

Shen Zizheng(沈自徵)'s View of Literature, an Author Lived in Late Ming Dynasty

Li Zhenyu, Fang Chuncao

(College of Chinese Language and Literature, Beijing Normal University)

Shen Zizheng(1591—1642), was a famous author in late Ming Dynasty. His extant works could only be found in the collections Yu Yang San Nong《漁陽三弄》edited by himself and the other one Shen Junyong Xian Sheng Ji《沈君庸先生集》edited by later scholars. In the latter, there are three prefaces written for his friends' collections of poems and qu(曲, a type of verse for singing, which emerged in the southern Song and Jin Dynasties and became popular in the Yuan Dynasty), namely, 《黃履中冰蘂草序》^①、《嚴伯度詩序》^②、《張都督詞曲序》^③。In the three articles, Shen Zizheng set forth some of his ideas about literature intensively, which were in accord with some thoughts in the progressive trend of thought in literature in late Ming Dynasty.

(一) The people who don't have genuine feelings are not worth talking to the best articles in the world.

Advocating that literary works should have true feeling, Shen Zizheng sympathized with elder scholars' views about literature such as "writing books because of indignation" and "complaint comes when there is injustice". He expressed this kind of thought clearly in his 《黃履中冰蘂草序》:

Zichang(Sima Qian, the famous historian, writer and thinker of Han Dynasty) said that most of the three hundred poems (in the Book of Songs《詩經》) were composed by saints when they were indignant at injustice. Han Fei also said "Where there is injustice, there will be an outcry". How correct their opinions are! The tears not distressed are not enough to move others, and the words not spoken from the bottom of one's heart are not able to express himself. Similarly, the people who don't have genuine feelings are not worth talking to the best articles in the world. The sky and the earth were stagnated to the extremity that they had to seek for an outlet, as a result, the sun and stars emerged and shined in the sky and the grasses and trees came out and dressed up the earth. The general rules of the universe are contained in this. But as a scholar, he began to complain in their articles not until he couldn't endure his plight. The matters which were appalling, frightful, lamentable and weepy in his heart could neither be hold back nor be poured out, so he had to live as a hermit with hair disheveled and feared to contact with others as if they were his enemies. Now and then, standing under the precipitous hills, in the grim and grave situations, he will hold his chest with his hands and cry loudly. Afterwards, he writes his depressed and discontented feelings in his books, showing his sympathy to the hardhearted Xiangjiang River, making in-

quiries to the erodent rocks, missing the lost old ethics and sighing for the contemporary scholar's indignation. And in this sense, the scholars' pens are sharper than any swords. These are main forms of what Han Fei said, namely "complaint comes when there is injustice." [1] (volume 2)

This kind of assertion, which advocating writing articles with the genuine feeling (namely the standpoint of "the people who don't have genuine feeling are not worth talking to the best articles in the world"), is consistent with the views of "perfect emotions" proposed by Li Zhi (李贄) and Tang Xianzu (湯顯祖). Huang Lüzhong is Shen's fellow townsman, he was good at writing poems and wrote a collection of poems named "冰蘂草". Zizheng was Huang's intimate friend and used to called at Huang's home. In Shen's works, there are two articles written to Huang Lüzhong, one is a divertimento (also named taoshu (套數), constituted with sets of tunes) whose style of tune is called "Xin Shuiling". The title of the divertimento was, "This opus was written to condole Huang Lüzhong, who had failed in the exam at Yan State (the capital of Ming Dynasty) but had a new baby daughter as a console." [1] (volume 2) And the other one is a long Five-character-ancient-verse poem titled with "to Huang Lüzhong". When Shen Zizheng wrote 《黃履中冰蘂草序》, he was not writing for writing's sake (that is, to write a meaningless article according to the demand of others), but had a deep meaning. He explained, "Huang Lüzhong came back from Yan State downheartedly, feeling aggrieved and sighing deeply. When he was drinking with me, he sang madly in a mournful voice. So, I wrote this preface to condole him." [1] (volume 2) It is obvious that this preface itself was an excellent article full of genuine feelings as he had advocated, as if someone were crying or singing. The author's frank, grand and heroic heart can be seen clearly from this preface.

(二) The subtle traits of excellent poems and paintings are their obscure natures, viz, incomprehensible as well as comprehensible.

Shen Zizheng claimed that he had ever immersed himself in Zen deeply, so his poetics were obviously influenced by Yanyu's theory of "Miao Wu" (妙悟), that is, they both advocated that "wonderful inspiration" is vital when apprehending literary works. He wrote in his 《嚴伯度詩序》, "there is not much difference between poetics and the doctrine of Zen... although some people advocate that heart is not Buddha, I still believe that heart is nothing but Buddha. It's lamentable that there isn't any general meetings on poetics like Buddhism up to now." [1] (Volume 2) Based on this criterion, he critiqued many famous scholars of his time sternly, such as Wang Shizhen (王世貞), Li Panlong (李攀龍), Yuan Hongdao (袁宏道) and Zhong Xing (鍾惺). He said,

"Neither Wang and Li's repudiation to former scholars, nor Yuan and Zhong's criticism to Wang and Li is comprehensive; their arguments are both one-sided, just like they are sitting on the tip of an isolated peak. Many so-called elites were academic cheaters who didn't really understand the ancients' standpoints, divorcing themselves from reality and acting blindly in the ghost hole." [1] (volume 2)

He discontented many scholars' poems of his time, satirizing that their poems were worthless like the saliva of a fox and narrow and limited like the flags and horses in the antenna of a snail.

He insisted that the highest level of composing poems could only be reached after a prescribed order and one even didn't know how he got there when he arrived at last, which was similar to musing on Zen. Obviously, this kind of standpoint could be traced back to Yanyu's poetical theory.

(三) The basic principle of composing dramas is to integrate both refined and vulgar contents.

Shen Zizheng's uncle on the paternal side is Shen Jing(沈璟), the famous master of qu(曲) of Ming dynasty. His《張都督詞曲序》^⑨ is an article about the theory of qu influenced deeply by his paternal teaching. In the theory of rhyme, Shen Zizheng followed the position of Shen Jing and advocated that the singing parts in dramas must be adapted to the rules of rhyme. According to such criterion, he highly appraised the dramas of Government Military (dudu 都督)Zhang, said, "The tunes and styles in this drama are perfect and pure. When it is sung by a beautiful girl (or a professional female singer), it will be loud, sonorous, resounding and prolonged to a long time without any word that is hard to pronounce and even will hurt each singer's throat seriously." By saying that "hurt each singer's throat seriously", he might more or less want to ridicule Tang Xianzu who had ever said that he didn't have much time to deliberate the rhymes of drama and didn't mind to hurt each singer's throat seriously". However, Shen Zizheng didn't think it was right to demand too strictly on the rhymes. So he criticized Zhou Deqing's《中原音韻》^⑩ boldly, "Zhou Deqing proposed that each cycle of songs must distinguish between different gongdiao (modes of ancient Chinese music), and each word must have a certain level or oblique tone, which was too rigorous, for nobody could demonstrate that Taohuashan (also named Peach Blossom Fan, composed by Kong Shangren, a famous dramatist in Qing dynasty) measured up this criterion." [1] (Volume2) By this token, Shen Zizheng was not a doctrinarian although he was a conformist to paternal teaching and influence. In the aspect of singing parts, Shen Zizheng cited such a sentence in Yan Yu's《滄浪詩話》^⑪ as "writing poems is a special talent, which can't be acquired by studying hard", and he thought it was the same with composing dramas, he put this proposition as,

"The basic principle of composing dramas is to integrate both refined and vulgar contents. Playwright should absorb anything from Jing (經), Zi (子), Sao (騷), Xuan (選) to books of anecdote and trifles, and so on. In other words, they should draw materials widely and abundantly. Those elegant and refined words could make people excited, and those comical and vulgar words also could make people smile happily." [1] (Volume2)

According to this proposition, Shen Zizheng set forth his opinions about the composing of drama which had become popular since Yuan Dynasty: He evaluated highly the dramatists in Yuan Dynasty, "Many dramatists such as Guan Hanqing(關漢卿) in Yuan Dynasty often played rolls in the stage themselves, just like the veteran You Meng (優孟, an ancient comical actor whose performance is remarkably true to life). The best librettos in Zhang Xiaoshan's (張小山, a sanqu writer of Yuan Dynasty, also named Zhang Kejiu) dramas are so perfect and wonderful that they could be compared to jade sheng (a reed pipe wind instrument) and heavenly crane. The popularity of their dramas had been in the whole Yuan Dynasty was not occasional. Compared

with his appraisal of Yuan dramatists, he gave much criticism to the dramatists of Ming Dynasty. He said, "In the early Ming, Yang Sheng'an (楊昇庵, a poet of the Ming Dynasty, also named Yang Shen) was the most learned and informed scholar of his time, but he still mistook the "wutou" (務頭, certain words to change the tunes of singing parts in a drama) for "butou" (部頭), which was sneered by the expert of drama. Other scholars such as Wang Meipi (王漢陂), Kang Duishan (康對山), Chang Louju (常樓居) indulged in self-admiration to their singing parts, but they couldn't incorporate the southern tunes and northern tunes into one, so there are lots of unharmonious melodies in their dramas. It's really very difficult to find a playwright who is good at both dictions and melodies." [1] (Volume 2) This kind of opinion that advocated "to integrate the refined and vulgar contents" reflected that Shen Zizheng had a deep percipience to the characters of drama.

Shen Zizheng was gallant, romantic and untrammelled in character, and his view of literature was affected by this character, bearing the traits of advocating genuine feeling, stressing on "writing heart" and conforming to no conventions. Zhou Ming's 《松陵絕妙詞選》^② evaluated one of his dramas like this, "《漁陽三弄》symbolized his own life. When reading his works, we could be easily affected by his singing with solemn fervor which from his deep heart—this is the author's true character." [2] (Volume 1) Some scholars even regarded his drama as in the same rank with Xu Wei's 《四聲猿》^③, take Wang Shizheng for example, who wrote in his 《古夫於亭雜錄》^④: "Shen Junyong, named Zizheng came from Wujiang county, composed 《霸亭秋》^⑤ and 《鞭歌伎》^⑥, his literature talent would be as good as Xu Wenchang." [3] (Volume 5) We can know from this that he earnestly practiced what he advocated about literature. In one of his letters written to his good friend Lu Qihong (陸啓宏), he criticized the "eight-part essay" (a stereotyped writing) penetratingly which was most popular type of writing of his time, saying that "the eight-part essay was tasteless just like a piece of chicken rib". [1] (Volume 2) His critical consciousness to the "eight-part essay", the most important cultural form of Ming Dynasty, should be one of thought basics of his literature theory which made his perception of literature in accord with the thoughts of Xu Wei, Tang Xianzu and Gong'an School who advocated writing true feeling in literature.

Explanatory Notes

① Huang Lüzhong Bing Nie Cao Xu.

② Yan Bodu Shi Xu.

③ Zhang Dudu Ci Qu Xu.

④ Zhang Dudu Ci Qu Xu.

⑤ Zhong Yuan Yin Yun, or The Rhythms of Chinese Plain.

⑥ Cang Lang Shi Hua.

⑦ Song Ling Jue Miao Ci Xuan.

⑧ Si Sheng Yuan.

⑨ Gu Fu Yu Ting Za Lu.

⑩ Ba Ting Qiu.

①Bian Ge Ji.

The Documents Referred in this Article

- [1] Shen Zizheng:《沈君庸先生集》[M], transcript of National Beiping Library in the ages of ROC.
- [2] Zhou Ming:《松陵絕妙詞選》[M], printed in Qing Dynasty.
- [3] Wang Xulou:《松陵見聞錄》[M], block—printed in 9th year(1829) in ages of Emperor Daoguang.

Shen Zizheng's View of Literature, an Author Lived in Late Ming Dynasty