

The Qing-Dynasty Reception of Wang Anshi's Epitaph for Mr. Xu, Registrar of Hailing County, Taizhou: Angularity, Abstruseness, and Their Formation

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Abstract: In the Qing dynasty Wang Anshi's *Epitaph for Mr. Xu, Registrar of Hailing County, Taizhou* was already credited as one of the fundamental ways to compose prose by the Tongcheng School. This article briefly outlines the reception of Wang Anshi and of his writing, analyzes the defining characteristics of the epitaph: angularity and abstruseness, and describes why Wang's writing could have developed these traits from the setting of the Northern Song, from Wang's temperament and career. It suggests that the work is a culmination of the epitaph as a genre, in its combination of compressed narration, forceful turns of argument, and restrained yet profound grief.

Keywords: Wang Anshi; prose style; Tongcheng School; *Epitaph for Mr. Xu, Registrar of Hailing County, Taizhou*; Qing reception.

1. Introduction

Epitaph for Mr Xu, Registrar of Hailing County, Taizhou was composed by Wang Anshi for Xu Ping, who was the registrar of Hailing County and died during Emperor Renzong's Jiayou reign. The work laments the tragedy of a man of great potential who wasn't properly utilized. It pits Xu's frustration with the failure of two other kinds of scholars, both those who refuse to conform to society and who become recluses, and those who follow the times and make the best of opportunity. His burial and his life are summarized in the closing parts. Within the epitaph, argument plays an unusually large part and the use of language is sparse and intense; strong grief is present but not expressed. In the prose section of *Introduction to Art and Literature* Liu Xizai noted: "Jiefu's prose is like that of Xunzi in its love of angularity and like that of Yang Xiong in its love of abstruseness" [1]. Both characteristics are evident in the epitaph, especially.

2. Wang Anshi and the Tongcheng Conception of Prose

Since the Southern Song, the lack of success of the Xining Reforms under Wang Anshi was blamed as a major reason for the Northern Song's demise. He was also said to be obstinate and impersonal in his political style, which merited moral and political criticism from the present day up to the present. Those opinions often carried over into the literary realm. When making epitaphs for cousins [2] Wang was described by Fang Bao, who valued compression as a feature of his prose, as "devoid of human feeling." Wang Jin also admitted "I love his writing, I can't defend the man" [3]. However, Mao Kun's anthologies since the Ming dynasty have confirmed this, and no literati could deny Wang's literary status, which had become the accepted eight masters of the Tang and Song period. In his opinion, Zhang Boxing said, Jiefu was undoubtedly a great prose writer but his one-sided perspectives and his dogged self-reliance brought disaster. Before it was even apparent the political implications of his obdurate learning, his compositions were too refined to be

effaced, Zhang went on, yet made apparent the tendency to the same in the brushwork. Hence Zhang chose some popular pieces of writing and submitted them for the critical opinion of good readers [4]. His comments make apparent the two aspects under which he was judged.

Although the Tongcheng School claimed to be the successor of the Eight Great Masters, the influence of Ouyang Xiu and Zeng Gong were mainly adopted in the practice of the mid-Qing literary world. From Fang Linggao to later on, all writers of Tongcheng have spoken highly of Tuizhi; however, their style was essentially from Ouyang Xiu and Zeng Gong, and they used Tuizhi to strengthen their foundation because their brushwork, vital force and diction are not of Tuizhi's type [5]. This inheritance endowed Tongcheng prose with a "recurrently yielding quality" as "its vital force was too weak to rouse itself. Even with a master like Yao Nai, he might be succinct but might not have enough strength of the brush. To reverse this weakness and regain strong momentum, it was necessary to bring in some strong influences. Liu Xizai did not only inherit Tongcheng ideas, but also surpassed them; the comparison of Wang to Xunzi and Yang Xiong is the result of a late-Qing reevaluation of Wang's prose [6]. Su Shi wrote in a forceful style as well among the Eight Great Masters, but his "natural and numinous" style may be too easy to become wordy or colloquial. Liu Zongyuan, Wang Anshi and Zeng Gong are more rigorous: Zeng leans towards the yielding while Liu and Wang towards arresting angularity. Especially Wang's prose is steep, taut, singular, and vigorously refined, qualities able to correct the softness that it has inherited from Ouyang Xiu and Zeng Gong. The political image of Wang occasionally deterred writers from calling his name, but they would inwardly emulate him and follow his brush. In order to overcome the lack of vitality in the later period of the Tongcheng literature, Zeng Guofan set up the Xiang River School, championed Wang's prose and gave private lessons in prose writing. He told another student that he should study Jiefu's prose so that his writing will be "vigorous and refined" [7]. This stylistic discussion was continued by the scholars of the Tongcheng in the Republican period [8].

In Wang's epitaphs, his style is evident to the extreme. *Epitaph for Mr. Xu* was regarded as the necessary way for those who wanted to learn classical prose and wanted to strengthen their enfeebled brush and it was regarded as an entryway and a key to composition by Zeng Guofan's circle. It is also musically beautiful through its ascending and descending, contracting and turning of phrases. Tongcheng writers thus adopted it as a way of transitioning between Wang Anshi to Han Yu. The epitaph is used in a total of seventeen of the twenty-six representative Qing anthologies of classical prose. It is the second most frequent work in Wang's prose oeuvre, and is widely recognized as a classic of his work [9].

3. Manifestations of Angularity and Abstruseness

The canonization of the epitaph is very unusual, and is due more to its angular and abstruse qualities. Jiefu was also a prolific speaker on institutions and took measures for the situation, which can be seen in Liu Shipai's collected works, and his writing is unique, and the language is high, the explanation is deep. Liu continued, Wang's prose is highly austere and concise, and the shorter ones are virtually unsurpassed in their ferocity - it's the prose of the Legalist tradition. Here, angularity will signify the peculiar, abrupt, force of diction, and abstruseness, argument leading to hidden depths.

3.1. Angularity: Unusual Momentum and Diction

Epitaph: a crumbling cliff, a severed bank, a precarious rock on the verge of falling, or a cramped path folding over itself before emerging beside the former stream: such is Master Wang Jiefu's brush, writes Jin Shengtan in *Essential Readings by the World's Men of Talent* [11]. The topographic imagery captures the composition's extraordinary momentum. Wang often creates such movement by making thought change direction through successive turns. Here he opens with "He was the man referred to in my genealogy as the present registrar of Hailing County, Taizhou" [12], abruptly lifting the prose before laying out Xu Ping's ability and circumstances. After explaining why scholars who depart from the world and defy convention naturally fail to find opportunity, Wang sets them against Xu's predicament, then turns suddenly to the humiliation and frustration of ambitious strategists. The question "What account can be given of this?" challenges the irrationality of their fate and gathers force. "Those who waited for something and never encountered it," he concludes, "must understand." The conduct of powerholders who trample talent and the injustice of fate are left beyond explicit judgment. The inscription ends in a passionate question: "The epitaph says: Someone might have raised him and set him on his feet; let no one have pressed him down and stopped him. Alas, Master Xu! That you ended here - who or what made it so?" [12]. These resistant turns create fluctuation in the essay's momentum and fill it with feeling. Jin therefore comments that the work is composed entirely of abrupt reversals yet remains utterly unrestrained, the brush genuinely singular and steep [11]. Wu Chucai and Wu Diaohou likewise observe that its emotions seem now doubtful and now credible, now close and now distant, leaving the reader unable to predict them [13]. The angularity of the epitaph works in this way, through multiple turns that

beg to be repeated.

The use of words and phrases is equally characteristic of Wang. Jin Shengtan identifies three linking phrases as "as for," "and yet," and "what explanation can be given for this?" He claims that the prose relies on emphasizing these small expressions; "the unusual clarity creates the pattern of resistant turns [11]". These function words are used to propel the text forward, enhance the sense of it, and harmonize its pitch with the ups and downs of the argument.

The epitaph is another source of angularity, through its indirect writing. Typically, an epitaph focuses on the deceased's life and character. Xu Ping, however, did not have "any official accomplishment to record, and the common behaviors of his family were not worth to say" [2]. So Wang moves the focus of the work from actions of a lifetime toward an argumentative reflection. After summarizing Xu's life in the opening paragraph, the prose goes into discussion, as a life without public achievement will also be transmissible. Shen Deqian describes this effect as "argument launched to the open space, that is to produce new form within the writing of epitaphs" [14]. In his opinion, the discursive structure is an innovation of Wang, and so another form of angularity. It is, however, a generic transformation, so Fang Bao cautions later writers to not mechanically imitate it.

3.2. Abstruseness: Hidden Depth in Form and Feeling

First of all, the epitaph's abstruseness is due to a thought-movement that is anything but linear. The layers are multiplied by the actions of reversal, suspension, and resistant turns. As commented by Li Fujia on *Record of a Visit to Mount Baoshan*, "the turns of the brush resemble the hidden depths of the cave" [15] equally applies to the present work. Wang has not directly vented his compassion for the life-long frustrations of Xu Ping. Rather, he presents what sounds a reasonable explanation for why those who "depart from the world and defy convention" are met with resistance: their inability to fit into the square pegs of regular society makes it seem natural that they meet some resistance. The brush is then turned back. Even the "strategists in pursuit of achievement," men who are adept at looking at the age and adjusting themselves accordingly, "are likewise too numerous to count" who never come to opportunity. What recognition can be expected in either of these courses is to be an independent self beyond convention, or to adjust oneself to the present moment. The central theme gradually grows, owing to this winding logic. The perpetual motion of Wang's circling and reversal creates an abstruseness that is both inward and withholding, its next turn.

The process of grieving in the work is not discussed directly, but is a contained imminence on the emotional plane. It's authentic and yet it has thoughts about the fate of talented individuals. The entire piece is pregnant with the notion of fate, but never identifies it overtly; the containment makes few words mean a lot, perceptively noted by Lü Liuliang. At the end, Wang says "Alas, Master Xu! 'Who or what brought you here - you ended up here?'" He does not offer a reply, and bewilderment and indignation hang in the air. The tragedy thus becomes a universal one about the fate of the talented. The sadness is not only Xu Ping's, but of all those who refuse to conform to the world, of the ambitious strategists and of the worthy who come and go throughout history without their chance. This loss of speech is pointed in the direction of suggestion and is extreme and very deep.

4. The Sources of Grief, Angularity, and Abstruseness

The sadness of the epitaph and its more angular and abstruse style had no random origin. They are very much related to Wang Anshi's temperament, experience, political identity and historical experience.

This work was written during the reign of Jiayou (1059-1063) in the likely period of 1059-1063. Prior to this he had passed the metropolitan examination in 1042 and had held various offices, first as judge in Huainan, then as magistrate of Yin County and assistant prefect of Shuzhou and finally as official at the Imperial Pasturage Service. It was through these posts that he first had the chance to explore the issues of popular livelihood and the correction of entrenched abuses. He had already won the respect of Ouyang Xiu and others leading figures of Northern Song letters, but he several times refused to come back to the central government and wanted to serve in the province. The selection indicates a practical, stubborn nature that is not willing to abide by custom. In 1058 he became an assistant in the Bureau of Expenditures of the central fiscal administration. He presented his famous and influential memorial, proposing reform, in the following year, and his political style, which was uncompromising, eventually cost him the name of "the Obstinate Minister" [16]. The angularity of his prose was related to his personal temperament, political practice and to the reformer's duty to point out the faults of the present day.

Wang's literary perspective had as its premise practicality and required writing to serve the age [17]. For him composition always performed a political reflection tending to order the world, to serve the people. The "Three Redundancies" of officials, soldiers and expenditure had drained the treasury and caused serious fiscal difficulties by the middle of the Northern Song period, while the Liao and Western Xia were threatening to the frontiers. Despite the failure of the Qingli Reforms, there was an increased emphasis on the scholar-official ideal of taking responsibility for the realm, and an increased demand for able men by the court. The examination system thrived and its graduates revealed the fundamental incongruity: letter-writing achievement was not a sure indicator of administrative capability and administrative accomplishment was not a sure indicator of letter-writing achievement. There was also a bit of factional conflict early on that hampered progress and resulted in many able people going unrecognised and impoverished. The interlocking difficulties produced the epitaph's sadness, and the pressure of its somewhat abstruse diction.

5. Conclusion

Epitaph for Mr. Xu, Registrar of Hailing County, Taizhou is more than just the traditional rule that the subject of an epitaph should be the actions of a lifetime. It also infuses a sharp and rigorous aesthetic to a degree of intensity that is also exceptional, and thus provides a model for the Tongcheng School to turn in search of increased force and precision. Its instinct for artful arrangement, on the other hand, detracts from the factual substance of its story. Later writers were thus forced to rethink the ways in which epitaphs were to be both historical and literary.

The epitaph came in the midst of the Northern Song's social conflicts and just before the maturity of Wang Anshi's political philosophy came into the forefront of history. Through its angularity and abstruseness, it signifies his perception of blocked talent, and his reflection on the need for reform. Such attributes make the epitaph a more expressive and intellectually rich work, and ensure its enduring status as a classic of literature.

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