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**BOOK REVIEW**

# *The Poetry of Yuan Haowen*

## Introduced, interpreted and explicated by John Timothy Wixted

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Olga LOMOVÁ
Charles University, Czech Republic
Olga.Lomova@ff.cuni.cz

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**關鍵詞：** 元好問，古典漢詩，金朝，詩史，詩體詩歌，文學翻譯，互文性，蒙古入侵，士人文化，詩意用典

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Reading classical Chinese poetry, either for its aesthetic appeal or as a historical source, is not always an easy task. This is particularly true of the poetry of later periods, much of which is outside the canon of Chinese literature as usually taught in Western university courses today. Thus, John Timothy Wixted's book is a most welcome contribution, as it helps to fill a gap, making accessible to a broad Western readership the later periods of *shi* 詩 poetry, which remained one of the most significant parts of literati writing up to the end of the imperial period. The author has many years of experience researching and teaching about Chinese poetry and poetry criticism (see his personal website: https://johntimothywixted.com/china.php). In addition to its contribution to Chinese literary history, the book also provides a rare insight into the perspective of the Sinicised cultural elite of the Jurchen Jin dynasty (1115-1234) during the period when it was weakened and eventually overtaken by the Mongols.

Yuan Haowen 元好問 (1190–1257) is regarded by Chinese historians as a great master poet, in some respects on a par with arguably the greatest of the Tang poets, Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770). While not all scholars agree with this high appraisal, Yuan was certainly a master poet, and in his oeuvre, he often enters into creative dialogue with Du Fu's poetry. Living during the later years of the Jin dynasty and witnessing its fall to the Mongols, he offers in his poetry a Jin scholar's authentic testimony about these turbulent events and the very identity of the Jin state destroyed by invading barbarians. There is indeed a parallel of which Yuan himself was aware between himself and Du Fu as a "poet historian" (*shi shi* 詩史) witnessing the turmoil caused by the An Lushan rebellion. The value of Yuan Haowen's recording of current events, his reflections on them in poetry, and his personal response to them is even greater due to a certain bias in sinology against the Jin state, which is perceived as the adversary of the "proper Chinese" Song dynasty rather than as a victim of Mongolian expansion.

Despite the undisputed importance of Yuan Haowen in the history of Chinese literature and the intellectual history of the Jin, he is not much studied in Western languages. The only other systematic book-length publication dedicated to him in English is a monograph on his literary aesthetics also written by Wixted nearly half a century ago (*Poems on Poetry: Literary Criticism by Yuan Hao-Wen* [1190-1257], Steiner, 1982). Recently, in 2019, a new revised edition of this book was published, perhaps signalling growing interest in Yuan Haowen and in later periods of classical poetry.

As the title of Wixted's current work suggests, Yuan Haowen's poetry lies at the core of the book. The author presents 150 *shi* poems of all kinds, including *yuefu* 樂府 ballads, which Yuan Haowen composed from the time he was an aspiring student preparing for the state examinations in his twenties until the last years of his life in retirement. The book is arranged chronologically into three large chapters further divided thematically into shorter sections. Given the historical situation in which Yuan Haowen lived and the fact that most of his poems

are autobiographical, in keeping with the genre conventions of *shi*, the chronology-cum-thematic classification is not rigid and poems on certain topics partly cross the borders of chronology. The abundance of material and the way in which it is presented offer readers a complex understanding of the poet's unique personal experience, perspective, and style.

Chapter One, "The Early Years", is largely devoted to reflections on aspirations and disappointments related to passing the state exams, the poet's success at the age of thirty-one, and his eventual disenchantment with his official career. This chapter also exams "socially conscious" poems rich in factual details about the hard life of the peasants, for whom the poet expresses compassion. Chapter Two, "An Ever-Darkening World", deals with the threat and realisation of the Mongol invasion, leading to the destruction of the Jin state and the poet's internment for two years by the new authorities. Besides a few earlier poems, most of the material presented here is from 1231 to 1235. The poems in this chapter are again rich in autobiographical detail, besides recording historical events and presenting reflections on the history and legacy of the Jin state to which Yuan Haowen remained loyal and emotionally attached. Chapter Three, "After the Storm", concentrates on poems written after the poet was released by his captors, when he decided to live a life in retirement. Among them is a cycle *In the Style of Su Shi's Poems on Moving House* (*Xue Dongpo Yi Ju* 學東坡移居), in which the poet turns to personal and intimate themes and speaks affectionately about his family. Landscape poems dedicated to the poet's visits to places near his new home are included, as well as travel poems, many of them related to Yuan Haowen's efforts to collect material for his two large projects—an anthology of Jin dynasty poetry and an unofficial history of the Jin.

Each section comprising a selected group of poems includes an introductory summary (two to six pages in length); shorter introductions accompany each poem as well. Here Wixted provides historical context and biographical information in addition to observations about poetic style and issues of literary history. The poems are in the original (both in characters and in *pinyin* transliteration) and in English translation, copiously annotated in the footnotes. The annotations are particularly important due to the allusiveness of most of the poems. Besides biographical and historical details elucidating topical allusions, the author pays particular attention to all types of intertextual references, and, in the footnotes, he includes relevant quotations from the source texts and Yuan Haowen's predecessors. The footnotes also contain cross-references to other Yuan Haowen poems if there are relevant correspondences.

The author explains his approach to interpretation and translation in a thoughtful introduction, in which he also points to recurring themes and motifs in Yuan Haowen's poetry. He discusses the importance of genre conventions and the biographical and historical context shaping the meaning of many of Yuan Haowen's poems which can be mediated to contemporary readers only with the help of commentaries and footnotes. In his translations

Wixted acknowledges inspiration by three of his mentors—Burton Watson for the unadorned style of translation, David Hawkes for the format he used to introduce Du Fu's poetry in his *Little Primer of Du Fu*, and William Hung (Hong Ye 洪業) who taught him many years ago how to look for meaning in difficult poems through their context and in broader perspective. In the Introduction the author also includes for the reader who is not a specialist in the history of Chinese poetry, basic information on the formal features of the poetic forms used by Yuan Haowen, and a summary of criticism, both traditional and modern, Chinese and Japanese, of the poet's work. The introduction concludes with pedagogically minded "suggestions for the reader", advising students not yet experienced in reading classical poetry on how to most effectively study the poems, especially the difficult ones, while at the same time enjoying their poetic beauty.

The book also features an appendix containing additional biographical material about Yuan Haowen, mostly consisting of primary sources, again in translation and in the Chinese original. The author also provides a list of Chinese and Japanese commentaries on the poems presented in the book which he consulted in his interpretations but for the sake of clarity did not refer to each time he used them. In addition to a rich bibliography, the book also includes a list of other published translations of Yuan Haowen's poetry.

The book can be read and enjoyed as an extensive collection of translated poetry offering an overall picture of the poet's work, as an exercise in the theory and practice of literary translation, as a monograph about one of China's great poets presented mainly through rich primary sources, and as supplementary material for historians interested in the Jin dynasty and the aftermath of the Mongol victory. It can also serve as a kind of a textbook for students of Chinese language interested in immersing themselves in pre-modern Chinese poetry, as it provides practical instruction even for those who have only just started to explore this subject. In his latest book Wixted shares with readers his knowledge about and enthusiasm for Chinese poetry, and he does so in such a way that it is a pleasure to read.