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978-0-521-46271-6 - Within the Human Realm: The Poetry of Huang Zunxian, 1848-1905

J. D. Schmidt

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Cambridge Studies in Chinese History, Literature and Institutions

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WITHIN THE HUMAN REALM

This book is a study of the poetry of Huang Zunxian, one of the most famous authors of late nineteenth-century China. The first part consists of a detailed biography outlining Huang's literary and political career. This is followed by a critical discussion on Huang's poetry, including such topics as his theory of literature, his traditional verse, his highly original poetry on foreign lands, his political satire, and his scientific verse. The book concludes with a generous sampling of his poetry in translation.

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**Within the Human Realm:  
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J. D. Schmidt

*University of British Columbia*



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## Preface

We normally associate late nineteenth-century China with catastrophic change, not cultural creativity. Western scholars have written detailed accounts of such national disasters as the Taiping Revolution, the Sino-Japanese War, and the Boxer Rebellion, but even many specialists on nineteenth-century China would be hard put to name one painter or writer from the final decades of China's last imperial dynasty.

Only during the preceding ten years or so has this picture begun to change. A few exhibition catalogues and studies of nineteenth-century painting have appeared; musicologists have begun to examine the emergence of Beijing opera and many other regional operas during the late Qing dynasty; and scholars of Chinese fiction have started to explore the Chinese novel at the turn of the century. But so far, the art most revered by nineteenth-century intellectuals, namely, poetry in the classical language, has been almost completely neglected by Western scholars.

In the present age, poetry may seem a remote and even esoteric art to the general reading public in the West, but the situation was very different in premodern China. Practically all the major political and intellectual figures of nineteenth-century China wrote poetry in the classical language. Zeng Guofan, the scholar-general who saved his dynasty from the Taiping Rebels during the 1860s, and Zhang Zhidong, one of the pillars of the Self-strengthening Movement, were accomplished poets; and all the leaders of the late nineteenth-century Reform Movement, such as Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and Huang Zunxian, created highly original verse. For these intellectuals, poetry in the ancient *shi* form was the supreme literary art, the form they used to express their deepest and most personal thoughts.

Many contemporary Chinese critics consider Huang Zunxian to be the most distinguished poet among the late nineteenth-century reformers. Although these evaluations are frequently based on extraliterary criteria (e.g., Huang's progressive thought or his patriotism), his poems are an

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excellent introduction to the literature of the age, no matter what rank we assign them, for more than any other author of the period Huang managed to transcend the bounds of time and geography.

His vast knowledge of the Chinese literary tradition allowed him to sum up three thousand years of poetry in his own writings, at the same time as he looked forward to the twentieth century. He was as familiar with the first-millennium B.C. anthology *The Classic of Poetry* or the medieval Tang-dynasty masters as he was with the latest nineteenth-century authors, and he proposed practically all the ideas of the Vernacular Literature Movement initiated by Hu Shi in 1917, at the same time as he anticipated the May Fourth authors of the 1920s in his approach to writing (particularly his iconoclasm and commitment to political change).

His position as one of the leaders of the late Qing-dynasty Reform Movement makes his poetry an important source of information about nineteenth-century Chinese politics, and few Chinese writers possessed the insight into society's shortcomings (and the gift for satire) that enabled him to dissect late nineteenth-century China with such witty results. But his knowledge of the world was hardly limited to China; his extensive experience as a diplomat in Japan, the United States, England, and Singapore meant that he was the first Chinese poet to write in any detail about non-Chinese societies. He was also the first Chinese writer to embrace the new international technological culture taking shape at the end of the last century, as we can see from the large number of poems he wrote on scientific themes.

The special character of Huang Zunxian's poetry requires a somewhat different approach from that employed for most other Chinese poets. Most pre-twentieth-century Chinese poets served in the government, so the connection between poetry and politics has always been close in China, but it was particularly close in Huang Zunxian's case. Thus, in Part I (Chapters 1–3), a brief biography of the poet, special attention has been paid to the influence Huang's career as a diplomat and reformer had upon the evolution of his poetry.

However, in Part II (Chapters 4–13) I have attempted to make up for the excessively political approach to Huang Zunxian's poetry adopted by most Chinese scholars, concentrating instead on the more purely literary aspects of his creations. In Part II I examine the theory and practice of Huang Zunxian's late Qing-dynasty Poetic Revolution, study his poetry on traditional themes, and conclude with chapters concerning his more original verse on foreign lands, contemporary Chinese politics, and modern science. A principal emphasis of this study is to see how Huang Zunxian adapted traditional poetic devices to depict a new world that his classical models could never have envisioned, and therefore I constantly



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ask how Huang's poetry fits into the history of Chinese literature as a whole.

Part III, which contains my translations of a selection of the poems, is the first extensive translation of Huang Zunxian's poetry into a Western language. I make no claims to be a master of translation, but within the limits of my abilities I have attempted to make the translations as enjoyable as possible for both specialist and nonspecialist readers. Some specialists may complain that the renderings are not literal enough, but my earlier attempts at literal translations of Huang Zunxian's poetry convinced me that an overly narrow approach would not work. Huang Zunxian's poetry is difficult, being particularly famous for its deft use of allusions to earlier Chinese literature, and a literal rendering of these would likely mystify all but the most learned specialists. Hence I have attempted to render Huang Zunxian's allusions with equivalent English expressions, or, when this is impossible, by circumlocutions that explain the meaning of the original. In spite of the freedoms that have been taken with the original, the translations are not as free as they might appear on the surface; all of them follow the Chinese closely, line by line, even preserving the original word order when consistent with good English usage. Generally speaking, whenever the translations differ enough from the original to confuse someone reading along in Chinese, footnotes with a more literal version are appended. In the interest of readability, the footnotes to the translations have been kept fairly short; important literary and historical allusions necessary for the understanding of poems have been identified, but allusions that merely involve the echoing of earlier works are rarely noted. In line with recent publications, placenames and names of persons are identified only if necessary to the understanding of a poem.

This book has adopted the *pinyin* system of romanizing Chinese words, in order to be consistent with all works published in China today and practically all Western-language newspapers, periodicals, and even scholarly works on China. Since much pre-1970s scholarship on nineteenth-century China used the Wade-Giles system, readers will notice discrepancies between names cited in the main body of the book and earlier Western-language references, but these should not cause too many difficulties. Except where noted, all specific dates have been indicated on the Chinese lunar calendar. The coexistence of the Gregorian and the Chinese lunar calendar in late nineteenth-century China is confusing for Western and Chinese readers, so the more important lunar dates have been converted to their Western equivalents and put in parentheses, but it was felt that Chinese poetry is too closely linked with the lunar calendar to make wholesale conversion desirable.

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The debt of this work to Professor Qian Esun's (Zhonglian) lifetime of scholarship on Huang Zunxian should be apparent to anyone who reads the footnotes to the poems. Qian Esun is one of the few scholars with a fully traditional background still alive in China, and during two visits to his home on the campus of Suzhou University, I was constantly amazed by the breadth and depth of his learning concerning all aspects of premodern Chinese culture. Without his detailed annotations of Huang Zunxian's collected poems, this work would have been next to impossible to write, and I can never fully express my gratitude to this great scholar. Undoubtedly, many mistakes remain in these translations of one of China's most challenging poets, but these are certainly the result of my inability to understand Professor Qian's learned comments or to comprehend the subtleties of the Changshu dialect he speaks. In any case, I shall be grateful to any critics who point out the remaining errors.

Finally, I wish to recommend an approach to this book for nonspecialists who are averse to reading literary criticism. They may want to read Part I, Huang Zunxian's biography, first and then skip over to Part III, the translated poems. The notes to the translations contain cross-references to the critical section, and nonspecialists who do not intend to read this in its entirety can easily select the sections of interest to them.

I would like to thank the Committee for Cultural Planning 文化建設委員會, Taipei, Taiwan, Republic of China, for generous assistance with the translation portions of this work, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for an earlier grant that allowed me to do initial research. This book would not have seen the light of day without the liberal publication subsidies of Paul Y. Wong, M.D., of Albany, Oregon, grandnephew of Huang Zunxian; Dr. Susan X. Xu-Wong, his wife; Michael D. Wong, great-grandnephew of Huang Zunxian; and the Canadian Federation of the Humanities using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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Last but not least, I would like to thank Professor Qian Zhonglian 錢仲聯 of Suzhou University, the greatest living expert on Huang Zunxian's poetry and Qing-dynasty poetry in general. I shall never forget his warm hospitality and all the assistance he gave me over the years. His erudition and scholarship underlie practically every page of this book, and it is for this reason that I dedicate this work to him.