

Prologue

Shengse: Sound and Sight

The Chinese word *shengse* (“sound and sight”) essentially refers to all objects of the five senses. However, it has a long history of negative connotations. Zhonghui, a minister pivotal to the founding of Shang (ca. 1600–ca. 1045 B.C.E.), for example, once proclaimed that the virtues of his king included “not going near sound and sight” (*buer shengse*).¹ A similar sense of the word was again invoked when Kuang Heng, the Western Han (206 B.C.E.–C.E. 8) scholar and minister, admonished Emperor Cheng to “refrain from ‘sound and sight’” (*jie shengse*).² In these two examples, *shengse* connoted sensual pleasure, which was considered a distraction—even a threat—that had ramifications not only for the individual, but for the state as a whole as well. Therefore, it is not surprising that the first definition listed for *shengse* in the major dictionaries of classical Chinese is “unorthodox music and the beauty of women” (*yinsheng yu nüse*).³ These, however, are only two of the items on a long list of *shengse*. Rich food, strong fragrances, and ornate decoration, among others, were all considered potentially dangerous sensual pleasures, and they had provoked serious warnings in anecdotal stories, historical commentaries, and philosophical discourses.⁴ Even *shengse* displayed in the context of moral instruction were

discouraged at times. In the *Liji* (Record of Rites), for example, Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.) is cited as saying,

“Sound and sight” are not the means by which [a ruler] transforms the common people. The *Shi* states, “The carriage of virtue is as light as a feather.” Yet a feather still has markings. “The manner in which Heaven on the High propagates [its virtue] is soundless and odorless”—that is perfect.⁵

In this statement, *shengse* is simply appearance: the surface form that can be seen, heard, touched, smelled, or tasted. From the Confucian perspective, the ideal state of moral influence is “soundless and odorless” (*wu sheng wu xiu*), that is, a state void of *shengse*. The imperative to be wary of, avoid, or even eliminate *shengse* revealed in the Chinese textual tradition is fundamentally a moral one and was often interpreted to guide political rule.

In light of the discussion thus far, what does it mean when poetry is said to exhibit “sound and sight”? I have borrowed the word *shengse* from the Qing dynasty poet and critic Shen Deqian (1673–1769), who made this comment about the trajectory of poetry at the onset of the Southern Dynasties (420–589): “By the time of the Song dynasty [420–479], ‘nature and feeling’ were gradually eclipsed in poetry, while ‘sound and sight’ were completely unleashed. This was a turning point in the course of poetry.”⁶ The Song dynasty and the following dynasties, the Qi (479–502), the Liang (502–557), and the Chen (557–589), are collectively called the Southern Dynasties. The group of poets to be discussed in this book lived right in the middle of this fascinating period and has been regarded as the main “instigators” of its poetic trend in “sound and sight.” When Shen Deqian discussed *shengse* in opposition to *xingqing* (“nature and feeling”)—a poetic quality he probes and emphasizes throughout his *Shoushi zuiyu* (An Assortment of Comments from Talking about Poetry)—he obviously did not intend to use it for appraisal.⁷ By *shengse*, Shen Deqian was referring to a broad range of poetic traits that he observed in Southern Dynasties poetry, including the descriptive landscapes of Xie Lingyun (385–433), the unconventional imagery of Bao Zhao (c.a. 414–466), the elegant diction of Yan Yanzhi (384–456), and much more. Ultimately, he was making the point that Southern Dynasties poets had shifted their attention to the “surface” or “exterior” forms of poetry, and, as a result, had “eclipsed” the genuine expression of “nature and feeling,” which presumably came from “within.”

Shen Deqian’s disapproval of the poetic trend in “sound and sight” is more obvious when he compares Tao Yuanming (Tao Qian; 365–427) side-

by-side with Xie Lingyun. Tao Yuanming, known for a tranquil and natural style, is the only Southern Dynasties poet whom Shen Deqian unequivocally celebrates:

Tao Yuanming's poetry immediately feels natural and others cannot surpass its genuineness and truthfulness. Xie Lingyun's poetry came from manipulation and went against that which was natural; but others cannot surpass its novelty and gracefulness. Tao Yuanming's poetry exceeds others for it has no crafting, whereas Xie Lingyun's exceeds others exactly because of its crafting.⁸

If we pay attention to Shen Deqian's tone, we will hear that the difference between Tao Yuanming's and Xie Lingyun's poetry is not a simple contrast between a bland and easy style and a more stylized and explicit one. Their difference has moral and philosophical implications about "genuineness," "truthfulness," and "naturalness," qualities that are opposed to "crafting," "manipulation," and "unnaturalness." Fundamentally, Shen Deqian was concerned about the overt display of artistry, which he obviously treated with great caution and suspicion. His evaluation of Southern Dynasties poetry continues:

Among Qi writers, few were good. . . . During the Liang of the Xiaos, the "Exchange Poems" of the rulers and their subordinates were quite skillfully composed, but their description of beautiful women and romantic love had caused the literary style and taste of their day to become more and more decadent. . . . From the Liang to the Chen and then to the Sui [581–618], poets were only interested in embellishing their lines.⁹

Like a historian commenting on the fall of a kingdom or a philosopher reflecting on the moral decline of a society, Shen Deqian portrayed the trajectory of Southern Dynasties poetry as a fatal degeneration. He warns at one point: "When it comes to articulating one's aim and making known the worthy teachings and yet one relies only on coloring and polishing, then one has lost the true meaning of being a poet from the start" (*yanzhi zhangjiao, wei zi tuze, xian shi shiren zhi zhi*).¹⁰ Once "sound and sight" were completely unleashed, it became a downward slope; the moment it headed in the direction of "sound and sight," Southern Dynasties poetry already lost its way.

It is not unusual that Shen Deqian should conflate literary criticism with moral judgment and political interpretation. More than a millennium earlier, the prince-poet Cao Pi (187–226) had declared that "literary composition is a great achievement that concerns the ruling of a state" (*wenzhang jingzuo*

zhi daye).¹¹ This statement is widely viewed as a landmark recognition of literature as literature in modern scholarship; but it is equally, if not more, significant in its clear articulation of the political and didactic relevance of literature. Shen Deqian's remarks about Southern Dynasties poetry only highlight the attention paid to the moral and political implications of literature in the case of our particular subject. In the Chinese collective memory, the Southern Dynasties were at their best "a stable time [presided over by a court] at a corner" (*pianan*) and, at their worst, plagued by the "illegitimacy" of their rule, they were an era of political dysfunction and military weakness.¹² Lasting more than 150 years, the Southern Dynasties saw the succession of the four dynasties whose capital city, Jiankang (modern Nanjing), was located just south of the lower Yangzi delta, while the Northern Dynasties (420–589)—themselves constituted by more than ten states over the course of the period—loomed large to the north. In 589, when the Chen dynasty was conquered by Yang Jian (later Sui Wendi; 541–604), who had consolidated his power in the north, this period of north-south division was brought to an end. Casting the period's political failings onto its culture and literature—or, rather, seeking to explain these failings *through* its culture and literature—the Tang minister Zheng Tan (d. 842) bluntly argued that "the reason the Northern and Southern Dynasties had failed in their rule was that they allowed literary splendor to surpass real substance."¹³ In this case, the "sound and sight" that originated from literature had caused the demise of an entire age. This is not only the imagination of "premodern" commentators. The hero of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun (1881–1936), for example, once characterized pre-Han and Han writers of *fu*, a poetic form famous for its verbose and ornate style, as "playthings among sounds, sights, dogs, and horses" (*wei zai shengse gouma zhijian de wanwu*).¹⁴ And as recently as 2007, at a talk on Southern Dynasties poetry, I heard criticism of the period's poets for their "narrow" and "materialistic" lifestyle, which was assumed to be the source of their formalistic pursuits in poetry.¹⁵

Without doubt, the central figures in this study were well versed in the literary tradition suffused with moral and political meaning. That makes the following questions even more significant: What did "sound and sight" mean to these poets? How did they come to guide the poetic trend in "sound and sight"? It is a mistake, I believe, to see their poetics only as surface or exterior forms, or to assume that the environment within which they pursued "sound and sight" was simply "narrow" or "materialistic." This study will highlight their identity as courtier-poets by situating their poetics within the courtier

culture of the day. That perspective draws on a broad range of issues that collectively will produce a more complex image of the courtier-poet. Ultimately, this book argues that their pursuit of “sound and sight,” which emphasized a process of grasping the phenomenal world in a meticulous manner, reflects a hybrid concept of personal worth that was unique to their time and far more significant in Chinese literary and cultural history than critics have acknowledged. Seen through this lens, the issue of “sound and sight” can be defined literally—it is about *how* one sees and hears. Tracing their unique way of seeing and hearing, this book will reveal how a group of early medieval courtier-poets ushered in a truly new and influential poetics.

Due to their activities during the Yongming reign period (483–493) of Qi Wudi (Xiao Ze; r. 483–493), this group of courtier-poets is called “the Yongming poets.” In Chapter One, I will outline two contexts important to their poetics: the shifting socio-political environment and the growing influence of Buddhism in Southern Dynasties courts. The merging of the two contexts, this chapter argues, resulted in a hybrid concept of personal worth that was channeled increasingly into poetry.

Chapter Two focuses on the issue of “sound.” The Yongming poets are best remembered for inventing a new form of poetic prosody, which used the concept of “four tones” (*sisheng*). To explain what their prosodic invention meant to them, I will look at how the Yongming poets pursued, displayed, and received poetic sound patterns within their courtier community. From that perspective, we will see how they created a new notion of cultural excellence.

Chapter Three looks at “poems on things” (*yongwu shi*), a poetic sub-genre popularized by the Yongming poets. Earlier studies view these poems as a kind of social verse written out of expediency, while, for instance, attending a gathering at a prince’s mansion or waiting on the emperor at a banquet. My discussion will reveal a keen interest in observing things, such as a drizzle or a neglected plant, that are difficult to grasp or are easily overlooked in these poems. Cynthia L. Chennault has suggested that these poems were a means for the courtiers to present and negotiate their “personal merit” before their patrons and fellow courtiers.¹⁶ Building on her suggestion, I will discuss how the freshness of seeing had become a crucial part in that process.

The issue turns to the perception of space in Chapter Four. The Yongming poets wrote about the “garden” (*yuan*) more prominently than earlier poets. During the Southern Dynasties, the *yuan* was being portrayed more and more as a private space that one “returned to” (*gui* or *huan*), signaling

a withdrawal from officialdom and an inward turning towards one's "true nature." In that context, the Yongming poets' depictions of gardens further reflected a unique spatial experience, wherein wilderness became organized "nature," which in turn is transformed into the Buddhist void. In this fluid space, they contemplate the practical issue of self-preservation, the aesthetic imitation of nature, and the struggle for Buddhist enlightenment.

Chapter Five observes the Yongming poets as they take leave of the capital city on official assignments. The perception of motion—riding on a carriage out of the city or sailing on a boat into the distant unknown—takes center stage in their travel poems. Fatefully bound to their identity as courtiers, they conflate the idea of *xiang* or *guxiang* ("hometown") with that of *jingyi* ("capital city"), sometimes successfully, sometimes in tortured ways. The most interesting moment is when the place where they have taken up a post suddenly seems more like "hometown" than the capital city they have left behind.

Chapter Six follows them in and out of the natural landscape. Contrary to popular imagination, their identity as courtiers did not confine the vision of the Yongming poets only to rare things, ornate objects, or artificial settings within the court, as evidenced by their large corpus of landscape poems. Writing after Xie Lingyun, the first master of landscape poetry, they offer a much-needed opportunity for understanding the changes in landscape representation during the Qi-Liang period. Engaging with natural landscape as courtiers, they also pose the question of whether or not "mountains and rivers," an antithesis to officialdom, can be "obtained" (*de*)—and, if so, how to obtain it.

This book pursues two paths. It follows a series of *shengse*—sound, sight, space, and motion—in the poems of the Yongming poets. At the same time, it trails them as they take the center stage of their courtier community, negotiate their self-image before their princes and emperors, retreat temporarily to their private gardens, take leave of the capital city, and move in and out of the natural landscape. By overlapping the two paths, so to speak, I present the issue of "sound and sight" in a completely new light, challenging the old perception of the Yongming poets and their courtier culture and, fundamentally, the common practice of reading classical Chinese poems for semantic meaning only.