

# Study of the Qing poetry in Russia

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*Evgenia Mitkina. STUDY OF THE QING POETRY IN RUSSIA*

**Abstract.** Many significant plays and novels were written in the Qing age; however, they could never completely replace poetry. Qing poetry outpaced the literary production in previous dynasties in terms of the number of composed poems. This shows that plays and novels could by no means substitute poetry. The love for poetry writing persisted. In Russian Sinology, Qing poetry has not been studied thoroughly enough. In the 1960s the journal “Peoples of Asia and Africa” hosted a discussion concerning the periodization of Chinese literature, primarily, of Qing literature. The main question was whether the whole Qing literature or only that part of it which was written upon the onset of the ‘Opium Wars’ should be considered as belonging to the modern cultural movement. Another general problem was the idea of Chinese Enlightenment. The majority of researchers, when speaking of 18th century literature, focus primarily on this period’s prose, and the fact that these authors also created poetic works is skated over. The poetry of the 17th and 19th centuries is also represented by a few poets. So Qing poetry has not yet been studied sufficiently.

**Keywords:** Chinese literature, Qing dynasty literature, history of literature.

*Евгения Миткина. ИЗСЛЕДВАНЕ НА ПОЕЗИЯТА НА ДИНАСТИЯТА ЦИН В РУСИЯ*

**Резюме.** По време на епохата Цин са създадени много значими пиеси и романи, но и те не могат да заместят поезията, още по-малко да я изместят от мястото ѝ в белетристиката. Поезията на Цин, разгледана като брой поеми, изпреварва значително предишните династии. Броят не е критерий, но ни показва, че пиесите и романите могат да бъдат част от поезията. През 60-те години на XX век в списание „Народите на Азия и Африка“ възниква спор относно периодизацията на китайската литература – дали цялата литература на Цин трябва да се разглежда като принадлежаща на съвременното културно движение. Друг основен проблем била идеята за Китайско просвещение. Поезията през XVIII век е най-слабо застъпена в руската китаистика. Поезията от XVII и XIX век също включва незадоволителен брой автори. Досега поезията през епохата на династията Цин не е изследвана достатъчно.

**Ключови думи:** китайска литература, литературата по време на династия Цин, история на литературата.

Many significant plays and novels were written in the Qing age; however, they could never completely replace poetry and supplant it in belles-lettres. Literature cannot exist within just a single genre, since it cannot encompass the whole variety of ideas and sentiments, as well as to satisfy various spiritual needs of people. The main condition for literature development is exactly coexistence of various genres; it is the variety of art forms that leads to their complementarity and mutual borrowing of the best. “Genres are in a certain, by no means random correlation between each other. This is a *sui generis* ‘plant association’ that embraces a joint existence of various breeds, species, units. Every age has its own correlation of genres, which changes depending on the literature function alteration, on a given literary school (in cases when literature schools have already emerged), on ‘the age style’, etc.” (Likhachyov, 2012).

Qing poetry, if regarded from the perspective of the number of composed poems, outpaced the previous dynasties by a long way. Xu Shichang, the President of the Republic of China in 1918–1921, published “The collection of Qing Poetry”, wherein over six thousand poets were represented. “The catalogue of Qing Literature from private collections” published under the editorship of Li Lingnian and Yang Zhong mentions over 40 thousand private collections of literary works (2008: 3). These numbers exceed approximately 10 times the same values for the Tang dynasty<sup>1</sup>, 3–4 times those for the Song dynasty and 6–7 times those for the Yuan and Ming era. Furthermore, there are so many works of Qing poets that their precise number has not been determined by the present time; one can be sure, however, that it is higher than in any other dynasty. Number, of course, cannot be the sole and most important success or achievement criterion for poetry of a particular age. However, it shows us that plays and novels by no means could substitute poetry. The love for poetry writing persisted.

As was mentioned above, there is a certain prejudice towards Qing poetry. Nevertheless, many researchers of the history of poetry (including the famous Qing poetry researcher Qian Zhonglian) agree that “the Qing poetry, as compared to the previous three dynasties, achieved a great success in poetry writing” (ibid.: 7). Some even deem that the Qing poetry can be regarded as the third golden age of poetry – on the morrow of the Tang and Song eras (Yuan Mei Novye, 1977). Such opinion is explained not only by the great number of extant poems, but also because of their high aesthetic distinction. Some scholars consider that the return to classical specimens represents the main distinctive feature of this period’s poetry. Others, however, express rather different judgements. In their view, Yuan and Ming poetries also addressed to the classics – i.e. this is not a feature unique for Qing poetry. Therefore, Qing poetry must have its own, distinct from other ages, unique character. Throughout almost three hundred years, the Qing poetry did not remain unchanged. At each stage of its development, it had its own particularities; more importantly, the difference even within one and the same stage could be enormous.

The fact that the Qing dynasty was the last for the old society and the lore of tradition accumulated by that time was immense, should also be taken into account, for this was not observed neither in the Tang age nor in the Song age – hence the unprecedented dependence on traditional art forms. Nevertheless, Qing poetry managed not only to level with, but in some cases even excel the achievements of Yuan and Ming literature because it in general fitted in its age, reached the depths of spiritual life of people of that time, and had a common heartbeat with the era.

As to peculiarities of the age itself – or rather of the period of the Qing dynasty reign, it was in many respects an extremely difficult phase of history, especially for those who aspired to devote their talent to classical literature that was based on ages-long principles of the Chinese concept of the world order. On the one hand, Manchurian rulers extended every possible patronage to scholarship and book learning. A system of examinations to engage talented people in public service was restored. In the Kangxi and Qianlong Emperors' reign, *boxue hongci* (examination in deep knowledge and literary talent) became widely practiced; men of letters were invited from remote parts of the country to compile the history of the preceding Ming dynasty. Considerable human resources were used to compile the large-scale collections “Siku Quanshu” (“Complete library in four sections”) and “Gujin Tushu Jicheng” (“Complete collection of illustrations and writings from the earliest to current times”). On the other hand, extensive campaigns against opposition-minded writers were carried out; actions and even ideas contradicting the ruling ideology were punished severely. Under such circumstances, the society was unavoidably becoming conservative and closed; people's interests, previously related to day-to-day existence, were now shifting towards researching and ordering of classical literary monuments. This is one of the reasons for the unparalleled worship of classics in the period under consideration.

Expectedly, such an exorbitant cultural conservatism was unfavorable for social thinking development. Nevertheless, it led to unprecedented systematization and making of highly detailed commentaries to monuments of Chinese cultural heritage. This process reminded the textual work with canon books in the Han dynasty – that is why Qing scholarship was called *Hanxue* (汉学) – ‘the Han learning’.

The Qing dynasty was the age of transformation from the old society to a new one, which was stipulated by the very march of history and contacts with the West; hence, it is not surprising that numerous deviations from tradition emerged in various cultural fields. Thus came out, for example, the novel “The scholars (the unofficial history of the forest of the literati)”, wherein the author, Wu Jingzi, sees tartly into the lifestyle that was traditional for scholars and refuses to choose the life path of a classical writer. As to poetry, a new *xingling* school, which will be reviewed in detail below, formed here. By the end of the Qing dynasty, many poets were already seeking for a fuller innovativeness (they were trying to write poems in *baihua*, use borrowed words and concepts in classical – in form – poems, etc.). Thus, two major trends can be observed in this period's poetry (as well as

in literature in general): old and new, conservative and innovative standing in opposition to each other. Part of the poets adhered to the old, classical tradition, but there were some, who sought the way to popularity through innovations in writing. Thereby, it can be said that the first ones were outnumbered, but it was them who were recognized as the quintessence of the Qing dynasty's literary rise (in prose it is, without doubt, Pu Songling and Cao Xueqin, whereas in poetry – Yuan Mei and Huang Jingren).

In Russian sinology, Qing poetry has not been studied thoroughly enough. Before discussing papers of orientalist researchers of individual writers, we should say some words about general studies.

Let us start with the issue, the discussion of which began in the 1960s in the journal *Peoples of Asia and Africa*, – concerning periodization of Chinese literature, primarily, of Qing literature. The main point of the discussion can be formulated as follows: whether the whole Qing literature or only that part of it which was written upon the onset of the 'Opium Wars' (that is, after the first major collision with the West) should be considered as belonging to the modern cultural movement. V. Semanov stated that it was necessary to set its own timeframe for each individual country and suggested to deem the period from late the 17<sup>th</sup> through early the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the late medieval period, whereas everything written from 1840 through 1919 – as 'modern' literature. V. Petrov disagreed with this opinion, "In the same way as there could not be and there was not any special Chinese modern age in Chinese history, there could not be and there was not any special 'modern age' in the history of Chinese literature. In Chinese literature, modern age as an era begins not in 1840, but in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, although for various reasons it obtains the features intrinsic to developed European literatures of modern age... much later – in fact, only in early 20<sup>th</sup> century." (1977: 177)

V. Petrov proposed his own periodization of the Manchurian-age literature. First, he divided it in two large stages: stage 1 – the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the entire 18<sup>th</sup> century; stage 2 – the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Within the second stage, he, in turn, distinguished 5 more stages, which we shall not review in detail here<sup>2</sup>, since our subject concerns the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Speaking of general problems discussed by Russian orientalist researchers of Qing literature, works of O. Fishman, who suggested the idea of Chinese Enlightenment (Fishman, 1967, 1966), should be mentioned. In her opinion, similar historical conditions generate similar literary phenomena. In China of the 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries, like in Western Europe, educational sentiment arose. First enlighteners called to restore the ideal order of antiquity with due account, however, for contemporary needs, whereas later ones spoke of reforms on the model of Western countries to adopt experience, science and technologies from. As to literature, it should not, in their view, be limited to Confucian classics. It should be connected to life, influence people and morals of the society. Literary works must reflect the spirit of the age. However, O. Fishman elaborates her conception of Enlightenment

in Chinese literature only through the example of fictional prose – namely, satirical novels.

In her book “The Chinese satirical novel”, she mentions several most eminent representatives of the Chinese Enlightenment, characterizing only Huang Zongxi as a poet. Other enlighteners appear in her paper merely as thinkers and politicians, but not as poets.

A. Maslov’s article “On the art form of Gu Yanwu’s poems” is devoted to the poetry of Gu Yanwu (1613–1682), one of the enlighteners. The author notes that Gu wrote principally octets in form of the ancient regulated verses *guti shi*, whereas the works written in the form of the modern regulated verses *lü shi* comply strictly with the Tang versification system, “firmly observing the sequence of tones and applying the compensation rule” (1970: 51).

17th century poetry is also represented in the studies of E. Bervers (Karymova, 1979, 1976) devoted to poetic works of Wu Weiye (1609–1671), the creator of a special literary style called *meicun ti*. Her candidate’s thesis “Works of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese poet Wu Weiye” (Bervers, 2007) defended in 2007 is also devoted to him.

S. Merinov’s article (1970) is devoted to the heritage of Wang Shizhen (1634–1711). The author familiarizes readers with the poet’s biography and his views on literature. The paper also provides translation of Wang Shizhen’s poems and analysis of some of them.

18th century poetry is represented in Russian sinology least of all. As a matter of fact, a special study is devoted only to one writer of this period. O. Fishman, in her preface to a translated collection of Yuan Mei’s short stories and notes “New [notes] on Qi Xie, or What the Master does not speak of”, characterizes him as a poet (“Despite all the virtuosity, Yuan Mei’s poems are always a fruit of strenuous work” (Yuan Mei Novye, 1977: 30). The monograph also provides information on the conception of literary creation elaborated by Yuan Mei along with translations of some of his poems. Besides, O. Fishman mentions that Yuan Mei had many friends and followers, among whom names of famous poets of that age – Zheng Xie (1693–1765), Zhao Yi (1727–1814), Huang Jingren (1749–1783), Zhao Wentao (1764–1814), Jiang Shiquan (1725–1784) – can be found.

As mentioned above, the majority of researchers, when speaking of 18th century literature, focus primarily on this period’s prose, and only when some novelists are characterized, the fact that these authors also created poetic works is skated over.

We can find such information concerning the famous novelist Pu Songling (1640–1715) in O. Fishman’s book “Three Chinese novelists” (1980) and in D. Voskresenskiy’s article “Distinctive features of Chinese culture in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and some new trends in literature” (1969). Voskresenskiy notes that Pu Songling “clothes... pieces of advice concerning medicine, agriculture, etc. ... in

poetic form...” (ibid.: 334). O. Fishman writes about sorrows and troubles pervading Pu Songling’s poetry. Her book also mentions that the novelist authored many poems in *shi* and *ci* genres; the author, however, does not provide any examples.

O. Fishman mentions Ji Yun’s (1724–1805) poetry merely in connection with the publication of the collection of his poems and essays titled “Postmortem collection of works of the honorable Ji Wenda” (Fishman, 1980: 161). As to the famous 18-century satirist Wu Jingzi, D. Voskresenskiy writes about him, “There survived a part of his works that speak of him as of a gifted poet and essayist. Rudiments of Wu Jingzi’s critical talent can already be observed in his poetic works...” (1962: 8). Nevertheless, no examples of poetic works of Pu Songling, Ji Yun or Wu Jingzi are provided.

Several works by E. Mitkina are devoted to the famous poet of 18th century Huang Jingren (1748–1783). In her articles the author gives the biography of the poet (2006, 2016, 2013, 2010), describes the major images and themes specific for Huang Jingren (2010, 2008, 2015).

We shall not consider few papers devoted to 19-century poets in detail. We shall only note papers familiarizing with works of Huang Zunxian (N. Petrov, “Huang Zunxian”, 1955), Tan Sitong (V. Semanov, “Tan Sitong”, 1960), Qiu Jin (T. Zayats, “Qiu Jin. Life and Works”, 1984), “Main Topics of Qiu Jin’s Poetry”, 1974, “Qiu Jin’s Landscape Lyrics”, 1976 and “Chinese Literary Theorists on Modern National Poetry (Qiu Jin’s Works)”, 1970. K. Golygina’s book “The theory of fine literature in China of the 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries” (1971), wherein the author characterizes the majority of schools and styles of the Qing literature, also merits attention. The main part of the paper is devoted to the so-called Tongcheng school, which emerged as early as in the middle 17<sup>th</sup> century and was officially recognized by the Manchurian dynasty.

Translations of Qing poetry can be found in “The history of world literature” (1987): works of Wu Weiye, Yuan Mei, Gu Yanwu, Zheng Xie, Huang Jingren, He Shaoji (1799–1783), Zheng Zhen (1806–1864), Wei Yuan (1794–1856), Zeng Guofan (1811–1872), Huang Zunxian and others are presented in O. Fishman’s and V. Petrov’s articles.

Around fifty poems of forty-two poets, among which there are Wu Weiye, Wu Jiafan (1618–1685), Wang Shizhen, Xu Qiu (appr. 1650 – ?), Xing De (1655–1685), Zheng Xie, Xie Fanglian (appr. 1700 – ?), Cao Xueqin (1724–1764), Gong Zizhen, Huang Zunxian, Tan Sitong, featured in the four-volume anthology of Chinese poetry (Mitkina, 2006). V. Vozhaninov’s article in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia (1973) mentions names of such enlighteners as Huang Zongxi, Gu Yanwu, Wang Fuzhi, and also the Tongcheng school along with its opponents Dai Zhen (1723–1777) and Gong Zizhen, as well as patriotic lyrics of Lin Zexu, Wei Yuan (1794–1856) and Huang Zunxian. The Concise Literary Encyclopedia also contains V. Sorokin’s article on Chinese literature. Besides, the Concise Literary En-

cyclopedia features articles of T. Zayats on Huang Zunxian and Qiu Jin, of P. Ustin on Gu Yanwu, as well as articles of V. Sorokin, A. Zhelokhovtsev and I. Lisevich devoted to Wang Shizhen, Gong Zizhen and Yuan Mei respectively.

In 2008, the third volume of the encyclopedia within the “Spiritual culture of China” series (2006–2008) was published. However, it also provides only small articles on 12 poets and writers of the Qing dynasty, among which there are Gong Zizhen (A. Zhelokhovtsev), Pu Songling (K. Golygina), Wu Weiye (E. Bevers), Huang Zunxian (E. Serebryakov), Ji Yun (K. Golygina), Cao Xueqin (D. Voskresenskiy), Shen Deqian (I. Smirnov) and Yuan Mei (K. Golygina).

Thus, it should be noted that up to now Qing poetry has not yet been studied sufficiently. Therefore, researchers of this period’s literature are currently facing a great challenge to translate and analyze the poetic heritage of one of the most interesting periods in Chinese history.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This estimation, without doubt, cannot be entirely unbiased, since a considerable number of the Tang, Song and Yuan literature works were lost – therefore, their entire number cannot be calculated.

<sup>2</sup> For more details see V.V. Petrov’s article “Periodization of the history of Chinese literature of the 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> CC.”

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