

# *Shi yan zhi* 詩言志

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## SUMMARY

*Shi yan zhi* 詩言志 (“The Poem articulates what is on the mind intently”, Owen: 26), is the fountainhead of Chinese poetics, being one of the most important theoretical concepts in ancient Chinese poetic theory and having a profound influence on the development of Chinese poetic theory and poetry itself.

In comparison with ancient Western poetics early Chinese poetic theory’s characteristic was the stress on the relationship between poetic creation and the poet’s mentality, as in, for example, *shi yan zhi* and the related concept *shi yuan qing* 詩緣情, “poetry traces emotions” (Liu: 192) etc., and not the relationship between the poem and external reality. This apparently determined that Chinese poetry should become an indispensable part of the daily life and moral cultivation of the cultured individual of that time, through activities such as the expression of feelings, exchanging poems, presenting them to friends, etc. Therefore, if one wishes to understand ancient Chinese poetry fully one must understand the theory of *shi yan zhi*.

## KEY WORDS

*Shi yan zhi*

*The Odes (Shi jing)*

Liu Xie

Kong Yida

*Shi pin*

*shi yuan qing*

*qing*

Zong Rong

*Wenxin diaolong*

*qing zhi*



“*Shi yan zhi*” is “the founding principle” of Chinese poetics (Zhu Ziqing 朱自清, 1898-1948), first appearing in ancient texts from the Spring and Autumn Period. The “Canon of Shu” in *The Book of Documents* states, “Poetry expresses in words the intent of the heart [or mind], songs prolong the words in chanting, notes follow the chanting, and pitch-pipes harmonize with the notes” (Liu: 69). In the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳, Xiang 襄公, Zhao Meng 趙文子 says to Shu Xiang 叔向, “We use the Odes in order to articulate our aims” (Van Zoeren: 65-66). In the “Tianxia 天下” chapter of Zhuangzi 莊子, it is written, “The *Odes* serve as a guide to the aim”, (ibid: 272, n.67). The “Ruxiao 儒效” chapter of Xunzi 荀子 says, “What the Odes articulate are their aims” (ibid:76).

The term “*zhi*” 志 has several interpretations.<sup>1</sup> Prevalent interpretations today are: “aspiration”, “ideal”, “ambition”, “intent” or “thought” etc. However, in ancient times poetry (*shi*) was equivalent to, or considered to be, interchangeable with *zhi*. Xu Shen’s *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 states that “*shi* is *zhi*. Its (etymology) derives from *yan* (word) and *si* (attendant)”. The recent scholar Wen Yiduo suggests that “*zhi*” has three meanings and also represents three stages on the road of poetic development. These three meanings are: 1) to remember, 2) to record, and 3) to cherish (emotion) in the heart. Therefore, the activities of recording or remembering are important in China’s early poetry and indeed the earliest poems refer to terms used in offering sacrifices to the gods or celebrating victories in religious, political and hunting

activities in ancient China, something which can be gleaned from China's earliest poetic anthology, the *Shi jing* (the *Odes*). In fact, the term "*shi yan zhi*" refers to matters pertaining to "the rise and fall of rulers" and statements "informing deities of success", for poets were most likely to be shamanic officials. Later, with the development of society and poetic creation itself, the scope of the term "*shi yan zhi*" gradually began to refer to the aspirations and emotions of the poet.

However, since there were differing understandings of the function of poetry, the connotations of "*shi yan zhi*" underwent transformation and development over time. There were those who, influenced by Confucianism, placed great emphasis on defining it in terms of its utilitarian social function. Confucius himself promoted the doctrine of "No warped thoughts" (Owen: 454) [in reference to the *Odes*], and standardized the function and utilitarian role of poetry with his view that, "It can be used to inspire, observe, to make you fit for company, to express grievances; near at hand, [it will teach you how] to serve your father, and, [looking] further, [how] to serve your sovereign; it also enables you to learn the names of many birds, beasts, plants, and trees." (Liu: 109). Thus, the term *zhi* was always understood by later generations as referring to the Sagely (or Confucian) Way. *Shi yan zhi* referred to the elucidation of the political or ethical thought of early philosophers through poetry, with an emphasis on the role of "admonition". The Song Neo-Confucian stress on "Literature as a vehicle of the Way" took this tendency to its extreme and, in so doing, overlooked the inherent rules and emotional effect of artistic creation itself.<sup>2</sup>

Another comparatively representative explanation of *shi yan zhi* is the theory of "affections" (*qing* 情) (Owen: 51) linked with *zhi*, whereby the Mao Preface to the *Odes*, following "The affections [*qing*] are moved within and take on form in sound" from the *Record of Music (Book of Rites)* (Owen: *ibid*), states, "The poem is that to which what is

intently on the mind [*zhi*] goes. In the mind [*xin* 心] it is 'being intent' [*zhi*]; coming out in language [*yan*], it is a poem. The affections [*qing*] are stirred within and take on form [*xing*] in words [*yan*]" (Owen: 40-41). This more or less fits the special characteristics of poetry, although the Mao Preface also stresses the didactic function of poetry, as in, for example, "By it [poetry] the former kings managed the relations between husbands and wives, perfected the respect due to parents and superiors, gave depth to human relations, beautifully taught and transformed the people, and changed local customs" (Owen: 45). However, *shi yan zhi* in this context is not a simple rational activity of giving expression to what is intently on the mind (*zhi*), but refers to an emotional activity associated with the pursuits of the heart and its expression. In this case giving expression to intent and to affections are intertwined and inseparable.

The famous early literary critics and scholars Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca.523), Zhong Rong 鍾嶸 (fl. 483-513) and Kong Yida (574-648) basically continued the theory of *qing* and *zhi* (what is intently on the mind) outlined in the Mao preface, emphasizing the ideas of responding to external objects to express *zhi* and through emotions creating literature. For example, Liu Xie, in "An Exegesis of Poetry" in his *Wenxin Diaolong*, writes, "Man is endowed with seven emotions. When stimulated by external objects, these emotions arise in response. In responding to objects one sings to express his sentiments [*zhi*]. All this is perfectly spontaneous" (Shih: 60-61). Zhong Rong in his *Shi Pin* refers to the uses of poetry thus: "At festive gatherings he [the poet] turns to poetry to express his feelings of intimacy; at separations he expresses his grief in verse. The exiling of the minister [of Chu], the Han concubine taking leave of the palace, or skeletons spread out over the northern wilderness, or the soul flown away among the tangled grasses, or spears carried to the far-flung regions, the spirit of combat flooding the borderlands, the traveler on

the frontier with clothes too thin, the lady in her chamber with tears run dry, or the scholar-official who gives up his office and takes leave of the court with no thought of ever returning, or the woman who wins [favour] by the raising of a brow, and topples a kingdom with a mere second glance - all these things touch the heart and stir the soul. How else can one give vent to these feelings than by expressing them in poetry? How else can one give free reign to his emotions than through the Long Song?" (Yeh & Walls: 51-52). The above examples add to the richness of the theory of *shi yan zhi*. Kong Yida of the Tang dynasty, in his *Correct Significance of the Zuo zhuan* (Van Zoeren: 128), took *qing* and *zhi* to be a single entity, saying, "Within oneself it is *qing*, when *qing* moves it is *zhi*, [thus] *qing* and *zhi* are one." In so doing he laid a cornerstone for *shi yan zhi*, for this theory of *qing zhi* has had a comparatively significant and long-lasting influence on poetic creation over the last thousand years in China.

Today many literary critics place *shi yan zhi* in the category of expressionism in counterpoint to the ancient Greek doctrine of mimesis.<sup>3</sup> Since early Chinese poetry was all very short in length (the earliest narrative poem, "The Peacock Flies Southeast" [ca. early 3rd Century], is only 360 lines long and appeared at the end of the Eastern Han; moreover, there are very few examples of this genre in early Chinese poetry), the recording of events and expression of sentiments were comparatively succinct, indirect and moderate. Thus, Chinese poetics based on the theory of *shi yan zhi* revolved around issues of what kind of thought and emotions should be expressed in poetry and considerations of how to go about expressing those thoughts and emotions. It was only in the Qing (1644-1911) that specifically related drama and narrative theories appeared (for example Li Yu's *Xianqing Ouji* 閒情偶記 and Jin Shengtan's 金聖嘆 commentaries etc.) Of course, *shi yan zhi* should not be simplistically paired with Western expressionist theories, for in traditional Chinese

literary theories, writers have not been able to sing freely and to their heart's content, because, consciously or unconsciously, their *qing zhi* has been shaped and standardized by the Confucian tradition.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Wen Yiduo in his article "Song and Poem", written in the thirties, has a detailed description of the various definitions of *zhi*.

<sup>2</sup> The concept that "Literature is a vehicle of the Way" was put forward by the Song Neo-Confucianist Zhou Dunyi (1017-73). He said, "Literature is that by which one carries the Way. If the wheels and shafts [of a carriage] are decorated but no one uses it, then the decorations are in vain. How much more so in the case of an empty carriage! Literature and rhetoric are skills; the Way and virtue are realities" (Liu: 114). However, most people consider the *locus classicus* of "literature is a vehicle of the Way" to be found in a letter written by the Tang dynasty leader of the *guwen* (ancient or neo-classical prose) movement, Han Yu (768-824), in which he explains his attitude towards *guwen*: "My *zhi* is that of the Way of the Ancients and I deeply love their language." The Way of the Ancients referred to by Han Yu is that of Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, the Dukes Wen and Wu of Zhou, and Confucius. This viewpoint was expressed by large numbers of Confucian scholars after Han Yu, becoming extremely prevalent in the Song and Ming dynasties, with, for example, such maxims as "Literature comes out of the Way" and "Literature turns with the Way," etc.

<sup>3</sup> In his section entitled "Early Expressive Theories: Primitivism", James Liu discusses classical poetic theories such as *shi yan zhi* while placing Confucius' opinion of poetry in the category of Confucian pragmatism.

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