo Si’s “Poems on History”

As for Zuo Si studies, David Knechtges translated his famous Rhapsody on Three Capitals, but there is limited extensive scholarship in English on Zuo’s “Poems on History”. However, some scholars mention Zuo when they discuss poetic phenomena and


201 Ibid.

202 Ibid.


204 Arthur Waley, Translation from the Chinese, 95.
development. For example, Watson’s *Chinese Lyricism* mentions Zuo’s historical and literary status and influence, but he did not provide detailed evidence or cases to expand on Zuo’s poems.²⁰⁵ Hans Frankel introduces different categories of poems and has one chapter about poems on history.²⁰⁶

Japanese scholarship on Zuo’s Poems on History is also limited. In a recent summary article, Professor Sun Mingjun 孫明君 reviewed research by Japanese scholars on poems from the Six Dynasties period.²⁰⁷ According to the paper, Japanese scholars paid more attention to the Jian’an 建安 poets, Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (ca. 365-427), and Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385-433). They also examined the *Wen xuan* and the relationship between Six Dynasties poetry and Tang poetry from a macro perspective. However, Professor Sun did not uncover any studies on Zuo’s “Poems on History”.

Many years ago, Kozen Hiroshi conducted research on Zuo Si. Kozen Hiroshi was a professor in Kyoto University and a major Japanese scholar researching Chinese medieval literary studies. His long paper entitled “Zuo Si and His Poems on History” examines the provenance of these poems, the relationship between historical figures and Zuo Si, Zuo’s depression, his disillusionment, and the reception of his poems. He mentioned Zuo’s influence towards Zhang Xie 張協 (fl.307), Tao Yuanming, and Bao Zhao 鮑照 (ca. 415-470). In addition, he briefly talked about Zuo’s reception in Tang;

for example, how Zuo’s attitude towards history affected Li Bai’s 李白 (701-762) “Gu Feng” 古風. However, he did not analyze Zuo’s reception in literary criticism, such as Wenxin diaolong 文心雕龍 and Shipin 詩品. Kozen’s article made a great contribution to Zuo Si studies, but it would be better if he could place these poems in a broader context. For example, he traced the origin of composing poems on history back to Ban Gu 班固 (32-92), but he did not refer to earlier literary writings, such as poems from the Shi jing 詩經.

In contrasting to the limited English and Japanese scholarship on Zuo Si’s poetry, Chinese scholars have written many papers and several monographs, but only a few papers focus on the reception of his “Poems on History”. According to the Chinese Academic Journals and the Chinese Studies Online databases held by University of Toronto, there are sixty-seven papers on Zuo Si and his Poems on History up to 2009. These papers can be divided into several categories, below are examples of each category and their distinguishing factors.

To begin with, the majority of these papers (around 30) analyze the content of Zuo’s “Poems on History”, focusing on introducing these poems to readers and explaining the historical allusions, the meaning of each poem, and Zuo’s feelings and emotions. Among these papers, Mou Shijin 牟世金 and Xu Chuanwu 徐傳武 “Zuo Si wen xue ye ji xin lun” 左思文學業績新論, is a good representation which contains

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China Academic Journals database has included all the papers which Wang Fang included. I used 左思 as title to search 113 individual paper titles included either Zuo Si, Tai Chong or Ji Shi in the China Academic Journal or China Online Studies databases from the earliest publications to July 30, 2009 used at the University of Toronto. I deleted papers which researched his other poems or rhapsodies. Finally 67 papers discussed either Zuo’s poems on history or his biography.
most of the points above (which are repeated in many other papers). Xu also published another two papers that gave comments on exemplary pentasyllabic couplets selected from Zuo’s poems, which covered some of his “Poems on History”. Xu not only shed light on the literary and historical allusions, but also cited literary criticism from the past to present, mainly after the Ming Dynasty, to demonstrate the literary features of these poems, including their diction, imagery, and style. Furthermore, after analyzing these points for each poem, he sometimes mentions how some poets or poems were affected by Zuo and his poems.

The second group of papers (around 10) attaches more importance to the artistic value, techniques, and styles that these poems employed, such as “Yijie hanshi de tansuo—Jiedu Zuo Si ‘Yongshi’ shi” — 一介寒士的探索 —— 解读左思《咏史》诗 209 and “Luelun zs “Yongshi” bashou” 略论左思《咏史》八首. 210

The third group (7 papers) pays more attention to the comparison or similarity between Zuo and other poets in Chinese Medieval literature, such as the comparison between Zuo Si and Bao Zhao (3 papers), between Zuo Si and Tao Yunming (3 papers), and the similarity between Zuo Si and Hu Zeng. For instance, “Zuo Bao yitong chutan—Bijiao fenxi Zuo Si, Bao Zhao de rensheng jingyu yu rensheng juezhe” 左鲍異同初探 —— 比较分析左思、鲍照的人生境遇与人生抉择 211 and “Zuo Si ‘Yongshi’ yu Tao Yuanming ‘Yong pinshi’ zhi bijiao” 左思《咏史》与陶渊明《咏贫士》之比较. 212

211 Dai Jianye 戴建業, “Zuo Bao yitong chutan—Bijiao fenxi Zuo Si, Bao Zhao de rensheng jingyu yu
The fourth group (2 papers) speculates on the time when the poems were composed. There are three main assumptions: the first supposition, based on the lines from the first poem, believes that these poems were written when Zuo was young and before the Western Jin unified the country; the second postulation, predicated on the divergent styles, moods, and spirit of these poems, argues that they were written in different periods. The poet expresses different psychological states and various life experiences; so they could not be written in the same period or when he was young; the last hypothesis asserts that they were written in his later years based on the coherent content of these poems: the first poem served as a preface, and the next seven poems expounded the first one using miscellaneous historical and literary allusions to articulate Zuo’s feelings. The specific examples and explanation were mentioned previously.

The fifth category (11 papers) stresses Zuo’s biography, including his disposition, ambition, extant works, and political career. There is little information about Zuo that we can find from the standard histories. Scholars have tried to obtain hints and indications from researching Zuo’s literary works, unofficial historical accounts mentioning him, and his sister Zuo Fen’s literary works and epitaph. The representative works of scholarship in this group are “You zibei dao chaoyue de xinling lichen—Lun Zuo Si de chuanguo”
The sixth category (8 papers) highlights Zhong Rong’s comments in his *Shipin*’s *詩品* on the strengths and shortcomings of these poems. In discussing Zuo Si’s strengths, Zhong coins what came to be an influential term of literary criticism: *feng li* 風力 (affective force, or lit. “wind force”), which is addressed in detail four of the eight papers in this category. In the *Shipin*, Zuo’s poems also received a partially negative comment for the first time. Scholars reassessed the comments given by Zhong, especially during the Qing dynasty, and they provoked an intensive debate among them. A few articles are good cases in point to illustrate the features of this group, such as “Zuo Si fengli zhi chengyin chutan” 左思風力之成因初探 and “Shuo ‘Zuo Si fengli’ jiqi beijing” 說“左思風力”及其背景.

Besides journal articles, two books are particularly useful in researching Zuo Si. The first one is Xu Chuanwu’s *Zuo Si yu Zuo Fen yan jiu 左思與左棻研究*,

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which is a selection of twenty-three papers he has written over ten years. Xu is a professor in the Institute of Chinese Literature, History, and Philosophy, in Shandong University, which is the native region of Zuo Si and his sister Zuo Fen. Xu had many advantages to do this research, such as geographical position, and a knowledge of cultural traditions and local customs in the region. In his papers, many new opinions were presented to academia. He is one of few scholars researching the reception of Zuo’s poetry in the Six Dynasties, and he pays attention to both Zuo’s rhapsodies and poems.

The second important book is Ye Riguang’s 葉日光 Zuo Si sheng ping qi ji shi zhi xi lun 左思生平及其詩之析論, which is one of the earliest and best monographs on Zuo Si studies. Ye first discusses Zuo’s biography, then the writing time of Zuo’s poems, and their content, style, rhetoric, and eventually Zuo’s influence on Chinese literary history. The last part deals with Zuo’s reception in later dynasties, and he often cites intertextual evidence to support his ideas. It is unfortunate that Ye did not write any other monographs or important articles on Zuo Si studies later in his career.

4. Poetic-self vs. historical-self in Zuo Silf vs. historical-self

Previously scholars have researched Zuo Si’s yongshi shi from a synchronic angle of how they are different from previous yongshi shi and confirmed that Zuo Si established a new approach to composing yongshi shi by using them to express his own feelings and thoughts. As I mentioned before, Zuo Si is greatly influential not only on his

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218 Ye Riguang 葉日光, Zuo Si sheng ping qi ji shi zhi xi lun 左思生平及其詩之析論 (Taibei: Wenshizhe chubanshe, 1979)
contemporaries, through providing an alternative to the poetic style of ornamental amplification popular at that time, but also on later poets, some of whom became famous in Chinese literary history, such as Tao Yuanming (ca. 365-427), Bao Zhao (ca. 415-70), Xie Lingyun, and Li Bai (701-62). Moreover, he was also influential in breaking away from the normal paraphrase and summary mode of poems on history in his period and establishing a far-reaching style and model for writing expressive poems on history whose influence extended to later periods, especially the Late Tang.

For decades, mainland Chinese scholars used Marxist ideology to portray Zuo Si as a representative of the poor talented individual who challenges the aristocratic class, and were influenced in this interpretation by the traditional Mencian notion of “knowing the person first and then discussing the time period and his works”. Scholars and critics read Zuo Si’s literary works to discover his disposition as a person. They then used this understanding of the type of man he was as a basis to interpret his entire literary corpus. Thus, their starting and ending points are both taken from his literary works, forming a closed hermeneutical circle.

My research adopts a new angle and develops critical methods to research these poems from the perspective of autobiographical writing, acknowledging that the self Zuo Si presents through his poetry is not that same as his historical self. I want to show how Zuo Si forged a new persona by using the lives of historical figures to embellish his own biography, to better secure his own literary reputation in history. This poetic-self is different from other life experiences recorded in various historical accounts. In my approach, I have learned from Stephen Owen’s and Wendy Swartz’s analysis of Tao
Yuanming’s poems as a form of autobiographical writings. I would like to ask why Zuo Si composed these poems, how we can understand their discrepancies in content and the contradictions between his poetic self and historical self, and how the image that Zuo Si portrayed in his poems shaped later reception of his reputations and works.

The idea of poetry being a verbal inscription of one’s self has been entrenched in the Chinese literary tradition since a passage in the Book of Documents 尚書 stated that “the poem articulates what is intently on the mind”. Later, in the “Great Preface” to the Classic of Poetry 詩經, the relation between poetry and intent changes slightly: “The poem is that to which what is intently on the mind goes. In the mind it is ‘being intent’; coming out in language, it is a poem”. Here poetry becomes a medium, which is the external verbal manifestation of internal intent. Although there are some differences between the two assumptions, they both acknowledge a similar function of poetry as transparently reflecting one’s mind. Poetry, based on spontaneity (an idea spelled out explicitly in the “Great Preface”), is an involuntary and therefore genuine expression of one’s feelings. This is the enduring foundation for understanding classical Chinese poetry for centuries, but the inconsistencies between the behaviour and personalities of writers and the literary works they produce have long complicated this somewhat simplistic idea of poetry.


221 Ibid., 40.
During the Three Kingdoms (220-280), Cao Pi 曹丕 in his well-known “A Discourse on Literature” states the importance of achieving the recognition of posterity through literary writings: “I would say that literary works are the supreme achievement in the business of state, a splendor that does not decay. A time will come when a person’s life ends; glory and pleasure go no further than this body. To carry both to eternity, there is nothing to compare with the unending permanence of the literary work”. These words were especially appealing to the poets who lived in the chaotic and turbulent Six Dynasties (220-589) era, when it was difficult for educated men to achieve political accomplishments. It should come as no surprise that educated men who saw their political ambitions frustrated, Zuo Si among them, would turn to poetry as a vehicle for creating a poetic-self and ensuring a legacy in literary history. In this sort of poetry, such men would often make use of historical lore. But we can uncover discrepancies if we read the texts closely--between the historical selves of the poets and their poetic selves, and between the historical lore they draw upon and how it ultimately appears in the lines of their poems.

We can start with the basic observation that the poetic-self--presented in poetry by the poet--is largely under the control of the poet, while the historical-self--preserved and captured by other records--was often not under his control. In the case of Zuo Si’s poems, we can see that he selected and polished certain events that he wished history to remember in his later years, and deleted other events that he wanted history to forget. Through a skilful combination of real and fictional events, he shaped a poetic self, which may largely be a product of his dreams rather than his actual attainments. Even if these

222 Ibid., 70.
poems do not give a completely accurate or comprehensive account of his behavior, they
do capture his passionate feelings and great ambitions.

In his first “Poem on History” preserved in the Wen xuan, Zuo Si mentions his
great literary talents: from a young age, he was not only skillful at literary writings but
also had high personal standards and sought role models among the great historical
figures, such as Jia Yi and Sima Xiangru. David Knechtges discusses the first poem and
mentions, “Although the title indicates they are on historical themes, most of the poems
concern two or more historical figures. The first of these is not on a historical theme at
all, but is a brief ‘autobiography.’”223

Eight Poems on History 詠史八首

I 224

弱冠225弄柔翰，卓犖226觀羣書。

At twenty, I skillfully played with a soft writing brush.

Outstanding and talented, I read every kind of book.

著論准過秦，作賦擬子虛。

Making arguments, I took The Faults of Qin227 as my example.

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224 Wen xuan 21.987. My own translations are based on the Five Ministers commentary.
225 弱冠 at around the age of twenty. In ancient China, when men reached the age of twenty, they would
have the capping ceremony.
226 卓犖 outstanding.
Writing rhapsodies, I imitated the style of Sir Fantasy.  

邊城苦鳴鏑，羽檄飛京都。

The border cities bitterly suffered from whistling arrows,

Feathered official documents rapidly flew to the capital.

I was not a soldier equipped with armor and a helmet,

But in the past I learned all of Rangju’s military strategies.

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227 *Guo Qin Lun* 過秦論 The Faults of Qin was written by Jia Yi 賈誼 (200-168 B.C.E.). He discussed and summarized the wrongdoings of the Qin Dynasty 秦 (221 B.C.E-6 B.C.E) and explained the reasons for its quick decline.

228 The Rhapsody of Zixu was written by Sima Xiangru, who “was a native of Chengdu in the province of Shu. His polite name was Sima Changqing. …He developed a great admiration for the famous statesman of antiquity, Lin Xiangru, and he accordingly changed his name to Xiangru. …During Emperor Jing’s reign, he met King Xiao of Liang, who gave orders that Xiangru was to be quartered in the same lodge with the other scholars, so that for several years he was able to live with the scholars, and guest rhetoricians of Liang. It was at this time that he wrote his prose poem entitled Zixu or Sir Fantasy.” See “Shi Ji 117: The Biography of Sima Xiangru” in *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty* II, 259. “司馬相如者，蜀郡成都人也，字長卿。……相如既學，慕藺相如之為人，更名相如。……梁孝王令與諸生同舍，相如得與諸生游士居數歲，乃著子虛之賦。”See *Shiji* 117.2999.

229羽檄 an urgent official military declaration, written on the wooden slip with a feather.

230京都 means capital, and is the same as 京師. Because King Jing 景 of Jin’s (208-55) name is Sima Shi 司馬師, Jingshi 京師 was changed to Jingdu 京都. “In the first year of Huangchu 黃初, the capital has events in the Ancestor Temple.’ The Jin historians avoided addressing Emperor Jing’s name directly, and so they called Jingshi 京師 as Jingdu 京都. “黃初元年，京都有事於太廟。”晋史避景帝（司馬師）諱，稱京師為京都。”See Qian Daxin 錢大昕, *Nian er shi kao yi Sanguo zhi yi* 廿二史考異·三國志一 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2008), 135.

231 Rangju refers to Sima Rangju 司馬穰苴. The information about him can be found in the Shiji: “Marshal Jang-chü 穰苴 was a descendant of T’ien Wan 田完 (p. 33) … (After winning against Jin and Yan,) Duke Ching and his great officers welcomed them in the suburbs, feasted their forces, and filled the rites with rhapsodies. Only then did [Duke Ching] return [to his residence] and retire to his bedchamber.
長嘯激清風<sup>232</sup>，志若無東吳。<p></p>

My long whistle and singing stirred up pure moral value.<p></p>

In my mind, it was as if the Eastern Wu<sup>233</sup> was no longer.<p></p>

鉛刀貴一割，夢想騁良圖。<p></p>

A lead knife<sup>234</sup> is only valued for its initial cut.<p></p>

I dreamt my enormous ambitions would be of good use.<p></p>

左眄<sup>235</sup>澄江湘，右盼定羌胡。<p></p>

Looking to the left, I pacify the Yangze and Xiang rivers<sup>236</sup>.<p></p>

Glaring to the right, I subdue the Qiang barbarians.<p></p>

功成不受爵，長揖歸田廬。<p></p>

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<sup>232</sup> 清風 literally means cool breeze and here it refers to pure moral value.<p></p>

<sup>233</sup> Eastern Wu refers to Sun Wu 孫吳 (222-80) sovereignty. When Zuo Si wrote this poem, it is probable that the Jin had not yet conquered Wu. The Jin unified the whole country in the year 280.<p></p>

<sup>234</sup> A lead knife refers to incapable people. Lead is soft. If one uses it to make knives, they cannot cut well. A lead knife can cut things once but then it will become warped and cannot cut well again. This phrase is from Ban Chao’s 班超 (32-102) memorandum to the Emperor “I ride the sage Han’s magnificent spirit, and am willing to die ten thousand deaths. I wish to serve the court as a lead knife works best at the first cutting.” 班超上疏曰：“臣乘聖漢威神，出萬死之志，冀效鉛刀一割之用。” See Dongguan Hanji Jiaozhu 東觀漢記校注, juan 16, zhuan 11, 658.<p></p>

<sup>235</sup> 盼 and 盼 both mean look sideways.<p></p>

<sup>236</sup> The Yangze River and Xiang River refer to Wu territory.
Achievements made, I did not accept the rank of nobility.
Hand clasped, I bowed deeply and returned to my cottage.

The background of the first poem is discussed in Zhonghua Shishi Yongshishi Benshi 中華史詩詠史詩本事，

The first poem might have been written before Emperor Wu 武 of Jin 晉 (236-90) attacked Wu 吳 (229-80) in the year 280. During his reign, the Babarian Qiang 羌 and the Eastern Wu were often at war with the Jin 晉 (265-316). In the fifth year of Xianning 咸寧, the Jin attacked Wu, and the rescript said, “Sun Hao 孫皓 (242-84) invades our territory, barbarians bother our border … all officials high and low should collect our efforts to defeat Wu in the south, and defeat barbarians in the north.”

約作于晉武帝咸寧六年（280年）平吳以前。晉武帝時羌胡、東吳與晉屢相攻伐，咸寧五年，晉伐吳，詔書有“孫皓犯境，夷虜擾邊，……上下戮力以南夷句吳，北威戎狄”等語，與本詩所詠情事相合。237

In this poem, Zuo Si recalled his youth, when he “played with a soft writing brush” and “read every kind of book”. At this time there were military engagements on the frontier. Zuo Si uses an analogy to compare himself to a lead knife. He would like to try his best to serve the court at least once.

In order to vaunt his literary talents, Zuo Si ignored the fact that he was a slow learner when he was young. According to the *History of the Jin Dynasty*, as a child, Zuo Si’s lack of abilities was the subject of his father’s discussions with his friends: “When young, Zuo Si tried to learn Zhong and Hu style calligraphy and play the zither, but failed at both of them. His father Zuo Yong told his friends, ‘His comprehension and understanding could not match me when I was young.’”

Zuo Si’s slow learning process in his early life is also recorded in an unofficial historical record: “Since his mother died while he was very young, his father was over-indulgent and his early education was slighted. Later, however, he became an omnivorous reader, and, because of an unprepossessing appearance and an impediment in his speech, he kept little company with his fellows, spending all his time in study and writing.”

This unofficial record blames Zuo’s incapability in early education on his father, which is different from the statement in the official history that Zuo Si lacked natural talent. Of course, Zuo Si did not want to discuss these awkward experiences in his poem, because it would detract from his personal image, and possibly consign him to oblivion. This first poem in the series shows Zuo Si’s strong motivations of shaping an impressive poetic-self.

In the poem, Zuo Si exhibits a double character. He tries to convince his readers that he was involved in political activities and movements, but did not aim for political fame or an important position, even once he had achieved great accomplishments. Rather, he only wanted to use his talents to serve the country. Zuo Si uses this poem to boast of

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238 *Jinshu* 92.2375.

his military exploits, but does not refer to any specific military deeds or contributions. Although he was not a well-trained soldier, he had read Rangju’s famous military strategies and wanted to contribute his talents to the process of unifying the country, but there is a complete absence of historical records or references to his military achievements. Yet in fact, the extant records indicate that Zuo Si never achieved any great military or political deeds for his country. What he claimed to have done is only a figment of his imagination. In these lines he is building a poetic self for later readers to appreciate and respect, a self that he hopes will supplant any memory of his historical self. He may have also hoped, as a secondary effect, that this poem would influence the later reception of his other literary works.

Zuo Si also portrays himself as proud of refusing wealth and fame after achieving great accomplishments. This high moral value placed on being aloof from political concerns contrasts with his actual political endeavors and struggles. In the Jin court, there was an intense debate about whether the Jin house had inherited power from the Han or Wei dynasty. Using his literary writing, Zuo Si participated in this discussion and demonstrated his opinions. He spent ten years composing the “Rhapsodies on Three Capitals”, which was not simply to demonstrate his literary talents but also served to validate and legitimate the mandate of the newly established Jin dynasty. This rhapsody contains ten thousand characters and is the longest extant rhapsody in Chinese literary history. The rhapsody informed readers that the Jin replacing the Wei and unifying the country was in accordance with the legitimate Mandate of Heaven—a message that demonstrates Zuo Si’s attempt to seek favor from the court.
In writing his rhapsodies on capitals, Zuo Si wanted to imitate the capital style rhapsodies of Zhang Heng and Ban Gu of the Han dynasty, an action which suggests that he wanted to use this rhapsody to glorify the reunification of the country under the Emperor Jin in the hopes that the Jin Dynasty would become the second Han Dynasty. The ultimate purpose of writing the capital rhapsody was to submit it to the emperor and praise him at the beginning of his new dynasty, to express the wish that the Jin Dynasty would restore the Han tradition and build another great empire. But it is also motivated by Zuo Si’s hope that readers would remember him in the same manner as his predecessors, Zhang Heng and Ban Gu. Such a sustained (ten-year) literary effort, though it may be interpreted as a dedicated literary act, can also be read as a motivated political act, which belies Zuo Si’s claim that he did (or would) reject recognition by the throne and retire to his cottage. In the end, the claims in his poem that he accomplished great things and shunned recognition for them simply do not match the historical records.

In order to prove that he was talented and capable of handling important missions as he described in his first poem, Zuo Si alludes to a historical figure named Feng Tang in the following poem:

II

鬱鬱澗底松，離離山上苗。

Luxuriant pines [grow] at the bottom of a ravine

Lush sprouts [grow] on the top of a mountain

241 The luxuriant pines at the bottom of a ravine refer to those who are inferior but have real talents and abilities.
242 The sprouts on the top of mountain refer to those who hold high positions but do not have talents.
The sprouts with their one-inch diameter stems,
Overshadow the pine branches a hundred feet high.

Noble descendants ascended to high positions.
The outstanding talents sank to lower offices.

The terrain\textsuperscript{245} contributed to this situation.
With time passing, it gradually became this way.

The Jin and Zhang families\textsuperscript{246} inherited their ancestors’ achievements,

\textsuperscript{243} Cun is the tenth of a Chinese 尺.

\textsuperscript{244} A chi is a unit of length; three chi equals one meter.

\textsuperscript{245} Terrain alludes to a persons’ status.

\textsuperscript{246} Jin refers to the Jin Ridi 金日磾 family. From Emperor Wu 武 of Han (140 B.C.E-87 B.C.E) to Emperor Ping 平 of Han (1-4), the Jin family obtained the Palace Attendant (Nei shi, 内侍) [See Charles O. Hucker, A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 350.] position for seven generations. Zhang refers to the Zhang Tang 張湯 family. From Emperor Xuan 宣 of Han (73 B.C.E-49 B.C.E.) to Emperor Yuan 元 of Han (48 B.C.E.-33 B.C.E), more than ten descendents from this family obtained Palace Attendant and Palace Attendant-in-ordinar (Zhong chang shi, 中常侍) [Ibid., 188.] within seven generations. "金日磾,字翁叔, (p. 2959)……篤敬寤主, 忠信自著, 勤功上將, 傳國後嗣, 世名忠孝, 七世內侍, 何其盛也!" (p. 2967) See Han shu 68.2959 and 2967.
Seven generations wore Han marten ear-ornaments.

馮公豈不偉? 白首不見招。

How could Sir Feng\textsuperscript{247} not be great?

White haired, he was not summoned by the Emperor.\textsuperscript{248}

The first four lines set up a contrast between young shoots on the top of the mountain and tall pine trees at the bottom of the ravine. In addition to being a contrast, this appearance of a natural image at the beginning of a poem is an important and typical literary technique in Chinese poetic composition known as xing, or “affective image”, the method of which was adopted from poetic devices in the Shijing. These natural images are meant to evoke feelings that resonate with the theme of human affairs in the poem. In this case, the natural disparity between the high-placed sprouts and low-lying pines are akin to the

\textsuperscript{247} Sir Feng refers to Feng Tang at Emperor Wen of Han’s reign. The background information about him can be found in the \textit{Shiji}: “Feng Tang’s grandfather came from Zhao. His father moved first to Dai and then, at the beginning of the Han Dynasty, to Anling. Because of his reputation for filial piety Feng Tang served as a lieutenant to the chief of the palace guard under Emperor Wen. (p. 361) ……Later, (after Emperor Wen accepted Feng Tang’s polite remonstrated in terms of his strict law) Feng Tang was made a tribute of chariots and cavalry in charge of the chariots and horsemen of the capital and the principalities. (p. 371)……Seven years later Emperor Jing came to the throne and appointed Feng Tang chief minister of Chu, but later dismissed him. After Emperor Wu ascended the throne, he made a search for able and worthy men and Fen Tang was recommended. He was then over ninety, however, and could not serve as an official (p. 373).” See “Zhang Shizhi and Feng Tang” in \textit{Selections from Records of the Historians}, 371 and 373. “

\textsuperscript{248} “Was still not summoned (by the Emperor)” means that he was not given an important position in the court.
Jin and Zhang aristocrats, whose family members do not need to work hard and can easily get high positions, versus the talented and worthy men without family connections, who must toil away in lowly positions.

Zuo Si was not satisfied with simply employing natural images to suggest analogies, but further articulated his arguments more forcefully by transforming historical figures, such as the noble families of Jin and Zhang, into icons which contrast with the talented poor directly. In the middle section of the poem, the poet speaks directly for the talented poor by assimilating and appropriating historical figures and events. Feng Tang, as talented as he was, was unappreciated by society, in contrast with Jin-Zhang and Xu-Shi clans. Zuo Si indicated that people who had real talents and strived hard could not have a smooth political career, while those who inherited benefits easily held political power. Without an eminent family background, aiming for political status always required great risks. This is one essential recurring component in Zuo Si’s poems on history, in which he reveals social unfairness: “Noble descendants ascend to high positions. The talented and outstanding sink to lower offices.”

However, this literary depiction of Feng Tang is dramatically different from historical accounts, which state that he was so well-known that when the emperor spotted Feng Tang in a crowd he consulted with him about state problems. According to historical accounts, Feng Tang presented good strategies to the emperor and was even promoted to a high position. Thus, according to historical records, Feng Tang was actually sought out and promoted by the emperor, which is different from the picture that Zuo Si paints of Feng Tang as under-appreciated. Zuo Si was surely familiar with history
of the Western Han as he taught the *History of the Han* to Jia Mi, so he might have deliberately changed the historical verdict about Feng in his poem. In fact, it is Zuo Si’s depiction of Feng Tang that became more influential among later scholars and poets, supplanting the one found in the historical records. It seems that Zuo Si is using historical figures and events to attract the attention of readers and that the veracity of his version is a secondary concern.

Despite the images of inequity in this poem, Zuo Si was actually raised in a very good intellectual atmosphere. Far from being at the “bottom of a ravine”, he had many opportunities because of his own endeavors, his sister’s status in the palace, and his father’s position. It is true that his father was a lower official at the beginning of his career, but he was promoted to become an attendant censor responsible for surveillance over palace personnel, a position that offered many opportunities to meet the emperor.

Zuo Si had another connection to the emperor through his sister, Zuo Fen, who was chosen to become a member of the imperial harem, possibly on the strength of her father’s recommendation. According to the History of the Jin Dynasty, Zuo Fen was selected to the imperial harem, because she was very talented in literary writings. However, she could not obtain Emperor’s favor due to her homely looking. It seems that Zuo Si could not obtain more help from his sister. Although his father worked in the palace and his sister was in the imperial harem, Zuo Si did not do well in the capital. In his first yongshi shi, he boasts of his military talents but this seems to be ineffectual fancy. He was a good writer, but this did not seem to help him to realize his political ambitions.
Sometimes Zuo Si appears in the poems conspicuously by using the word ‘I’ (wu吾), while other times he used historical figures to articulate his mindset. With the first person pronoun ‘I’, Zuo Si often appears to directly inform the audience of who he was and what ideals he embraced. This is a strong autobiographical indicator of his own agency and opinions. His third “Poem on History” is a typical example of this feature:

III

吾希段干木, 偃息藩魏君。

I esteem Duangan Mu:

He stopped the Qin army and defended the Ruler of Wei. 250

吾慕魯仲連, 談笑卻秦軍。

I admire Lu Zhonglian.

He defeated Qin forces, talking and laughing. 251

249 Wen xuan 21.988-989.

250 The story about Duangan Mu and the Ruler of Wei can be found in the Shiji: “Marquis Wen learned arts from Zi Xia 子夏 (fl. 507), and had Duan Ganmu [Duangan Mu] 段干木 as his guest. Whenever he passed Duan’s gate, he often stood in his carriage to see him. Qin wanted to attack Wei, and someone said, ‘Lord Wei treat people with ritual, and people in Wei praise him benevolent, the superior and inferior are in good relationship, and it was not yet ready to plan to attack it.’” 文侯受子夏經藝，客段干木，過其閭，未嘗不軾也.秦欲伐魏，或曰：‘魏君賢人是禮，國人稱仁，上下和合，未可圖也。’ See Shiji 44.1839.

251 The story about Lu Zhonglian and his defeating Qin army can be found in the Shiji: “Lu Chunglien 魯仲連 (c. 305-245 B.C.) was a native of Ch’i. He loved grandiose and extraordinary schemes, but was unwilling to serve as an official or to hold a post, delighting only in holding to his high principles. He traveled to Chao. In the time of King Hsiao-ch’eng 孝成 of Chao (r. 265-245 B.C.), the King of Ch’in sent Pai Ch’i to defeat Chao’s army at Cha’ng-p’ing, from beginning to end [killing] over 400,000. The
When they encountered difficulties, they could solve them.

When their achievements were completed, they did not accept awards.

Their high principles were outstanding, beyond those of their contemporaries.  

soldiers of Ch‘in subsequently besieged Han-tan 邯郸 the east. The King of Chao was afraid, and none of the rescuing troops of the feudal lords dared to attack the Ch‘in army. …The King of Wei has sent his Foreign General Hsin-yüan Yen to have Chao confer the title of emperor on Ch‘in. (p. 281) (Lu Chung Lien has a heated discussion with Hsin-yüan Yen, who was eventually persuaded by Chunglien and not dare again of making Ch‘in emperor.) ……When the Ch‘in commander heard this, he retreated fifty li. (p. 284)” See “Lu Chung Lien and Tsou Yang, Memoir 23” in The Grand Scribe’s Records Volume VII: The Memoirs of Pre-Han China, 281 and 284. “魯仲連者，齊人也。好奇偉俶儻之畫策，而不肯仕宦任職，好持高節。遊於趙。趙孝成王時，而秦王使白起破趙長平之軍前後四十餘萬，秦兵遂東圍邯鄲。……魏王使客將軍新垣衍令趙帝秦。……秦將聞之，為卻軍五十裏。” See Shiji 83.2459.

The author’s comment is based on Lu Chuanglien’s story, which happened after the event that the above couplet referred to: “(After Lu Chunglien helped defeat the Qin army), the Lord of P‘ing-yüan wanted to enfeoff Lu Lien. Lu Lien refused three times and in the end remained unwilling to accept. The Lord of P‘ing-yuan laid out wine; after he was in his cups, he rose and stepped forward, presenting one-thousand chin as a gift to Lu Lien. Lu Lien smiled: ‘What I value in the knights of the world is how they avert troubles, resolve dilemmas, and cut tangled knots for others without ever receiving anything for it. If they received something for it, that would be a transaction of shopkeepers and traveling peddlers; I could not bear to do so.’ He then bid farewell to the Lord of P‘ing-yuan, departed, and never sought audience again.” See “Lu Chung Lien and Tsou Yang, Memoir 23” in The Grand Scribe’s Records Volume VII: The Memoirs of Pre-Han China, 284. “平原君欲封魯連，魯連辯諫者三，終不肯受。平原君乃置酒，酒酣起前，以千金為魯連壽。魯連笑曰：‘所貴於天下之士者，為人排患除難解紛亂而無取也。即有取者，是商賈之事也，而連不忍為也。’遂辭平原君而去，終身不復見。” See Shiji 83.2465. After
They were unwilling to tie official silk bands
They were unwilling to divide jade tables.

A series of official seals shone in the front court
They considered these the same as floating clouds.

This poem echoes the first poem—re-confirming Zuo Si’s ideals of making great contributions without asking for any benefits—by praising two historical figures of the Warring States period: Lu Zhonglian and Duangan Mu. Yet we have seen that in fact Zuo Si actively pursued political positions and fame. He stayed in Luoyang for many years when writing his capital rhapsodies and visited Zhang Zai and Lu Ji to help him with his research as they were experts on the Shu and Wu territories, geography, stories, custom, and historical allusions. During the writing process, he was possibly able to establish a twenty years of this event, Lu Chuanglien also helped the state of Yan and refused to accept the awards and noble title again.

組253 thin and wide silk band.
珪254 a jade table conferred upon feudal princes by the emperor as a symbol of dignity and authority.
浮255 Floating clouds alludes to the fact that both Duangan Mu and Lu Zhonglian did not consider official titles important and are not limited by noble ranks. The phrase was originally from the Analects of Confucius: “The Master said, ‘With coarse rice to eat, with water to drink, and my bended arm for a pillow; I have still joy in the midst of these things. Riches and honors acquired by unrighteousness are to me as a floating cloud.”’
firm relationship with many officials. The draft of the “Rhapsodies on Three Capitals”, which was probably completed around 282, was not initially popular, but Zuo Si actively sought out several important literati to publicly recommend it, which greatly increased its circulation. So many people bought paper to copy out his rhapsodies that it even caused the price of the paper in Luoyang to increase (a figure of speech still in use today to describe a popular book). As the History of the Jin records:

When his rhapsodies were completed, his contemporaries did not consider them important. Zuo Si himself thought his writing was not inferior to Ban [Gu] and Zhang [Heng], and feared that his work was being unjustly maligned. Huangfu Mi, a native of Anding, had a prestigious reputation, so Zuo Si visited and showed his work to him. He spoke approvingly of it, and wrote a preface for it.

及赋成，时人未之重。思自以其作不谢班张，恐以人废言，安定皇甫谧有高誉，思造而示之。谧称善，为其赋序。256

Despite his denials in poetry, Zuo Si’s actual practice demonstrates his great concern for his fame and reputation. In order to obtain patronage and fulfill his political ambitions, Zuo Si joined Zhang Hua’s circle and later became a member of Jia Mi’s “Twenty-four Friends”, both groups were concerned with literary and political activities.

Zuo Si’s life was deeply affected by politics and intrigues at court. Due to Emperor Hui’s (r. 291-306) incapability of governing the court, Empress Jia took the control of it and eliminated her opponents. Her clan members became increasingly

256 Fang Xuanling 房玄龄, Jin Shu 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000), 2377.
powerful, especially Jia Mi 賈謐 (d. 300), her nephew, who manipulated power. As Michael Farmer observes, “The empress’s nephew, Jia Mi, was given free rein at court, and officials personally loyal to the empress were placed in charge of governmental affairs. Later historians view the nine years of the empress’s control of the Jin court as a virtual reign of terror, describing her with terms such as ‘jealous, vindictive, cruel, and murderous.’”

Jia Mi appointed Zuo Si to lecture on the History of the Former Han. After the Jia clan was overthrown by the Sima clan in 300, Zuo Si retired to concentrate on reading and writing about classical books and documents. The Prince of Qi, Sima Jiong offered him the position of secretary, but he did not accept the post on the pretext of illness. When the forces of Zhang Fang 張方 raided the capital in 302, Zuo Si and his family fled to Jizhou 冀州 (in modern Hebei province), where he died a few years later of an unspecified illness.

Zuo Si’s affiliation with the Jia clan is corroborated in other accounts. For example, the Zuo Si biezhuan 左思別傳 states,

He served as libationer in Chang Hua’s administration and later as a secretary for the notorious Chia Mi 賈謐, nephew of Empress Chia. When in 300 the Chia clan was wiped out by the Prince of Chao, Ssu-ma Lun, Tso Ssu retired from public life altogether. It was about 272 when his sister, Tso Fen 菓, entered the

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258 Jin Shu, 2377.
harem of Emperor Wu and the family moved to Lo-yang, that he conceived the plan for his “Poetic Essays on the Three Capitals”, on the writing of which he is said to have spent ten years.\(^{259}\)

However, Zuo Si in his second “Poem on History” claims that he belonged to the talented poor and was far away from the social elite. The poetic-self that Zuo Si created is the one he would like readers to know and remember him by. He was afraid that his political behavior and affiliation would influence his posterity, and wanted later readers to remember the poetic-self of an altruistic disposition and lofty ideas rather than his historical-self, which was more opportunistic. This poem provides the enduring means for him to disseminate his ideas, demonstrate his ideal poetic-self, and influence the later reception of his image and literary works. Because he relied on the traditional notion of a poem as being an authentic representation of the self, Zuo Si expected his readers to understand his poems as being his poetic self, for which purpose he chose and embellished certain events, imagined and ignored others by a careful design, and established an ideal poetic text-self that is at odds with his historical-self that is transmitted in received historical records. In the following poem, Zuo establishes an exemplar for himself in the figure of the Han dynasty scholar Yang Xiong, and enhances the depth of his poetic-self:

IV\(^{260}\)

濟濟京城內，赫赫王侯居。


\(^{260}\) *Wen xuan* 21.989-990.
Tidy and magnificent rows of houses inside the capital, ²⁶¹
Impressive princes and marquises dwell within.

冠²⁶² 盖²⁶³ 蒲四術，朱輪竟長術。
Carriage canopies shade the roads in all directions,
Vermilion wheels fill the long thoroughfares.

朝集金張館，暮宿許史廬。
At dawn they gather in Jin and Zhang’s mansions.
At sunset they sleep in Xu and Shi’s²⁶⁴ villas.

南鄰擊鐘磬，北里吹笙竽。
The southern district beats chime stones and bells.
The northern alley blows reeds²⁶⁵ and wooden²⁶⁶ pipes.

²⁶¹ Capital refers to Chang’an 長安.
²⁶² 冠 top hat that goes with formal dress.
²⁶³ 盖 circular covering on the ancient vehicle.
²⁶⁴ Xu 許 and Shi 史 families were prominent in the Eastern Han Dynasty. Xu refers to Xu Bo’s 許伯 family. Xu was the father of Empress Xu, who was the Emperor Xuan’s 宣 wife. Shi refers to Shi Gao’s 史高 family. The Shi were the relatives of Emperor Xuan 宣. See Yan Shigu’s 顏師古 commentary quoting Yin Shao’s 應劭 words, “Xu Bo was Empress Xuan’s father. Shi Gao was Emperor Xuan’s relative on the side of Emperor’s mother side.”“顏師古注引應劭曰：‘許伯，宣帝皇后父。史高，宣帝外家也。’”
²⁶⁵ Sheng refers to a reed pipe wind instrument.
²⁶⁶ Yu refers to a pipe, an ancient music instrument.
寂寂楊子宅，門無卿相輿。
How quiet and silent Master Yang’s residence was!
No high officials’ carriages passed his door.  

寥寥空宇中，所講在玄虛。
Lonely and barren, he stayed in his empty house.
(or: His mind wandered in the empty expanses of the cosmos.)
What he taught others was shrouded in Mystery.

言論準宣尼，辭賦擬相如。
In his speech, he took Confucius as a standard.
In his rhapsodies, he imitated Sima Xiangru.

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267 The story about Yang Xiong can be found in the Han shu: “His home was often poor, but he liked drinking wine. Few people came to visit him.” “家素貧，耆酒，人希至其門。” See Han shu 87.3585.

268 Mystery refers to TaiXuan 太玄. The background information can be seen from the Han shu: “Yang Xiong thought no cannon was more influential than the Yi, and so imitating the book, he wrote TaiXuan.” “以為經莫大于《易》，故作《太玄》.” See Han shu 87.3583.

269 Yang Xiong was poor, and taught Taixuan and Fayan at home. The story was recorded in the Han shu: “Sometimes there were good people carried wine and food to travel and pursue knowledge with Yang Xiong. However, Hou Pa, a native of Ju Lu often learned from him. Yang Xiong taught him Taixuan 太玄 and Fayan 法言 in his empty house.” “時有好事者載酒肴從遊學,而巨鹿侯芭常從雄居,受其《太玄》、《法言》焉。” See Han shu, 87.3585.

270 宣尼 refers to Confucius. Emperor Ping 平 of Han conferred upon Confucius Duke Xuanni.

271 Yang Xiong, imitating the Analects of Confucius, wrote Fayan. The details can be seen from the Han shu: “Yang Xiong thought no biographies were more influential than the Analects of Confucius; so imitating it, he wrote Fayan.” “傳莫大於《論語》，作《法言》.” See Han shu 87.3583.

272 Yang Xiong, imitating Sima Xiangru, wrote four rhapsodies. The details can be seen from the Han shu: “Previously, Shu had Sima Xiangru, who wrote rhapsodies very magnificent and gentle. Yang Xiong
悠悠百世後，英名擅八區。
Long, long, after a hundred generations passed by,
His illustrious name occupied the whole world.

The first two couplets depict the busy atmosphere and great mansions in the capital. The overall impression of the capital provides readers a magnificent feeling. If the first two couplets depict the capital in a general manner, the third and fourth couplets zoom in and focus on the luxurious life style, including politicking among the famous noble families and musical performances in large mansions. This atmosphere of hustle and bustle sets up a major contrast with Yang Xiong’s situation in the following couplets. In contrast with the homes of rich and noble families, there were no carriages from high officials near Yang Xiong’s home. Yet this does not mean he was lonely. He had disciples, only not ones associated with noble family members.

The parallel of the Jin and Zhang with Xu and Shi families in the third couplet already appears in Zhang Hua’s “Qing Bo Pian” 輕薄篇 and Zuo Si’s second poem on history in this group. It is possible that the poems were composed after Zuo Si moved his home to the capital and saw the lifestyle of the elite class. Meanwhile, the fifth couplet about Yang Xiong has two possible interpretations: it could mean he physically stayed in his quiet house, teaching his understanding of the Yijing; or it could refer to his thoughts admired Sima Xiangru’s writings, and so every time when he wrote rhapsodies, he often imitated Sima Xiangru’s style. …No diction was more beautiful than Sima Xiangru, and so imitating his rhapsodies, Yang Xiong wrote four rhapsodies.” “先是時，蜀有司馬相如，作賦甚弘麗溫雅，雄心壯之，每作賦，常擬之以為式。……辭薦麗於相如，作四賦。” See Han shu 87.3515.
on the cosmos, teaching his disciples about what he understood from the *Yijing*. The following couplet stating that he took Confucius and Sima Xiangru as his models to emulate indicates that an excellent scholar and writer should not only possess outstanding literary skills but also hold high moral values. Although Yang Xiong was not “successful” in his lifetime in terms of his political career and reputation, his fame as a scholar grew and persisted. Even long after Yang’s death, scholars in the Western Jin such as Zuo Si still took him as a role model. By contrast, many of the noble people in Yang Xiong’s time, who obtained wealth, power, and fame in their own lifetimes, have been forgotten in history.

Zuo chose to compose autobiographical poetry partly through using historical allusions. It seems that he hoped readers would remember him in the same manner as the historical people, such as Yang Xiong, whom he admired and respected. He tries to convince his readers that the possibility of his poetic-self is a plausible one, since an ancient figure such as Yang Xiong was able to achieve it. When Zuo Si “sings” (yong) the praises of Yang Xiong, he is at the same time comforting and praising himself. They shared many aspects of their disposition and life values. Yang, for his part, was not involved in intrigues with the nobility as far as we can tell from historical records. He preferred to stay alone to focus on cultivating his moral values and training his literary talents. Although Yang was poor and underappreciated in his life time, he concentrated on his writing about his philosophy and literary ideas, which have since been passed down to us through generations and will continue to in the future due to his lofty ideals. The words of Yang’s literary works are able to transcend time and space, whereas the actions of the fame-obsessed officials are ephemera; their actions easily perish in the test
of time, but words can be preserved in books, other written materials, or through oral transmission. Their existence is more permanent.

Besides their commonality in life pursuits, both Zuo Si and Yang Xiong had very high standards about their literary writings and sought to imitate Sima Xiangru’s rhapsodies. They both wrote great rhapsodies, particularly capital rhapsodies. David Knechtges places Yang’s rhapsody in the context of literary development of the capital rhapsodies: “Yang Xiong was the first to move from description of the imperial hunting party to description of a particular place. He wrote the first piece in Chinese literary history on a regional capital--the ‘Shu Capital.’ Ban Gu, Zhang Heng, and Zuo Si all were inspired by this rhapsody.”

Zuo Si highly revered Yang Xiong, and so in his preface to “Rhapsodies on Three Capitals”, he quoted Yang’s words at the beginning on poetic principles and the origins of the *fu* genre. Yang and Zuo even both wrote on the Shu area in their rhapsodies.

In terms of appearance and speech, both Yang and Zuo were stutterers. They saved the words that they wanted to say for their writings. Zuo Si was acutely aware of his drawbacks in terms of appearance and speech. He was homely looking and unattractive in appearance. In a society that emphasized appearance and speech in its educated men, Zuo was bound to not be appreciated. Zuo Si may have found one avenue to articulate his frustrations through composing his poems on history. His literary talents were compensation for his physical shortcomings, a way to defend his oration, and a path

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274 Zuo Si quotes Yang Xiong’s words, “‘The Songs has six principles. The second is called Expositio.’ Yang Xiong has said, ‘The *fu* of the Songs poets are beautiful but maintain standards.’” See David Knechtges, *Wen xuan*, 337.
to success, if not political success in the short term, then the success of being remembered in posterity. Yang Xiong was a good case for Zuo Si to show what was possible with literary talent.

Neither Yang nor Zuo held high political positions. Zuo’s political career was a failure in that he did not even have the chance to demonstrate the ability that he claimed to have. The highest official position he achieved was Palace Library Assistant, which was monumentally less important than what he had dreamt of when he was young. This made him frustrated and depressed, and so he naturally thought of Yang Xiong, whose works were written for future readers and indeed appreciated by later generations. In Zuo Si’s poem, the historical figure of Yang Xiong becomes a potent emblem of the power and endurance of a literary reputation.

The image of Yang Xiong forged by Zuo Si as poor and unappreciated in his time, although talented, dedicated, and destined for greatness also influenced later writings. Zhang Zhenjian 張正見, a Chen Dynasty poet, imitated the topic of Zuo’s fourth “Poem on History” and composed a new poem 题得落落窮巷士詩 to praise Yang Xiong. The title of this poem includes 题得 which indicates that the idea of this poem is based on another literary work in the past. Zhang also focused on depicting Yang’s lonely and lofty character. Zhang’s disposition was similar to Zuo Si’s in that both believed that they had great talents, but society did not provide them with a chance to show their abilities. Like Zuo Si, Zhang also felt depressed and his poem on Yang Xiong even more sorrowful and melancholic than Zuo Si’s.
With Yang Xiong as his exemplar, Zuo Si realized that he did not belong in capital society and he made an important decision to leave there. He contrasts himself with the noble family members whom he leaves behind in his fifth poem:

V

皓天舒白日，靈景耀神州。
The bright sky unfurls the white sun,
The sunlight shines on the divine state.

列宅紫宮裏，飛宇若雲浮。
An array of residences is in the Purple Palace
Flying eaves are like floating clouds.

巃巃高門內，藹藹皆王侯。
Tall and high, behind the imposing gates,
Numerous and vast, all belong to nobility.

自非攀龍客，何為歘來遊?
I am not a dragon-mounting guest indeed.
Why have I suddenly come here to travel?

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275 Wen xuan 21.990.
276 Purple Palace is a constellation name. Here it alludes to the capital of Western Jin, Luoyang.
277 Dragon-climbing guest refers to those who follow princes and marquises to obtain benefit and reputation.
被褐出閶闔，高步追許由。

Clothed as a commoner, I go out the palace gate,

Striding with long paces, I pursue Xu You.

振衣千仞岡，濯足萬裏流。

I shake my clothes on the steep cliff edge.

I bathe my feet in the long flowing river.

The first three couplets are like the previous poem in how they initially use a remote viewpoint to depict the overall magnificent view. Then the view zooms in and describes the palaces, mansions and residences of high ranking officials to represent the flourishing and royal life in the capital. This glorious and glamorous scene sets an enormous contrast with Zuo Si’s own situation. The fourth couplet clearly refers to Zuo Si himself again, using the self-reflexive word zi ("I myself"). He regrets

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278 I wear black denotes wearing a common costume.
279 Changhe gate refers to the palace gate of Luoyang, which was the capital of Western Jin Dynasty.
280 Stride high paces alludes to the fact that Zuo Si would like to be far away from the reality and hide in some place to be a recluse.
281 Xu You was Yao’s hermit based on the folklore, which was recorded in the Shiji: “Yao yielded the world to Hsü Yu 許由, but Hsü Yu would not accept. Humiliated at Yao’s offer, he fled into hiding.” See “Po Yi, Memoir 1” in The Grand Scribe’s Records Volume VII The Memoirs of Pre-Han China, 1. “堯讓天下於許由，許由不受，恥之逃隱。” See Shiji 61.2121.
282 Ren is a measure of eight feet. 467.
283 Shaking clothes and washing feet alludes to the fact that Zuo Si Si wanted to get away from worldly customs.
his previous behavior, which possibly includes joining political groups, seeking patronage from high rank officials, and dreaming to become an important official. He makes his confession in this couplet as he suddenly feels that his disposition and character no longer fit in the capital culture of the Western Jin. For example, although he spent ten years composing his “Rhapsodies on the Three Capitals”, they were not appreciated by his peers initially. Although he was in the capital, he was not a member of a noble family and thus found it difficult to break into court circles. Then he went to see Zhang Hua and asked for his advice and comments. After Zhang Hua eulogized this piece, its reception became very positive. Zhang Zai 張載 (fl. 3rd century) wrote a commentary to the “Wei Capital Rhapsody,” and Liu Kui 刘逵 (fl. 3rd century) wrote both a preface and commentary to the Wu and Shu portions of the piece.

In the fourth couplet, Zuo Si openly questions his original intentions and decides to leave the capital. He wants to follow in the steps of the recluse Xu You and patriotic poet Qu Yuan. Following the example of their received images, Zuo Si claims that he does not want to pursue fame and power and feels his contemporary world is merely hustle and bustle. Qu Yuan once stated, “Because all the world is muddy and I alone am clear, and because all men are drunk and I alone am sober.” After living within a constrictive social hierarchy, Zuo Si decided to have a more peaceful life. He received inspiration from Daoism, which advocates withdrawing from the struggles of official life in favor of a peaceful relationship with nature. In this poem, he desires to establish his own position in history by using allusions to previous great figures such as

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Xu You and Qu Yuan who straddle the indistinct line between myth and history. In this poem, we can see Zuo Si grappling with the contradiction between his historical-self, that he has been living, and his ideal poetic-self, which may only ever be realized in his poetry. He was eager to explain why he did some acts initially and why he was regretful later due to his natural disposition.

This is the second poem in this group that does not sing of any particular historical figures. It is an explicitly autobiographical poem, as the first one is. In the first poem, he has the ambitious agenda of a youth, “Looking askance to the left, I purified the Yangze and the Xiang Rivers / Glaring to the right, I conquered the Qiang barbarians.”

After encountering difficulties and frustrations in the capital, he eventually abandoned his political aspirations in this poem, “I am not a dragon-mounting guest. / Why do I suddenly come here to travel?”

Zuo Si joined Zhang Hua’s circle, and later he was affiliated with Jia Mi’s group of Twenty-Four Friends; these groups were not only literary gatherings, but also political groups. Zuo Si likely joined Jia’s group of Twenty-Four Friends as means to seek higher political positions. Zuo Si felt it would be advantageous to his career to be involved in the upper classes, but the group of Jia Mi’s friends in particular was famous for its ostentatious lifestyle of luxury. This did not match Zuo’s own disposition and so he felt frustrated. His ideals and his social reality produced many contradictions and problems. He expressed his resentments through his poems on history and made them very

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285 The Yangze River and Xiang River refer to Wu territory.

286 向 and 向 both mean look sideways.

287 Wen xuan 21.990.
passionate and heroic in their tone to the point of self-righteousness. Many literary critics contend his poems on history are actually “songs of his cares” (yong huai). Among these eight poems preserved in the *Wen xuan*, the first poem lays out his ambition in his youth, while this poem allows him to make a confession in his old age, before it is too late, that political life is not for him. Whether Zuo Si wrote the poems periodically as he aged, or looking back on his life (or a combination of the two), they are a way for him to work out tensions between practicalities and ideals throughout his life.

Zuo Si seems to realize that if he wanted readers to believe his opinion of himself, he must also point out some of his drawbacks and limitations to make it seem less idealistic. His main readers were not limited to his peers; it seems his intended audience was really the people of future times. His desire for us to remember him is implicitly and explicitly mentioned throughout his poetry. He urges us, through his allusions, to remember him as we do Xu You, Qu Yuan, Yang Xiong, Feng Tang, and other exemplary figures. Zuo Si turned to these historical figures as a form of solace after he failed to participate in the mainstream political scene and to succeed in a political career.

Zuo, in the following poem, further mentions four more historical figures who were the frustrated scholars and then became well-known figures in history. Zuo again demonstrates that his case was not unique in history. Because the four great figures were remembered in history despite their initial difficulties and unfortunate circumstances, he hope that later readers would treat him in the same manner as his worthy predecessors.
Zhufu’s political career was not successful;
His kin turned on him in disdain.  

Maichen was reduced to cutting timber;
His wife refused to live with him any longer.

Zhufu Yan refers to Zhufu Yan, whose story can be found in the Shiji: “Zhufu Yan was a native of Linzi in Qi. He studied the diplomatic and military theories of the Warring States period, and in his later years of the Book of Changes, the Spring and Autumn Annals, and the works of the various philosophers. He traveled about among the scholars of Qi but could find none who would treat him with any liberality. On the contrary they refused to have anything to do with him, so that he could get nowhere in his native state of Qi. His family was very poor and he likewise failed in all attempts to borrow money. Later he traveled north to Yan, Zhao, and the region of Zhongshan, but again was unable to find anyone who would employ him. He suffered great hardship on his travels.” See “Shiji 112: The Biographies of the Marquis of Pingjin and Zhufu Yan” in Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty, 192-93. “主父偃者，齊臨菑人也。學長短縱橫之術，晚乃學易、春秋、百家言。游齊諸生間，莫能厚遇也。齊諸儒生相與排擯，不容於齊。家貧，假貸無所得，乃北游燕、趙、中山，皆莫能厚遇，為客甚困。” See Shiji 112.2953.

Maichen refers to Zhu Maichen, whose story can be found in the Han shu: “Zhu Maichen zi was Fengzi [Wengzi], a native of Wu. His home was poor, but he liked reading books. He did not manage property, and often cut timber to sell it for a living. When he carried the timber on the shoulder, he walked while reciting books. His wife also carried the timber with him, and tried to stop him singing the books on the way to the market. Maichen sang ever loudly, and his wife was ashamed of this. She asked to leave him.” “朱買臣字翁子，吳人也。家貧，好讀書，不治產業，常艾薪樵，賣以給食，擔束薪，行且誦書。其妻亦負戴相隨，數止買臣毋歌/gpio道中。買臣愈益疾歌，妻羞之，求去。” See Han shu 64.2791.
Chen Ping did not have any properties,

Going home, he relied on city walls for shelter.

長卿還成都，壁立\textsuperscript{291}何寥廓？

Changqing went back to Chengdu;

Just the walls standing and nothing in the house. \textsuperscript{292}

四賢豈不偉？遺烈光篇籍。

How could these four virtuous men not be great?

Their legacy shines in the historical records.\textsuperscript{293}

\textsuperscript{291}壁立 means nothing or naught.

\textsuperscript{292} Sima Qian mentioned twice how poor Sima Xiangru’s home is. The details can be found in the Shiji: “With the death of King Xiao, he [Sima Xiangru] left Liang and returned to his home in Chengdu, but by this time his family had grown very poor and he had no means of making a living. (p. 259)...That night Wenjun ran away from home and joined Xiangru, and the two of them galloped off to Chengdu. There they took up residence in Xiangru’s house, four bare walls with nothing inside.” See “The Shi Ji 117: The Biography of Sima Xiangru” in Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty, 259. “會梁孝王卒，相如歸，而家貧，無以自業。……文君夜亡奔相如，相如乃與馳歸成都。家居徒四壁立。” See Shiji 117.3000.

\textsuperscript{293} Zuo Si spoke highly of their achievements. Although their early lives were poor and they did not have a chance to realize their ambitions, they made great contributions to society when they were given the opportunities. We take Prime Minister Chen Ping as an example. In concluding Chen Ping’s biography, Sima Qian gave his comment on this great figure: “He (Cheng Ping) devised many ingenious plans to overcome difficulties and to save the state from danger. In the time of Empress Lu, although troubles beset him, he not only succeeded in extricating himself but restored the dynasty so that he died a dignitary and was known to posterity as an able minister. Truly, ‘a good beginning makes a good ending.’ None but a wise man could have accomplished this.” See “Prime Minister of Chen Ping” in Selections from Records of the Historians, 143. “常出奇計，救紛糾之難，振國家之患。及呂後時，事多故矣，然平竟自脫，定宗廟，以榮名終，稱賢相，豈不善始善終哉！” See Shiji 56.2062-2063.
Before they were appreciated, (or: Before they faced good prospects)
They worried about being left in the ravine.  

Heroes have difficulties and frustrations,
Which come down to them from the past.

Which generation does not have great talents?
They are abandoned in fields of wild grass.

Zuo Si in these poems broke away from the norm of writing poems on history, by transplanting these historical figures into a literary realm, where they could be

294 Before they had their golden chances, they had difficulties and frustrations; they struggled to make a simple life. They were also human beings. Problems and troubles surrounded them. Let us examine the Sima Xiangru’s life after he eloped with Zhuo Wenjun. “She (Zhuo Wenjun) and Xiangru accordingly went to Linqiong, where they sold their carriage and all their riding equipment and bought a wine-shop. Xiangru left Wenjun to mind the counter while he himself, dressed in a workman’s loincloth, went off on errands with the other hired men or washed the wine vessels at the well in the market place.” See “The Shi Ji 117: The Biography of Sima Xiangru” in Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II, 261. “相如與俱之臨邛，盡賣其車騎，買一酒舍酤酒，而令文君當爐。相如身自著犢鼻褌，與保庸雜作，滌器於市中。” See Shiji 117.3000.

295 This couplet is Zuo’s conclusions based on four great figures life experiences.
transformed into timeless cultural icons through which he expressed his own views and emotions. For example, in this seventh poem of his “Poems on History,” Zuo Si mentions four great historical figures and their stories from the Western Han Dynasty (202 B.C.E-8): Zhufu Yan 主父偃 (fl. 127 B.C.E), Zhu Maichen 朱買臣 (fl. 115 B.C.E), Chen Ping 陳平 (fl. 178 B.C.E), and Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (ca. 179-117).

The poet does not describe who Zhufu Yan and Zhu Maichen were and only chooses a few historical moments from their lives. It seems that the poet had strong emotions and chose certain historical moments from historical figures to match his feelings. The whole selection process is driven by his horizon of concerns. In Zuo Si’s view, each of these four great figures shared the same situation: before they seized their opportunities to be great, they were all poor and despised by people around them.

Zuo Si’s real intention in alluding to these figures was not to embellish their deeds and their life experiences, but to utilize these figures and their events to express his own frustrations. Zuo Si identified with the protagonists in the poems who, despite the difficulties and impediments they encountered, were able to find the opportunity to prove their abilities and talents. Their stories became a reflection of his own life; though he had great talent, he felt both unappreciated and abandoned by the powers of the day, but he holds out hope for appreciation and recognition through his poetry. This situation is further explained by modern scholar Gong Kechang: “The large families themselves distributed offices according to reputation and power. The Nine-Rank Grading of the Six Dynasties period was based on this practice. Under the rule of these families, scholars of the lower class felt that it was even more difficult to obtain office.”

So these poems

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296 Gong Kechang, 326.
were the vehicle through which he vindicated his own poetic far-ranging genius. The implied or explicit figure of the Zuo Si the poet plays just as important a role as the historical subjects of the poems. We have seen thus far that Zuo Si’s eight “Poems on History” are famous for their use of allusions to articulate his personal emotions, express his ambitions, and satirize the political hierarchy in passionate language. Zuo’s plain, unadorned, direct style is also unusual, as he was not restricted by the ornamental poetic style and practice of his time, with which educated men at court sought fame and favor. Not many poets have approached Zuo Si’s level of poetic achievement from the Jin Dynasty to the end of the Six Dynasties.

After discussing many and various historical figures to express his own frustration, Zuo Si in his final poem points a way out for frustrated scholars, a way highly influenced by Daoism.


Fluttering, flapping, a bird within a cage
Beats its wings and touches the four corners.

The frustrated scholar inside the narrow alley
Embraces his shadow and guards an empty hut.

He goes outside but finds no escape,
Thorny trees block his road.

His plans and strategies are abandoned.
His appearance is like a fish in a dried up pool.

Gazing afar outside, he has not hope of a salary;
Turning back within, he has no rice in store.

Relatives turn their backs in disdain.
Friends become more distant each passing day.

Su Qin traveled north to advocate his teachings,\(^{300}\)

\(^{298}\) 枳 refers to trifoliate orange trees.
\(^{299}\) 棘 refers to sour jujube trees.

\(^{300}\) The *Shiji* recorded the Su Qin story: “Su Ch’in was a native of East Chou’s Lo-yang 雒陽. (p. 97)… [He said], ‘I hope, Great King, that you might join in alliance with Chao. When the world is as one, the state of Yen is sure to have no fears.’ Marquis Wen said, ‘Your advice is acceptable, sir, but my state is small. To the west we are near mighty Chao, to the south we are close to Ch’i. Ch’i and Chao are mighty
Li Si journeyed west to submit his documents.  

They obtained prosperity and high positions rapidly, 

Yet in a moment, they came to wither and die.

states. If you are set on forming an alliance to secure the safety of Yen, we ask permission to follow with our state.' (p. 99).” See “Su Ch’in, Memoir 9” in The Grand Scribe’s Records Volume VII The Memoirs of Pre-Han China, 97 and 99. “蘇秦者，東周雒陽人也。(p. 2241)……願大王與趙從親，天下為一，則燕國必無患矣。文侯曰：‘子言則可，然吾國小，西迫彊趙，南近齊，齊、趙彊國也。子必欲合從以安燕，寡人請以國從。’” See Shiji 69.2241 and 2244.

301 The Shiji recorded the Li Si story: “Li Ssu 李斯 was a native of Shang-ts’ai 上蔡 in Ch’u. (p. 335) ……The clansmen of the House of Ch’in and the great vassals all said to the King of Ch’in: ‘Most of the men of the feudal lords who come to serve Ch’in seek to advise or spy on Ch’in for their rulers. We ask that you expel all foreigners.’ Li Ssu was also proposed as one of those to be expelled. [Li] Ssu thus submitted a memorial to refute this idea…The King of Ch’in then revoked the decree expelling foreigners, restored Li Ssu’s position, and eventually adopted his schemes. [His] position reached Commandant of Justice (p. 340).” See “Li Ssu, Memoir 27” in The Grand Scribe’s Records Volume VII The Memoirs of Pre-Han China, 335 and 340. “李斯者，楚上蔡人也。……秦宗室大臣皆言秦王曰：‘諸侯人來事秦者，大抵為其主游間於秦耳，請一切逐客。’李斯議亦在逐中。斯乃上書。……秦王乃除逐客之令，復李斯官，卒用其計謀。官至廷尉。” See Shiji 87.2539.

302 The poet saw through Su Qin and Li Si’s life, and made a brutal but true comment: life is changing with a rule. We take Li Si’s story as an example to illustrate this. The story was seen in the Shiji: “Beginning in a simple hamlet, Li Ssu traveled among the feudal lords, then came to serve Ch’in. ‘Seizing flaws and chinks,’ this was how he assisted the First Emperor. [The Emperor] finally succeeded in his imperial enterprise and Ssu became one of his ‘Three Masters.’ He can be said to have been put to an exalted use indeed.(p. 356-57)…In the seventh month of the second year of the Second Emperor [208 B.C.] it was proclaimed that [Li] Ssu should be sentenced to the five punishments and cut in half at the waist in the marketplace of Hsien-yang. His clan to the third degree [of relationship] was wiped out. (p. 355)” See The Grand Scribe’s Records: The Memoirs of Pre-Han China. 355-57. “李斯以閭閻曆諸侯，入事秦，因以瑕釁，以輔始皇，卒成帝業，斯為三公，可謂尊用矣。……二世二年七月，具斯五刑，論腰斬鹹陽市。……而夷三族。” See Shiji 87.2562-2563.
飲河期滿腹，貴足不願餘。

In drinking from the river, [a mole] expects to fill its belly. 303

It values sufficiency, and does not long for more.

巢林棲一枝，可為達士模。

[The wren] makes its nest and roosts on a single tree branch,

This can be a model for all exceptional scholars.

The beginning of the poem demonstrates how relatives and friends treat the talented who cannot find political and thus financial success. The vivid picture of their living conditions echoes his previous poem on the four great men. In contrast with the talented men who are blocked from success, Zuo Si alludes to the historical figures Su Qin and Li Si, who rapidly ascended to powerful positions because of their advice to their rulers, but lost it just as quickly when they met their demise. The use of historical allusions to Su Qin and Li Si was a tactic for Zuo Si to avoid risk due to the malicious political situation at the time. Zuo Si knew all too well that princes in different parts of the empire were jockeying for power and some of his friends and superiors had died in the coup. He did not want to become one of them and tried to avoid any potential conflict; therefore he chose to comment on historical events and historical people of prior ages to express his resentment towards his own society and life. He was responding to the external milieu when producing his passionate language, but he was tempering it with ancient allusions. He dealt with the dichotomy between style and rhetoric very well: his style is passionate

303 It is originally from the *Zhuangzi*: “The tailor-bird makes its nest in the deep forest, but only uses a single branch; the mole drinks from the He, but only takes what fills its belly.” “鷦鷯巢於深林，不過一枝；偃鼠飲河，不過滿腹。歸休乎君！予無所用天下為。庖人雖不治庖，屍祝不越樽俎而代之矣。”
and personal, while his use of historical allusions softens his tone and balances his direct style by deflecting his references into ages past.

Zuo Si suggests in this last poem that exceptional scholars should not seek fame and reputation because they come and go very rapidly. One should behave like the mole and wren as in the stories from the Zhuangzi, which only value self-sufficiency and do not yearn for more than they need. The poem not only criticizes the strict hierarchical society but also suggests a way for the talented poor to survive. The Daoist attitudes towards life come to the fore in the final poems of Zuo Si. This may be a reflection of the social zeitgeist at Zuo Si’s time after the fall of the Han dynasty and the continual disintegration and instability of the empire, which led to mass migrations of the elite population. The practice of Confucianism was less fervent and the relationships among family members had become more practical and utilitarian as extended clans were broken up. Without a strong state-sanctioned Confucian ideology or the protection of a close kinship network, the talented poor in Zuo Si’s eyes might do better to follow a Daoist path of reclusion and self-reliance.

Through giving his confession in poetry and suggesting a way out for scholars, Zuo forges a poetic image of himself for later generations to remember. The extended and enduring fame of literature appeals to him more than the local and immediate fame of political success, which eluded him in his life. One may achieve immediate fame, but one may just as easily lose it. Only through cultivating and practicing good virtues and moral values--and expressing them in enduring literary form--may one be remembered forever.
5. Conclusion

As we have seen, Zuo Si’s poems on history--by using allusions to articulate his personal emotions and ambitions and to satirize the political hierarchy in the Western Jin--broke away from the norms of this subgenre, which usually mimicked historical narration with a conventional moral evaluation in closing. In this chapter, I investigated the eight “Poems on History” by Zuo Si from a new perspective of autobiographical writing and illustrated how Zuo Si made full (and often free) use of historical figures to manipulate his own biography through poetry as a means to shape his historical reputation and reception of his works. Zuo Si wanted later readers to remember this subtly fictionalized self of altruistic disposition and lofty ideals rather than his biographical identity found in historical accounts. Through exaggerating his deeds and ambitions, these poems provide the opportunity for him to disseminate his ideas, demonstrate his ideal self and influence the later reception of his image and literary works. He relied on the traditional notion of a poem as an authentic, transparent, and trustworthy representation of the self. Therefore, he expected his readers to receive the poems as his autobiography, even though he chose and embellished certain events, imagined and ignored others by meticulous design, and thus established a subtly fictionalized self that is sometimes at odds with his received biographies. This research deepens and complicates our understanding of Zuo Si’s poems on history and autobiographical practices in early medieval China.

When we examine these eight poems on history as a single corpus, we can see that Zuo Si had ambitious plans as a youth, but after encountering difficulties, he eventually gave up his political aspirations. Zuo Si gives us a condensed version of the major tension in his life, and by extension in the lives of all educated men with political
ambitions: when young, people always strive for political accomplishments; after years of social experiences and struggle, they gradually doubt the feasibility of their lofty aspirations because of the strict social hierarchy. Zuo Si, in his poems, demonstrates the stark contrast between young idealism and adult realism (and skepticism) in terms of political desires. Through adopting various rhetorical strategies and expressing his intention and frustrations in these eight poems, he tried to convince his readers that his motivation for being involved in political groups was not for the sake of fame or power, but because he wanted to use his talents to serve the country. Zuo Si, after failing to achieve political success, realized the importance of conveying his ambitions and ideals to later generations through commenting on historical people in poetry. His innovative use of the word “I” and the many images that refer to himself tell the readers that Zuo’s real intention in writing poems about other historical figures is to establish an ideal poetic-self. To write of oneself in a direct autobiographical fashion would be seen as biased and self-aggrandizing. Zuo Si’s use of historical allusions to express his emotions allows him to be indirect and to lend his own feelings legitimacy by linking them to admired figures in history. He did not want readers to see his anxiety and eagerness directly. It is true that Zuo Si seems to be violating the concept that a poem would be an original, authentic, spontaneous expression of the self. Instead he seems to be mediating himself through historical allusions in order to secure and shape his reputation. In a way, though, he is still being true to that early idea of a poem “articulating what is on the mind intently” because he is using poetry to express his poetic self, even if it is sometimes at odds with his historical self.

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304 Family background and network, as well as historical opportunities were some of the important factors that one could not understand when they were young.
Chapter 5: Poems on History and Character Appraisal— Yan Yanzhi 顏延之 (384-456) as a Case Study

Chapter 4 examines Zuo Si and his poems on history through the lens of autobiographical writing. Zuo contributed the largest number of poems in the section of Poems on History in the Wen xuan. Second to Zuo is Yan Yanzhi’s Poems on the Five Gentlemen (Wu jun yong 五君詠).

1. Brief introduction of Yan Yanzhi and His Literary Style

Yan Yanzhi 顏延之 (384-456) lived through Eastern Jin (317-420) and Song dynasties (420-479). The official biographies tell us that he was born into a low status family. He was straightforward and outspoken, expressing his emotions without any restraints. Although he was favored by different emperors due to his literary talents and political strategies, his outspoken character caused him trouble many times during his life, including his being exiled to several rural places. His biography appears in the Songshu 宋書 and Nan shi 南史.\(^{305}\)

Twenty-seven of Yan Yanzhi’s literary writings are preserved in the Wen xuan, putting him fifth among poets in terms of the total number of writings selected in the Wen xuan, next only to Lu Ji, Xie Lingyun, Cao Zhi, and Jiang Yan. In the section of poems

\(^{305}\) Shen Yue 沈約, Song shu 宋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 1891-1904. Li Yanshou 李延壽, Nan shi 南史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 877-881.
on history, six of his poems were chosen, a number second only to Zuo Si’s eight poems. These statistics demonstrate that the editors of the *Wen xuan* held a profound admiration for his writings, which would have reflected their contemporary literary taste.

Yan Yanzhi was famous for using frequent allusions, parallel structure, and ornate and flowery style to express his political concerns. He also liked to show off his literary talents in order to get promoted. Yan Yanzhi’s writing style matched his contemporary literary and aesthetic pursuits, making him a representative figure of his era, and a useful contrast with Zuo Si’s simpler and more archaic style; as Xiaofei Tian argues: “The fifth century was prone to a strict formal structure in poetry and extreme density in diction, exemplified by Yan Yanzhi’s work.”

Many of Yan’s contemporaries were also famous for ornate writings with numerous allusions and it sometimes seemed as though they were struggling to outdo one another in their displays of erudition. The literati at that time could access more written materials than ever before due to the circulation of paper, which provided ready source material for allusions. Chen Qiaosheng 陳橋生 has calculated the percentage of lines using allusions among some of Yan Yanzhi’s poems; for example: “Poem on Zhang Zifang” 張子房, 38 lines, 34 allusions, 89.5%; “Poem on Qiu Hu” 秋胡詩, 90 lines, 49 allusions, 54.4%; “Poem on the Five Lords” 五君詠, 40 lines, 25 allusions, 62.5%.

Yan Yanzhi was also a major influence on later generations of writers; Yan’s contemporary and literary critic Shen Yue mentions in his “Biography of Xie Lingyun” that Yan Yanzhi and Xie Lingyun are two excellent models for later writers.

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generations to follow and emulate. Although he was often paired with Xie Lingyun, Yan Yanzhi’s poetry was considered inferior to Xie Lingyun’s according to Zhong Rong’s comments in his Shipin. Zhong Rong provides a comprehensive evaluation of Yan Yanzhi’s literary characteristics, including his shortcomings. Zhong puts Yan in the middle rank, along with Yan’s good friend Tao Yuanming:

Yan Yanzhi’s poetry derives from that of Lu Ji. Yan puts much store on crafted resemblance. His structuring is marvelous, his arrangement compact. The poetic figures he uses to express feeling reveal depth. He is never frivolous; every word, every phrase conveys his intent. Yan also enjoys using allusions, so that his writing becomes ever more constricted. Although he goes contrary to what is graceful and untrammeled, his is a talent quite proper for writing about affairs of state. Someone less gifted, however, would find himself in difficult straits. Tang Huixiu said, “Xie Lingyun’s poetry is like lotus flowers coming out of the water; Yan Yanzhi’s is like a mix of colors with inlays of gold.” This was to gall Yan the rest of his life.

其源出於陸機。尚巧似。體裁綺密，情喻淵深。動無虛散，一句一字，皆致意焉。又喜用古事，彌見拘束，雖秀逸，是經綸文雅才。雅才減若人，則蹈於困躓矣。湯惠休曰：“謝詩如芙蓉出水，顏如錯采鏤金。”顏終身病之。

308 Songshu, 67.1778.
310 Zhong Rong 鍾嶸, Xu Da 徐達, trans., Shipin quanyi 詩品全譯 (Guiyang: Guzhou renmin chubanshe, 2008), 270.
Although Zhong Rong criticizes Yan Yanzhi for using many allusions, overall he shows his respect for Yan and acknowledges his literary talents in expressing his sincere and deep emotions. His poems on the “Five Lords” among the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove are representative of his poetic characteristics. Before we turn to the poems themselves, however, let us examine the significance of its topic.

2. The Origin of the Appellation “Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove”

The “Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove” (Zhulin qixian 竹林七賢) were a group of unconventional intellectuals who gathered together to drink wine, compose literary works, and discuss ideas during the Third Century, after the fall of the Han dynasty. This group’s appellation is recorded in A New Account of Tales of the World:

Ruan Ji of Chenliu (Henan), Ji Kang of Jiao Principality (An Hui), and Shan Tao of Henei (Henan) were all three of comparable age, Ji Kang being the youngest. Joining this company later were Liu Ling of Pei Principality (Jiang Su), Ruan Xian of Chenliu, Xiangxiu of Henei, and Wang Rong of Langye (Shandong). The seven used to gather beneath a bamboo grove, letting their fancy free in merry revelry. For this reason the world called them the Seven Sages [Worthies] of the Bamboo Grove.”

311 Mather, Shih-shuo Hsin-yü, 399.
312 Shishuo xinyu jiaojian 23.390.
Although this appellation has been well acknowledged and the stories surrounding this group have been widely circulated, scholars doubt whether this appellation was assigned to these seven worthies during their life time or whether later scholars attributed it to this group. The translator of *A New Account of Tales of the World*, Richard Mather, believes that “there is no doubt that the seven were contemporaries and that at least some were close friends, but the earliest known reference to them as a group seems to have been Yūan Hung’s [328-376] lost *MSC*, and the principal sources about their ‘merry revelries’ are Sun Sheng’s [ca. 302-373] *CYC* (Chin yang-ch’iu) and Tai K’uei’s [d. 396] *CLCHL* (Chu-lin ch’i-hsien lun). It seems quite clear that the nostalgic refugees of Eastern Jin [317-420] reconstructed the supposed association in their effort to idealize the spirit of freedom and transcendence the ‘Seven’ came to symbolize.”

David Knechtges echoes Mather’s statement when commenting on these worthies: “Scholars generally consider this group a fiction created several generations later when the ideas of the two most prominent “members” of the group, Ruan Ji and Xi [Ji] Kang, were in vogue in the capital, Luoyang.” These two eminent scholars both notice that the appellation was assigned to this group after their own era due to later generations’ characterizations of their literary pedigree and lineage.

Even if the historical reality of this unusual association of men cannot be clearly established, the very idea of the group was a potent cultural image. As for the perceived function of this group of literati, modern scholar Guo Yingde provides a succinct

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summary, “The Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Groove was neither a political organization nor an academic community. Nor was it affiliated with or sponsored by any political factions. Then, in what sense did it constitute a literary group? I believe that it was a social group with special cultural functions. Its members shared similar behaviors and ideological and political tendencies. They shared frequent academic activities and often communicated with each other.”

Regarding their purported behavior, they all partook in excessive drinking, and had unconventional dispositions. Withdrawing from public service to drink played an important role in shaping their identity, allowing them to both enjoy themselves and avoid being killed in the social chaos. Qian Nanxiu discusses the function of wine in this context: “Given the transformative power of wine, drinking can produce a ‘famous gentleman’ (ming-shih).” In the guise of heavy drinking, the group’s members behaved strangely and escaped from politics. The accounts claim that they all believed in dark learning (xuanxue) centered on Laozi and Zhuangzi, and enjoyed debating its finer points with each other.

3. Character Appraisal

Character appraisal 人物品鑑, influenced by pure talk 清談 and dark learning, was a popular activity among scholars in the Six Dynasties. It is widely accepted that the pure talk in the Wei and Jin period derived from pure discussion 清議 at the end of the Han dynasty. Pure discussion was based on community comments which derived from

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people’s judgments of other people. Pure discussion and pure talk have some differences: in their form, pure discussion was a kind of social criticism, while pure talk was a scholarly debate. Meanwhile, concerning their content, pure discussion focuses on detailed comments on historical figures, while pure talk emphasizes the law and principles of things.  

Character appraisal has a long history. During the Cao-Wei period, the government adopted the nine-rank system. Officials at all levels provided comments on individuals’ character and virtues based on social comments, and selected the good ones to become part of the official class. This system was associated with moral teaching, which was based on Confucian ethics. People who obeyed these ethical rules and secured a good reputation were promoted to become officials. Through this, officials hoped to teach people to behave appropriately. Eventually, this was meant to lead to good governance. Because of the system, certain groups of literati became powerful authorities of opinion on the moral worthiness of others. If they provided someone with positive comments, the person could be promoted quickly; a negative opinion might ruin a career before it had even started.

Scholars not only commented on people in actual practice but also wrote books on the theories of how to select good and right people for governance, such as Cao Pi’s 曹丕 Shi cao 士操, one juan; Wu Yaoxin’s 吳姚信 Shi wei xin shu 士緯新書, ten juan; Lu Yu’s 盧毓 Jiuzhou renshi lun 九州人士論, one juan; the anonymous Tong guoren

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318 Wang Xiaoyi, 3.
The motivations behind compiling these character appraisal books were to satisfy the demand for the official selection and recommendation system. In the Six Dynasties, many literary and historical works commenting on the moral character of historical figures also appeared, such as the Ren wu zhi, Han Wu gushi 漢武故事, Xijing zaji 西京雜記, and Shishuo xinyu 世說新語. Literary criticism also commented on and evaluated writers in a ranking system similar to that for officials; for example, Zhong Rong’s Shipin evaluates and ranks poets. It was within this larger intellectual atmosphere of personal evaluation that Yan Yanzhi composed his five poems on history that appear in the Wen xuan. In writing his poems, Yan Yanzhi would have been familiar with the same sort of historical lore regarding the Five Lords that appears in standard histories, such as the Jin shu, and story collections, such as A New Account of Tales of the World.

These five poems on the intellectuals of the Bamboo Groove are different from other poems in the “Poems on History” section of the Wen xuan because they depict five intellectuals in a biographical manner, rather than simply allude to them. These poems also appear to be influenced by the pure talk aspect of character appraisal in that they focus on their subjects’ ephemeral spirit rather than concrete actions, in a way which matches other art forms of this period such as painting and calligraphy.

These five poems were composed in the year 433, and are the only poems in the section of poems on history in the Wen xuan whose writing background and composition time can be ascertained. The background story of these poems can be found in Yan Yanzhi’s biography, appearing in both the Songshu and Nanshi. It is a welcome means to

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319Wang Xiaoyi, 6.
understand these poems and provides clues as to Yan Yanzhi’s state of mind at the time. Yan Yanzhi was demoted to a remote area because he expressed his dissatisfaction with contemporary governance, in which the power was controlled and dominated by a few lesser and incapable men. He voiced his complaints and frustrations through these five poems on the great figures in the past. Here is the record from Shen Yue’s *Songsu*:

Deeply distressed and indignant, Yan Yanzhi [wrote] ‘In Praise of the Five Lords’ portraying the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove. On account of the eminence and nobility of Shan Tao 山濤和 Wang Rong 王戎 he dismissed them [from his list]. Praising Xi [Ji] Kang 稽康 he wrote, ‘Though the wings of the simurgh have at times been broken, / There is none who can tame a dragon’s nature.’ Of Ruan Ji 阮籍 he wrote, ‘He could not give an explanation for death, / But by the end of his journey he could not be moved.’ Of Ruan Xian 阮咸 he wrote, ‘Though recommended many times, he never took office; / Then with one wave he went out to become governor.’ Speaking of Liu Ling 劉伶 he wrote, ‘Daily he concealed his essence with intense drinking; / Who knew he wasn’t wantonly reveling?’ These four couplets very likely express his own feelings.320

延之甚怨憤，乃作五君詠以述竹林七賢，山濤、王戎以貴顯被黜，詠嵇康曰：
“鸞翮有時鎩，龍性誰能馴。”詠阮籍曰：“物故可不論，塗窮能無慟。”詠阮

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320 Tina Harding, 48.
咸呪：“屢薦不入官，一麾乃出守。”詠劉伶曰：“韜精日沉飲，誰知非荒宴。”

此四句，蓋自序也。321

Based on this narration, Yan Yanzhi seems to be an emotional, sensitive and straightforward man, who shared many characteristics with the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove. They all liked excessive drinking and unconventional behavior. These characteristics were the reflection of how the malicious society of their times changed and transformed scholars’ dispositions. Although these poems adopt allusions and veiled criticism to criticize the government, Yan Yanzhi was nevertheless not fortunate enough to escape the tragic fate of punishment and exile.

Yan Yanzhi removed Shan Tao and Wang Rong from the list and changed the seven worthies to five lords, because these five did not actively pursue government positions and were forced to be involved in government affairs, while the first two wanted to become eminent officials and to be associated with noble families and clans. Additionally, even among the seven worthies, the remaining five may not have had an easy relationship with Shan and Wang. For example, Wang Rong was depicted as a mean person who was not welcomed by the group. Wang’s appearance in the following story ruins the mood of the other worthies: “Ji Kang, Ruan Ji, Shan Tao, and Liu Ling were in the Bamboo Grove drinking and were well in their cups when Wang Rong arrived later. Ruan Ji said, ‘Here comes this vulgar fellow again to spoil our mood.’”322

321 Songshu 73.1893.
322 Mather, Shih-shuo Hsin-yü, 433.
劉在竹林酣飲，王戎後往。步兵曰：“俗物已複來敗人意！”王笑曰：“卿輩意，亦複可敗邪？”

4. Scholarship on Yan Yanzhi

Up to the present, three books, two Ph.D. dissertations, ten M.A. theses, and seventy-nine single articles have been written on Yan Yanzhi. Among all the publications, Chen Dongbiao’s 諶東飆 Yan Yanzhi yanjiu 顏延之研究 provides the most comprehensive account of Yan Yanzhi's family background, life experience, thoughts, acquaintances, and social life, and serves as a solid foundation for further research on Yan Yanzhi’s literary writings. Chen is particularly interested in Yan Yanzhi’s poetry and its main distinguishing feature of adopting allusions. Chen discusses the usage of allusions in the poems before Yan Yanzhi's time, Yan’s own technique of adopting allusions, and also places Yan’s situation in the context of his larger literary and aesthetic milieu. Chen also deals with the reception of Yan Yanzhi’s poems in the Southern Dynasties. The final chapter of the book is on Yan’s essays. Although the book is titled Studies on Yan Yanzhi, Chen mainly addresses Yan Yanzhi’s life experience and poetry.

Li Jia’s 李佳 Yan Yanzhi shiwen xuanzhu 顏延之詩文選注 is based on the author’s M.A. thesis. Li selected and annotated forty-six literary writings, including four rhapsodies, fourteen poems, and twenty-eight essays. At the beginning, Li has a long introduction chapter on Yan Yanzhi’s life experience, writing, and political background.

323 Shishuo xinyu jiaojian 25.418.
324 The single articles were counted based on a search result, using Yan Yanzhi as the topic in the Chinese Journals Online database of mainland Chinese scholarship.
which is followed by an analysis of Yan Yanzhi’s thoughts and social interaction and the intellectual atmosphere at his time, and concludes with a discussion of the content and artistic value of Yan’s literary writings. In the main body of the work, Li explains difficult characters and words, and often paraphrases the meaning of the content for clarity due to the many allusions used in Yan Yanzhi’s writings.\(^{326}\)

Two Ph.D. dissertations have been produced on Yan Yanzhi. Yang Xiaobin’s 楊曉斌 dissertation *Yan Yanzhi zhengping yu zhushu kao* 顏延之生平與著述考 covers all the aspects of Yan Yanzhi’s life, including his experiences and writings, and discusses the development of various pre-modern editions of Yan Yanzhi’s writings, not only literary writings, but also writings in the fields of the Confucian canon, history, philosophy, religion, and family instructions.\(^{327}\)

Tina Harding wrote a dissertation on Yan Yanzhi’s poetry with detailed annotations.\(^{328}\) She did a thorough study of Yan Yanzhi’s extant twenty-seven poems. She first conducts a comprehensive literary review on Yan Yanzhi studies, including Western and Asian research up to the time she wrote her dissertation. In the main body, she introduces Yan Yanzhi’s poems through investigating their characteristics, cultural contexts, and Yan’s life experience. After explaining the general background about Yan Yanzhi and his poetry in the first two chapters, she explicates his poems in several categories: *yuefu* poems, presentation and response poems, court commissioned


occasional poems, and travel poems. From chapter three to six, she explains the poems line by line, quoting traditional commentary and illustrating words and diction, especially allusions.

Ten M.A. theses deal with Yan Yanzhi: two of them focus on Yan Yanzhi’s poetry, one is about the philological aspect of Yan Yanzhi’s oeuvre, five are on his life experience and literary writings, including both poetry and essays, and two place Yan Yanzhi in the context of the Yuanjia period that he lived through.

A few scholars have researched his five poems on history in particular. Zhou Rongquan does a close reading of these five poems and mainly argues that Yan Yanzhi uses these poems on five historical figures to express his frustrated feelings about his contemporary government. Yu Shuo argues that these poems provide a new model for poems on history, including the creation of such poems in a biographical style.

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and a new emphasis on the manifestation of the poet’s subjective consciousness. Huang Shuiyun 黃水雲 argues that the unique feature of these poems lies in their integrating historical biography with Yan’s emotions and concerns.

Zhao Wangqin and Zhang Huanling mention the following prominent feature of Yan Yanzhi’s poems on history: “Yan Yanzhi’s poems on the Five Lords achieve a new height, which differs from traditional biographical poems on history. Poets no longer focused on the complete narration of historical figures, but began to emphasize the details that can best reflect their spirit and elegant demeanor.”

Several scholars have translated some or all of these five poems into English. Tina Harding’s dissertation on Yan Yanzhi includes English translations of the five poems. Chinese scholar Xu Yuanchong 許淵衝 in the Golden Treasury of Chinese Poetry in Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties translated three poems. S.C. Soong translated the first poem on Ruan Ji in the Hong Kong based journal Renditions.

Up to this point, scholars have researched these five poems and found that these poems create a new tradition of composing poems on history with their biographical

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336 Zhao Wangqin 趙望秦 and Zhang Huanling 張煥玲, Gudai yongshi shi tonglun 古代詠史詩通論 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2010), 51.

337 Xu Yuanchong 許淵衝, Han Ying duizhao Han Wei Liuchao shi 漢魏對照六朝詩 (Golden Treasury of Chinese Poetry in Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties) (Beijing: Zhongguo duiwai fanyi chuban gongs, 2009).

style, and that these poems, albeit on ancient figures, express Yan Yanzhi’s feelings. My research demonstrates how Yan Yanzhi emphasizes the spirit of these five lords, because spirit is the most important aspect in character appraisal in the Six Dynasties; as Qian Nanxiu observes, “Character appraisal…is mainly a verbal practice, in which evaluators use words to express evaluatees’ personalities. Among the numerous terms devoted to this practice, a most significant and widely applied notion is shen, or ‘spirit.’”

In what follows, I will examine each of the poems to show how Yan Yanzhi transformed the subgenre of “poems on history”. The annotation of the following five poems is based on the Li Shan and five ministers’ commentary.

5. Poems on the Five Lords

Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210-263) was born into a noble family. His father Ruan Yu was one of the seven masters of the Jian’an period and had close ties with the Cao family. Therefore, when Ruan Ji was dissatisfied with Sima’s usurpation of power, he could not express that explicitly. 

Although Ruan Ji displayed unconventional behavior and despised etiquette, he was one of the most influential literati of the Wei-Jin period, and his behavior was imitated by later generations of scholars. Wang Yin’s Jin shu records a story to demonstrate Ruan Ji’s enormous influence on later literati:

Ruan Ji, at the end of the Wei dynasty, was a man given to wine and reckless in all his actions. He would bare his head, let loose his hair and sit naked with his legs spread out. Later idle young aristocrats took him as their spiritual ancestor and said

\[339\] Qian Nanxiu, 152.
\[340\] Jinshu 49.1359-1362.
they had obtained the Root of the Great Way. They threw away their bonnets, took off their clothes and showed forth their ugliness like any animal.\footnote{John Minford and Joseph S. M. Lau, 443.}

Yan Yanzhi included representations of Ruan’s maverick disposition and provided his reasons for Ruan’s behavior in his following poem:

阮步兵


1 阮公雖淪跡，識密鑒亦洞。

Although Ruan Ji concealed his footprints,

His thoughts were well-conceived and his insights sharp and thorough

2 沈醉似埋照，寓辭類託諷。

Intoxicated, he appeared to hide his luster,

Words which held emotions and intentions seemed merely to project his satire

3 長嘯若懷人，越禮自驚眾。

His long whistling sounded as though he missed someone,

To transcend rituals and etiquette naturally shocked the masses.

4 物故不可論，塗窮能無慟？\footnote{\textit{Wen xuan} 21.1008.}
The reasons of things could not be discussed,
At the end of the path, who would not have deep sorrow?

Ruan Ji held three positions during the Cao-Wei period, two of which he was forced to take. Commandant of infantry was his last official position, and the reason for his taking this position demonstrates his notion of pursuing what he desired. The story is recorded in A New Account of Tales of the World. As Richard Mather points out, it is very difficult to ascertain the historical veracity of many of the entries in this source. However, such stories are an indication of Ruan Ji’s reputation even if they are not completely accurate.

There was a vacancy in the office of the commandant of infantry, in the commissary of which were stored several hundred hu of wine. It was for this reason that Ruan Ji requested to become commandant of infantry.\(^{344}\)

步兵校尉缺，廐中有貯酒數百斛，阮籍乃求為步兵校尉。\(^{345}\)

The first line of Yan Yanzhi’s poem discusses the difference between Ruan Ji’s appearance and his mind. It seems that he concealed his traces, drinking and living a reclusive life, which demonstrates his social detachment. However, his far-reaching insight equipped him to make an incisive analysis of the political situation. In order to stay away from the scourge of politics, he hid himself away from society.

The second couplet is a reference to his writing. Although Ruan Ji was drunk, he still managed to write down his thoughts in poems, particularly his eighty-two “Songs of My

\(^{344}\) Mather, Shih-shuo Hsin-yü, 401.

\(^{345}\) Shishuo xinyu jiaojian 23.392.
Cares‖. He did not express his feelings directly, instead using various ambiguous images and rhetorical devices. The blurry nature of these poems allowed later generations to interpret them in different ways and variously make sense of Ruan’s poems. Yan Yanzhi was one of these early exegetes: “Yan Yanzhi (384–456), who was one of the earliest commentators on Ruan’s verse, remarked that ‘even though the purpose of his poetry lies in satire, his writing is full of concealment and evasion, and many ages later, it is difficult to fathom his real feelings.’”346 The first two couplets use two contrasts. The first line of each couplet shows what Ruan Ji appeared to be, while the second line of each couplet demonstrates the true situation.

The third couplet focuses on Ruan Ji’s unconventional behavior, including two stories told of Ruan Ji. Long, drawn-out whistling is a spontaneous external manifestation of his unrestrained emotions. A New Account of Tales of the World records, “When Ruan Ji whistled, he could be heard several hundred paces away.” 347 阮步兵嘯聞數百步348 Donald Holzman, in his study of Ruan Ji, gives Sun Guang’s (765) definition of “whistling”—“a sound produced by breath striking against the tip of the tongue…, a method of communicating with the spirits and achieving immortality”—and comments: “whatever whistling did signify, the important thing to note is that it was an unintellectual art, probably a fairly strange kind of sound divorced from speech and reason.” Some scholars may have used this method of expression to communicate and exchange their

347 Mather, Shihs-huo Hsin-yü, 354.
348 Shishuo xinyu jiaojian 18.355.
feelings and emotions. However, this way of exchanging emotions was gradually lost as time went on.

“Transcending the rituals”, appearing in the third couplet, refers to Ruan Ji’s strange behavior: he often surpassed the boundary of traditional Confucian rituals and caused some shocked reactions. For example:

The wife of Ruan Ji’s neighbor was very pretty. She worked as a barmaid tending the vats and selling wine. Ruan and Wang Rong frequently drank at her place, and after Ruan became drunk he would sleep by this woman’s side. Her husband at first was extraordinarily suspicious of him, but after careful investigation it was found that Ruan had no other intention.\(^{349}\)

阮公鄰家婦，有美色，當壚酤酒。阮與王安豐常從婦飲酒，阮醉，便眠其婦側。夫始殊疑之，伺察，終無他意。\(^{350}\)

The issue above shows how Ruan Ji dealt with people outside of his family. When it came to his own family members, his behavior was of a similar surprising fashion. When his mother passed away, Ruan Ji did not initially behave as one does at a funeral; instead he ate pork and drank wine. However, after that, he suddenly cried loudly and expressed his sorrow. Eventually, he vomited blood continuously.\(^{351}\) Another case is when Ruan Ji bid farewell to his sister-in-law, which incited a dispute because of his lack of

\(^{350}\) *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian* 23.393.
\(^{351}\) *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian* 23.393.
matters. Issues such as these were plentiful around Ruan Ji—even if some of them may not have actually happened, they do speak to perceptions of his character. It is not certain which stories Yan Yanzhi was thinking of when making his poetic comments, but this couplet captures the spirit and most salient characteristics of Ruan Ji: unconventional, eccentric, straightforward and sincere.

The last couplet shows that Ruan Ji did not want to investigate the reasons behind many issues or to be involved in any political activities. Many scholars, including Ruan’s friends, were executed or died unnaturally. The Jinshu records the common psychological state of the literati in the Wei-Jin period through commenting on Ruan’s case:

Ruan Ji did cherish a high ambition to help the society, but he lived in a very turbulent world and few well-known intellectuals survived intact. So he left behind social matters and began to drink habitually from day to day”.

Drinking became a very useful way to avoid plunging into political troubles. However, as a scholar who was deeply concerned with the society, Ruan was worried about its future. The bitterness and suffering behind his affected drunkenness made him feel dispirited and melancholy. In order to survive in his society, he could not overtly comment on

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352 Shishuo xinyu jiaojian 23.393.
354 Jinshu 49.1360.
contemporary issues. Thus, literary writings became a means through which he could vent his strong feelings.

This poem demonstrates Ruan Ji’s meticulous design for his life at different stages in order to survive in the rapidly changing political environment of his time. Although Ruan did not want to be involved in politics, his keen insights and observations were well-formed. He seemed drunk and unconscious, but as a matter of fact, he used these pretenses to prevent himself from being drawn into the treachery of politics and becoming a victim in the competitions between political clans. He adopted an attitude of self-preservation towards social chaos, expressing his ideas only indirectly, in his literary writings. It seemed that he was physically drunk, but actually he was spiritually sober. He transcended traditional rituals and deliberately behaved like an unconventional man, writing unconventional, highly suggestive poetry.

Yan Yanzhi deeply appreciated Ruan Ji’s writings and personality, but--unlike Ruan Ji--Yan was prone to expressing his ideas freely. This led directly to his demotion and transfer to the rural area of Shian. Ruan Ji had been a governor of Shian, which naturally reminded Yan to think of Ruan’s experience. Moreover, Yan Yanzhi wrote commentaries on Ruan Ji’s “Songs of My Cares” (Yong huai shi), and therefore he was familiar with Ruan Ji’s writings and poetic style; he could understand his pain and plight as those he were an old acquaintance of a different age. For Yan Yanzhi, he felt that he encountered a society similar to the one which Ruan Ji had lived through. However, Yan Yanzhi could not keep his mouth closed as Ruan Ji did, and he spoke his mind, which led to his setbacks in political life. In terms of his outspoken personality, Yan was close to Ji Kang.
嵇中散

1 中散不偶世，本自餐霞人。

Courtier Ji did not get along with the mortal world,
He was by nature a man who dined on dew.

2 形解验默仙，吐论知凝神。

His release from his bodily form attested to his having silently become immortal,
Expressing his arguments, he demonstrated that he had concentrated his spirit on them.

3 立俗迕流议，寻山洽隐沦。

Establishing [new] customs, he contradicted popular opinions;
(or Establishing his opinions, he contradicted popular customs)\(^{356}\)
Looking for mountains, he found harmony with the recluses.

4 鹤翮有時铩，龙性谁能驯？\(^{357}\)

Although sometimes the simurgh’s wings were broken,
Could anyone tame the nature of the dragon?\(^{358}\)

The first couplet opens with a negative structure and highlights that Ji Kang’s social behavior did not comply with social norms. His good friend Shan Tao once advised him to give up his position and work for the government. Ji Kang was furious when he

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\(^{355}\) Ji Kang is often pronounced as Xi Kiang is English scholarship. Another English translation includes Wang Rongpei, 341.

\(^{356}\) Scholars generally believe that the current word order in the first line of the third couplet is slightly incorrect. This line should read thus: 立议迕流俗, which means that Ji Kang established new ideas, which were different from the opinions of the vulgar world.

\(^{357}\) Wen xuan 21.1008-1009.

\(^{358}\) The available English translations include Tian Harding, 134, and Wang Rongpei, 343.
learned this. He wrote a farewell letter to Shan Tao, after which they did not communicate with each other. The second line of the first couplet explains why Ji Kang did not want to socialize with other people. He belonged to another world and had a hobby of eating dew, which was a Daoist way to become immortal. Through this practice, one could be forever young. Hence the first couplet shows Ji Kang’s prominent characteristic of being unique and otherworldly through a strong negative statement.

The second couplet further elaborates the signs of becoming an immortal. 形解 “form released” means Ji Kang separated himself from his body and became an immortal. Li Shan quotes Huanzi xinlun 桓子新論, “Sages all released from their forms and went away as immortals” 聖人皆形解仙去.359 “Expressing arguments” 吐論 refers to Ji Kang’s composition of his masterpiece of “Nurturing Life” around 243,360 which warns people not to become obsessed with fame and reputation as these desires will bring troubles to them. Li Shan quotes Sun Chuo’s 孫綽 Ji Zhongsan zhuan 稽中散傳, “Ji Kang composed ‘Nourishing Life’ and came to Luoyang. The people in the capital called him an immortal.” 稽康作養生論, 入洛, 京師謂之神人.361 The first two couplets separate Ji Kang from the secular world, depict his otherworldliness, and describe the process of how Ji Kang became an immortal and its signs at different stages.

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359 Wen xuan 21.1008.
360 David Knechtges discusses the composition time of ‘Discourse on Nurturing Life’, “Around the year 243 Xi [Ji] Kang wrote an essay titled “Discourse on Nurturing Life” (Yang sheng lun), in which he argued that it was possible for some men to live as long as a thousand years.” See David Knechtges, “From the Eastern Han through the Western Jin (25-317),” in Cambridge History of Chinese Literature, edited by Stephen Owen, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 180.
361 Wen xuan 21.1008.
As with the first poem dedicated to Ruan Ji, this poem focuses on Ji Kang’s characteristics. Li Shan quotes *Zhulin qixian lun* 竹林七賢論 to expound Ji Kang’s eccentric opinions, “Ji Kang criticized the rulers Tang of Shang and King Wu of Zhou, and despised Duke of Zhou and Confucius; therefore, he offended the world”嵇康非湯武，薄周孔，所以迕世.\(^{362}\) Ji Kang challenged the traditional heroes, including political leaders and moral paragons. He went deep into the mountains to gather herbs with his fellows, such as Wang Lie 王烈, and lived a reclusive life. Li Shan quotes *Shen xian zhuan* 神仙傳 to shed light on this, “Wang Lie was already two hundred and thirty eight years old. Ji Kang liked him very much and travelled with him to the deep mountains. They enjoyed themselves and plucked herbs”王烈年已二百三十八歲，康甚愛之，數與共入山遊戲採藥.\(^{363}\) Eating herbs was an important way for Ji Kang to prolong his lifespan and to attempt to become immortal. Through depicting all these lofty activities, Yan Yanzhi shows that Ji Kang’s life style was influenced by Daoism. Ji Kang also acknowledged this in his own writing “Discourse on Nurturing Life”, “Besides, my taste for independence was encouraged by my reading of the Zhuangzi and Laozi; as a result any desire for fame or success daily grew weaker, and my commitment to freedom increasingly firmer.”\(^{364}\) Ji Kang’s activities showed that he practiced the ideals depicted in his writings and pursued the ultimate Dao in his life.

The last couplet emphasizes that although sometimes Ji Kang was forced to yield, his disposition was not changed. His unconventional character was still the same and so he

\(^{362}\) *Wen xuan* 21.1009.  
\(^{363}\) *Wen xuan* 21.1009.  
\(^{364}\) John Minford and Joseph S. M. Lau, 464.
became a symbol of “surpassing moral teaching to rely on being self-so” 越名教而任自然. 365 Ji Kang could not control his mouth and mind as tightly as Ruan Ji. He found that this might be a problem in a chaotic society. Though Ji Kang clearly knew his own disposition, it was hard for him to behave artificially, as he demonstrates in his letter to Shan Tao:

But I (Ji Kang), without Ruan Ji’s superiority, have the faults of being rude and unrestrained, not careful like Shi Fen, but driven to carry things to their end. The longer I were involved in affairs the more clearly would these defects show. I might want to stay out of trouble, but would it be possible? 366

Although Ji Kang knew his shortcomings very well, he still could not control his eccentric behavior. When Ji Kang expressed his ideas directly, it created significant difficulties for him. Sima Zhao saved him from danger, because he was aware of Ji Kang’s shortcomings.

Although Ji Kang drank excessively and quite often, he had a balanced perspective about himself. He even admitted that, “If I were to bend my mind to the expectations of the crowd, it would be dissembling and dishonest, and even so I would not be sure to go unblamed.” 367 Despite Ji Kang’s wariness of political struggles, in the end he was framed and killed by Zhong Hui.

365 Jinshu 49.1369.
367 Ibid.
From what we know of Yan Yanzhi’s life, he seems more like the impetuous Ji Kang than the reserved Ruan Ji in terms of his personality: they both knew their words would irritate some officials, but they still expressed their minds directly. Their lives were influenced by their words, in each case either being demoted or killed for them. Ruan Ji did not comment on other people of his own volition, but Ji Kang and Yan Yanzhi were unable hold their tongues (and writing brushes) because of their nature.

劉參軍  Aide-de-camp Liu

1 劉伶善閉鬱，懷情滅聞見。
Liu Ling was good at isolating himself,
His concealed inner emotions quenched outside sounds and sights.

2 鼓鍾不足歡，榮色豈能眩？
Drums and bells were not sufficient to entertain him,
How could honor and beauty bewilder him?

3 貽精日沈飲，誰知非荒宴？
Hiding his essence, he was addicted to drinking every day,
Who knew he was not indulging in banquets?

4 頌酒雖短章，深衷自此見。369
Although his eulogy on wine was a short poem,
The bottom of his heart can be discerned through this.

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368 The English translations of the title Canjun follows Mather, Shih-shuo Hsin-yü, 642. Another English translation is Wang Rongpei, 343.

369 Wen xuan 21.1009.
Liu Ling once served Wang Rong as his administrator, and so the title names him by his position. As with the previous two poems, the first couplet demonstrates that Liu Ling was separated from his society. The phrase “good at isolating himself” in the first line indicates that Liu Ling was not sociable. Because of his inner virtuous sentiment separate from external attractions, he was not moved by sensual situations.

The second couplet further explains that Liu Ling could bear his loneliness. Thanks to his high moral character, he was able to resist a luxurious life style and high social status. To emphasize Liu Lung’s lofty character, Yan Yanzhi uses two rhetorical questions to reinforce the sense of Liu’s deep emotion.

Liu Ling concealed his shrewdness through frequent and heavy drinking, as Ruan Ji is shown to do in the first poem. There are many stories about Liu Ling’s love of drinking, which is clearly expressed in his acclaimed poem “Eulogy on the Virtues of Wine” 酒德頌, which reads in part:

At rest he grasped a goblet or a cup,
And moving, always carried jug or pot.
For wine, and wine alone, was all his lot.
How should he know about the rest?370

止則操卮執觚
動則挈榼提壺
唯酒是務

370 John Minford and Joseph S. M. Lau, 471.
Liu Ling spoke his mind through the persona of the Great Man, describing his fervent love of wine.

In Yan Yanzhi’s poem on Liu Ling, the words “who knew” in the third couplet capture the success of Liu Ling’s camouflage of drunkeness, which was effective in preventing people from knowing his true feelings and nature. It was indeed difficult for intellectuals such as Liu Ling who had to conceal their talents and ambitions in order not to be involved in nasty political struggles. Such intellectuals took to drink as a pretext to be unconscious in the world, as a means of avoiding political factionalism. Every one of the Five Scholars shared this as a common strategy of keeping themselves safe; Liu Ling was known for taking it to its extreme.

Yan Yanzhi, in the tradition of classical exegesis, felt that literary writings are a true reflection of a writer’s moods. Thus, in his last couplet he mentions Liu Ling’s “Eulogy on Wine” as the key to seeing to “the bottom of his heart.” In this eulogy, Liu Ling depicts himself as the Great Man talking about his excessive drinking behavior with a gentleman who represents traditional Confucian rites and rituals. Although the gentleman is eager to tell him about such Confucian rituals, he refuses to listen to the lecture:

At this the Great Man

Took the jar and filled it at the vat,

Put cup to mouth and quaffed to the lees;

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371 Han Geping 韓格平, Zhulin qixian shiwen quanji yizhu 竹林七賢詩文全集譯注 (Changchun: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 1997), 576.
Shook out his beard and sat, legs sprawled apart,
Pillowed on barn and cushioned on the dregs.
Without a thought, without anxiety,
His happiness lighthearted and carefree.\textsuperscript{372}

先生於是
捧薷承糟
衔杯漱醪
畚髯箕踞
枕麯藉糟
無思無慮
其樂陶陶\textsuperscript{373}

This Great Man image naturally reminds us of the Perfect Man in the Zhuangzi, as Qian Nanxiu argues, “Note that the Great Man’s mind resembles the Perfect Man’s in the \textit{Chuang-tzu}, self-contented and immovable by external forces.”\textsuperscript{374} Although it is a short piece, the poem reflects Liu Ling’s inner feelings. He despised people who only focused on fame and benefits. He mentions:

He looked down on the myriad things, with all their fuss,
As on the Jiang or Han with floating weeds.

\textsuperscript{372} John Minford and Joseph S. M. Lau, 472.
\textsuperscript{373} Han Geping 韓格平, \textit{Zhulin qixian shiwen quanjí yizhu}, 576.
\textsuperscript{374} Qian Nanxiu, 136.
And those two stalwarts, waiting by his side—

How like to blacktail flies their busy buzz!\(^{375}\)

俯觀萬物之擾擾
如江漢之載浮萍
二豪侍側
如蜾蠃之與螟蛉\(^{376}\)

Through his writing, Liu Ling vividly depicts himself as a man who loves drinking and transcends Confucian rituals and laws. He also expresses his true intentions in this piece, as *A New Account of Tales of the World* states. “When Liu Ling composed his ‘Hymn to the Virtue of Wine’, it was the document to which he committed his whole heart and soul.”\(^{377}\) 劉伶著《酒德頌》，意氣所寄.\(^{378}\)

阮始平  Ruan of Shiping\(^{379}\)

仲容青雲器，實稟生民秀。

Zhong Rong demonstrated a noble personality of blue clouds,

Indeed, he manifested the excellence of a human being.

達音何用深？識微在金奏。

How could he need to show his profound knowledge of melody?

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\(^{375}\) John Minford and Joseph S. M. Lau, 472.

\(^{376}\) Han Geping 韓格平, *Zhulin qixian shiwen guanji yizhu*, 576.


\(^{378}\) *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian* 4.136.

\(^{379}\) Another English translation is from Tina Harding, 139.
He already knew the subtleties of bell songs.

郭奕已心醉，山公非虛覯。

Guo Yi was already enchanted,

Shan Tao’s comments were not superficial.

屡薦不入官，一麾乃出守。380

Despite several recommendations he did not obtain his desired position,

He was asked to become the governor outside of the capital.

Ruan Xian, the governor of Shiping, was the nephew of Ruan Ji. Ruan Xian was also known as Zhong Rong 仲容. Yan Yanzhi names all the poems in this series by the subjects’ last names and the titles of their official positions. The first couplet highlights Ruan Xian’s ambition. “Blue clouds” directly reveals Ruan’s visionary plans and status as a representative of the outstandingly talented. Moreover, Yan Yanzhi’s praise is without reservation and stint in the second line. Meanwhile, Yan Yanzhi did not mention in the first couplet that Ruan Xian was an eccentric, as he did in in the other previous poems.

In the second couplet, Yan Yanzhi demonstrates Ruan Xian’s impeccable abilities in music. When hearing music played by the metal instruments, he could find and explain the problems with the playing of the music. Li Shan’s commentary quotes from the Shishuo xinyu to illustrate Ruan’s unique talent, comparing him with Xun Xu, a famous musician at his time:

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380 Wen xuan 21.1010.
Now Ruan Xian had a superb appreciation of music, and his contemporaries claimed that his was a “divine understanding”. At each public gathering where music was performed, in his heart he felt it to be out of tune, but since he had never uttered a single word about it directly to Xu, the latter was mentally jealous of him, and had him sent out of the capital (Luoyang) to serve as grand warden of Shiping Commandery.

Later on there was an old peasant plowing in his field who found a jade foot rule of the Zhou period (trad. 1122-256 B.C.), which then became the standard measure for the whole realm. When Xun tested it against the one he had used himself to determine the pitches of the bells, drums, metal and stone chimes, silk-stringed instruments, and bamboo pipes, he discovered that in all cases his was short by one grain of millet, and thereafter he acknowledged the superiority of Ruan’s “divine knowledge.”

荀勖善解音聲，時論謂之「闇解」，遂調律呂，正雅樂。每至正會，殿庭作樂，自調宮商，無不諧韻。阮咸妙賞，時謂「神解」。每公會作樂，而心謂之不調。既無一言直勖，意忌之，遂出阮為始平太守。後有一田父耕於野，得周時玉尺，便是天下正尺，荀試以校己所治鐘鼓金石絲竹，皆覺短一黍，於是伏阮神識。

381 Mather, Shih-shuo Hsin-yü, 383.
382 Shishuo xinyu jiaojian 20.379-380.
When Ruan Xian heard the sound and music arranged by Xun Xu, he could identify the problems. Ruan Xian kept silent about Xun Xu’s mistakes in order to avoid being suspected and framed by the powers of the time. However, Xun Xu was a lesser man who was jealous about Ruan Xian’s talents and Ruan Xian’s being better than himself. Due to this, Ruan Xian was demoted. The anecdote of the peasant discovering the jade foot rule proves Xun Xu’s inferior music knowledge compared with Ruan Xian. “Understanding the subtleties” highlights Ruan Xian’s profound and broad music knowledge. Based on small and tiny details, he could identify the problems of musical measurement. Of course, their different abilities to understand and appreciate music are metaphors for the worthiness of the two men.

Ruan Xian, unlike the other four lords in this group of poems, did not explicitly go against his contemporary society. He had low official positions, but was never promoted to an appropriate one. It was not that he did not want to be promoted; rather, his actions and behavior were often beyond social norms. He was not forced to become an official, nor did he despise an official career, but no one wished to work with such an unconventional scholar as Ruan Xian.

The third couplet uses two allusions: one is from Guo Yi, who admires Ruan Xian’s superb musical ability. The other allusion is from Shan Tao, who believes that Ruan Xian could make a positive contribution to the government if he were appointed to an appropriate position. Shan Tao repeatedly recommended Ruan Xian for official positions and promised that Ruan Xian would be able to live up to expectations, but Emperor Wu of the Jin Dynasty refused this idea because Ruan Xian liked superficial

383 Wen xuan 21.1011.
pure talk and excessive drinking. Ruan Xian’s unconventional behavior was well-known at that time, as is recorded in this somewhat fanciful entry from the *Shishuo xinyu*:

The Ruans were all great drinkers. When Ruan Xian arrived at the home of any of the clan for a gathering, they no longer used ordinary wine cups for drinking toasts. Instead they would use a large earthenware vat filled with wine, and sitting facing each other all around it, would take large drafts. One time a herd of pigs came to drink and went directly up to the vat, whereupon pigs and men all proceeded to drink together.\(^{384}\)

诸阮皆能饮酒，仲容至宗人閒共集，不復用常杯斟酌，以大甕盛酒，圍坐相向大酌。時有羣豬來飲，直接去上，便共飲之。\(^{385}\)

However, Yan Yanzhi, of a similar eccentric disposition as Ruan Xian, did not think these characteristics of Ruan Xian prevented him from being a great politician. He mentions Shan Tao and Guo Yi as examples of discerning men who are able to evaluate Ruan Xian’s actions positively. Through the recommendations from these two influential figures, Ruan Xian’s personality and character are made clear.

Ruan Xian’s eccentric behavior, surpassing Confucian rituals, was not limited to his excessive drinking, but also includes his approach to his marriage:

\(^{384}\) Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 404.

\(^{385}\) *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian* 23.394.
Ruan Xian had previously shown favor to a Xianbei slave girl in the household of his paternal aunt. At the time when Xian was in mourning for the death of his mother, the aunt was on the point of moving to a distant place. At first she said she would leave the slave girl behind, but after she had set out, it turned out she had taken her along. Ruan Xian borrowed a guest’s donkey, and, still wearing the clothes of mourning for apparel, rode after her himself, returning with the two of them riding one behind the other on the same saddle. Ruan explained, “A man’s seed is not to be lost.” She was Ruan Fu’s mother.386

阮仲容先幸姑家鮮卑婢，及居母喪，姑當遠移，初雲當留婢，既發，定將去。仲容借客驢，著重服，自追之，累騎而返，曰：“人種不可失！”即遙集之母也。387

Ruan Xian did not care about the different social classes that he and the slave girl belonged to. He pursued his idea directly and unwaveringly.

The last couplet continues from the previous one and forms a contrast. Although scholars, like Shan Tao, recommended Ruan Xian, he had many “negative” stories surrounding him. Hence, he was not promoted. This was also because Xun Xu was jealous of Ruan Xian’s real talents and found excuses to demote Ruan Xian. Li Shan quotes Fu Chang’s 傅暢 Zhu gong zan 諸公讚, “Xun Xu was arrogant and made an excuse to demote Ruan Xian to Governor of Shiping” 昭性自矜，因事左遷咸為始平太

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386 Mather, Shih-shuo Hsin-yü, 405.
387 Shishuo xinyu jiaojian 23.395.
This poem is different from Yan Yanzhi’s other poems on the Five Scholars as it does not refer to Ruan Xian’s written works.

Xiang Xiu was willing not to seek fame and reputation,
Concentrating on conveying his deep emotions through brush and paper.

When investigating the Dao, he liked profound dark learning.
When surveying writings, he despised detailed exegesis of ancient documents.

He made friends with Lü An as swan-geese in flight.
He connected with Ji Kang as phoenixes on the wing

Loitering and lingering, he travelled in Henei.
Melancholy and distressed, he composed a rhapsody at Shanyang.

Xiang Xiu was a native of Henei. When he was young, his home town fellow Shan Tao knew him well. Xiang Xiu was acquainted with other famous intellectuals, such as Ji Kang and Lü An. Xiang Xiu was forced to take an official position under the powerful

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388 Wen xuan 21.1010.
389 Wen xuan 21.1010-1011.
390 Other English translations include Tina Harding, 150-151, and Wang Rongpei, 343.
influence of Sima Zhao. The first couplet points out Xiang Xiu’s noble quality. He was indifferent to fame and reputation and composed literary pieces to harbor his emotions. These characteristics become especially obvious after his friends Ji Kang and Lü An were killed by the powers of the day. After his two good friends were put to death, he realized the recklessness of a political career in a chaotic society.

The second couplet discusses Xiang Xiu’s commentary on the *Zhuangzi*, which Xiang Xiu was unfortunately unable to finish before he died:

Previously none of the several tens of commentators on the *Zhuangzi* had ever been able to get the full essence of its ideas. Xiang Xiu, going beyond the earlier commentators, wrote an “Explanatory Interpretation” which made a subtle analysis of its marvelous contents and gave great impetus to the vogue of the Mysterious. His comments on the two chapters “Autumn Waters” and “Supreme Joy” were the only ones not completed when Xiu died (ca. 300). Since Xiu’s sons were still in their infancy, his “Interpretation” fell into oblivion, but a separate copy still survived.\(^{391}\)

Xiang Xiu used his “dark learning” (*xuanxue*) thoughts to comment on the *Zhuangzi* and provided the text with a fresh vitality. His contemporaries spoke highly of his comments.

\(^{391}\) Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 105-106.

\(^{392}\) *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian* 4.111-112.
Through mentioning Xiang Xiu’s friends, the third couplet shows his virtues. This is a higher form of praise than praising Xiang Xiu’s moral value directly would be. Lü here refers to Lü An and Ji refers to Ji Kang. Li Shan cites *Xiang Xiu bie zhuan* 向秀別傳 to illustrate Xiang Xiu’s firm and congenial relationship with Ji Kang and Lü An.\(^{393}\) In his well-known “Recalling Old Times: A Rhapsody”, Xiang Xiu mentions these two old acquaintances in his preface to the work: “I used to be a near neighbor of Xi [Ji] Kang and Lü An. Both were men of irrepressible talent. But Xi [Ji] Kang was high-minded and out of touch with the world, and Lü An, though generous in heart, was somewhat wild. Eventually both of them got into trouble with the law. Xi [Ji] Kang had a wide mastery of the various arts, and was particularly skilled at string and wind instruments.”\(^{394}\) In this preface, he recalls the good old days and their good feelings. In this piece, he also gently expresses his grief over the loss of his friends in their prime.

The last couplet mentions that Xiang Xiu went back to his old home of Henei and expressed his sorrowful feelings on the loss of his endearing friends. He composed a rhapsody at his old abode to memorialize their great friendship.

6. Conclusion

These five men had already become cultural icons in Yan Yanzhi’s time, but he was the first poet to compose poems on the Five Lords as a group. The common features among these poems lie in that they first identify their historical subjects through their names and official positions, then discuss how these historical figures were isolated from society and

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\(^{393}\) *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian* 2.43.

\(^{394}\) John Minford and Joseph S. M. Lau, 468.
maintained lofty ideals, followed by their distinctive characteristics, including their representative literary works and unconventional behavior, and their frustrations towards their society. This form matches Yan Yanzhi’s career experience and psychological state. He used the methods of traditional character appraisal to evaluate these five lords and focus on their spirit, especially their eccentric and unconventional behavior. Confirming the value of these behaviors and of expressing one’s mind directly, he adopted literary pieces to console himself and to express veiled criticism towards his contemporary society. Although he was demoted, he would not regret his outspoken behavior, since ancient figures such as the five lords had already proved the lasting influence of a noble spirit. Yan Yanzhi carried this spirit on and hoped later readers would judge and evaluate him accordingly, taking reference from the great Five Lords he praised in these poems.

Yan Yanzhi developed the poems on history subgenre by focusing on the inner qualities of these five figures as shown in their refusal to engage in politics and in their literary expression. This links back to Sima Qian’s sayings in the *Shiji*:

> All of these men [such as King Wen of Zhou, Confucius, and Qu Yuan] had something eating away at their hearts; they could not carry through their ideas of the Way, so they gave an account of what had happened before while thinking of those to come. In cases like Zuo Qiu-ming’s sightlessness or Sunzi’s amputated feet, these men could never be employed; they withdrew and put their deliberations into writing in order to give full expression to their outrage,
intending to reveal themselves purely through writing that would last into the future.\(^{395}\)

Sima Qian’s *fanfen* 發憤 theory of literary production demonstrates that admirable historical figures are not always the ones who were politically successful, but were those who had the best intentions as judged by their literary production. Yan Yanzhi argues that one can be a part of historical memory just for one’s inner virtues and writing rather than any meaningful actions or participation in political events.

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Conclusion

In this doctoral dissertation, “Verse and Lore: ‘Poems on History’ (yongshi shi) from the Selections of Refined Literature (Wen xuan)”, I adopt a multidisciplinary approach to the corpus of poems preserved in the most influential anthology on classical Chinese literature. I employ several interrelated perspectives: reception studies and the selection of poems, history and memory as expressed in poems on history, and remembrance and being remembered through composing these poems. This dissertation focuses on the yongshi poems as a prime example of the operation of historical memory in the reception and transmission of literature. It explores the literary and cultural factors that influenced the selection and canonization of poems on history in the Wen xuan on three levels: intertextual links between these poems and other works that illuminate the poetic practices of the time, literary criticism that evaluates these poems, and narratives in anecdotal collections or standard histories that reveal how the educated elite employed these poems in their discourse. Investigating these three levels reveals how changing horizons of expectation led to shifts in interpretation, and finds that the reception of these poems in the Six Dynasties influenced historical memories of the editors of the Wen xuan.

This dissertation addresses primary historical accounts and the poets’ own contexts and social milieu to illuminate the relationship between historical sources and poetic rhetoric used in yongshi shi. Poets in the Six Dynasties chose which figures or events to compose poems on and which aspects they wanted to emphasize for their readers. Their feelings affected the selection process and played an essential role in shaping history in their poems; thus, they did not simply borrow historical records for
maintaining and preserving them, but related history to contemporary issues and their personal experiences.

The poets’ nostalgia for the past is demonstrated in these poems through their approaches to historical lore (oral and written); they drew upon a vast body of such lore by reading various historical accounts and citing oral transmission, and thus creating a present history in poetry to commemorate the absence of the past. Through this they are able to convey the enormous weight of history. This memorial of the great tradition essentially tells later readers that they should remember these poets in the same manner as they do the great historical figures who appear in their poems, thus invoking history as a force of canonization for the poets and their works.

This research disproves the sweeping generalization of Six Dynasties poetry as simply exuberant images and ornamental styles, which was an exaggerated accusation made retroactively by later historians. Indeed, yongshi shi represents an alternative style that transforms historical figures into icons through interpreting historical memory.
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