

# Research on the Poetic Thrust of "Autumn Willow"

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**Abstract:** Wang Shizhen's poem "Autumn Willow" has many influential theories, including "the theory of the demise of the Ming Dynasty", "the theory of the old prostitute", and "the theory of rise and fall". This article attempts to sort out the views expressed by various families from the perspective of creation and commentary and to comment on many views, to look forward to the research status of the poem.

**Keywords:** Wang Shizhen, Autumn Willow, Literary criticism.

## 1. Introduction to the Poem "Autumn Willow"

The four poems of "Autumn Willow" are a set of seven-word rhythm poems written by Wang Shizhen in the 14th year of the Shunzhi reign of the Qing Dynasty (1657 AD), written in the water pavilion next to Daming Lake in present-day Jinan, and preceded by a small preface to describe the reason for writing.

As soon as the poem "Autumn Willow" appeared, it attracted the attention of people around it, "dozens of people at a time." So much so that when Wang Shizhen went south to Jiangnan to become an official a few years later, "the north and south of the great river were very harmonious." The poem "Autumn Willow" not only spawned several singing harmonies in the Qing dynasty but also appeared in several special annotated versions, which cannot but reflect the wide scope of influence of this poem at that time.

However, regarding the main theme of the poem "Autumn Willow", whether it is a Qing dynasty commentator or a contemporary research scholar, there are different opinions on it. The mainstream viewpoints include "death theory", "old prostitute theory", "rise and fall theory" and other aspects, and various views also clashed with each other, and they became a big view for a while. In this article, the author tries to sort out the flow and development trajectory of the main theme of the poem "Autumn Willow", and at the end tries to return to the text of the poem "Autumn Willow" to explain the poem.

## 2. "Autumn Willow" Poetic Analysis

### 2.1. Return to the author - "Autumn Willow" in Wang Shizhen

If you want to analyze the main theme of "Autumn Willow", it is naturally impossible to bypass the author, Wang Shizhen's own views on this poem. This can be seen in the author's account and in some later works.

The first is the preface to the poem "Autumn Willow". Here the author will quote the following in order:

昔江南王子，感落叶而兴悲。金城司马，悲长条而陨泪。仆本恨人，性多感慨。寄情杨柳，同小雅之仆夫。致托悲秋，望湘皋之远者。偶成四什，以示同人，为我和之。丁酉秋日，北渚亭书。

As can be seen from the "偶成四什" in the preface, the time when the preface was written should be after the poem was completed. Later, "以示同人" means "show it to the people around me". The author believes that the motivation for writing in the preface should be that the work is both well received and immersed in the mood created by the work at this time, and Wang Shizhen, as the author, naturally cannot help but write a paragraph to record his creative process and his mood at this time. Therefore, the preface can provide first-hand information for the interpretation of the poem in "Autumn Willow".

In the preface to the review, "江南王子" and "金城司马" used Xiao Gang and Huan Wen to lament the passage of time in turn, and then used the words in Jiang Yan's "仆本恨人"(I hated humans in the first place). Currently, Wang Shizhen's positioning of himself is a person who is frustrated and regretful, which seems to imply the content of the whole poem, the word "hate".

The content that follows the preface seems to explain what his "feelings" are. It can be understood here that Wang Shizhen used it to express the passage of time. And the Beizhu Pavilion where it is located will naturally be linked to the Beizhu where the emperor in "Chu Ci" is located, which can't help but make people feel sad.

The whole prologue is full of strong lyricism, which seems to emphasize the loss and melancholy that still lingers in the author's heart after writing this poem. Therefore, it can be considered that what is written in the "Preface" is a portrayal of Wang Shizhen's inner state at this time.

In Wang Shizhen's subsequent life creation, due to the changes in the environment and interpersonal relationships, the hazy sense of loss created by the poem "Autumn Willow" has not been well inherited. But Wang Shizhen's memory of "Autumn Willow" can still be seen in his poems.

First, Wang Shizhen wrote in the eighteenth year of the Kangxi Dynasty (1679) in the "Inscription After the Sutai Yang Willow Branch Words" has the following two sentences:  
明湖记得吟秋柳，惨绿当年最少年。

According to the title of the poem, the reason why Wang Shizhen wrote this sentence should be that he read a similar work by a friend and thought of the poem "Autumn Willow" written by Yang Willow when he was young and could not help but arouse nostalgia for the merry life of the past. "惨绿少年" which has the meaning of a personable teenager.

Wang Shizhen uses this allusion here, on the one hand, to reflect his nostalgia for the merry time when he was young and then became famous all over the world, on the other hand, he secretly pointed out that his poem "Autumn Willow" was a matter of "young affair", and he rebuked the sentimentality of his youth, but he obtained unexpected results, and now he looks back on it with a complacent mood.

"Poetry is the natural expression of strong emotions", based on Wang Shizhen's own record of this poem, this group of poems is more like the author's youthful talent and sentimental emotional outpouring. The poet wanders through the changes of spring and autumn, questioning time, and space, and lamenting his past and future. However, contemporaries read from the poem "Autumn Willow" what Wang Shizhen may not have expected.

Perhaps because of this kind of self-assurance, Wang Shizhen would show a good impression of Chen Yunheng's comments at that time. Chen Yunheng's view should be the conclusion of comparing Wang Shizhen's poem "Autumn Willow" with the harmony poems of the north and south of the river, and it is an artistic commentary on the poem "Autumn Willow", in which we may be able to glimpse the trance and polysemy of the main theme of the poem "Autumn Willow", which to a certain extent creates the beauty of the poem. Later, Wang Shizhen advocated the "Shen Yun poetry school", and this hazy beauty, illusory beauty, and subtle and unspeakable emotions in the "Autumn Willow" poem corresponded to it, so Wang Shizhen has always been in a state of appreciation for the "Autumn Willow" poem, a state of not over-interpreting like others, and this may also be the poet's real thoughts and hearts when he created - what he felt for a while, what he was connected for a while.

## 2.2. "Autumn Willow" in the heart of the peacemaker

The poem "Autumn Willow" was greatly sung by the people of the time in the Shunzhi and Kangxi dynasties where Wang Shizhen lived. Even the poem "Autumn Willow" has spread overseas, and the singing harmony of the poem can also be found in overseas Chinese poems.

The singing and crowd of the poem "Autumn Willow" can be divided into the following categories: the singing and singing of the relics, the ladies, and the people of the imperial examination. In addition, the "autumn willow" in the word is also discussed as part of the singing harmony.

First of all, let's talk about the singing and harmony of the remnants, most of them are Wang Shizhen's elders or peers, such as Mao Xiang, Xu Ye, Gu Yanwu, and so on. In their political stance, they mostly adhere to the idea of "opposing the Qing Dynasty and restoring the Ming Dynasty", and are more immersed in the grief of the motherland, and the poem "Autumn Willow" has naturally become a work of "thinking of the motherland, the sorrow of departing" in their minds. This also influenced the elaboration of the poem "Autumn Willow". For example, Xu Ye creates a more withering and bleak atmosphere than the poem "Autumn Willow" with "摇落江天倍黯然", The Han family palace tree is used to convey the nostalgia for the king and the Ming dynasty. Another example is Gu Yanwu, a famous literary scholar in the Ming and Qing dynasties, who directly thinks of his previous king from Willow, perhaps also the King of Ming who was captured by the Qing army. And later Qu Fu's peace poem that explained "Autumn Willow" also explicitly sang harmony with the main theme of "Thoughts of the

Motherland". Considering the large number of remnant groups mixed with poetry and emotions and intertwining the irremediable position of the remnants in the context of the big era, it is reasonable that the poem "Autumn Willow" is interpreted as "the thought of the dead country".

Compared with the singing and poetry of the remnants full of blood and tears, "Autumn Willow" shows a tender and gentle side in the pen of female poets. They either simply sing things, write about parting in purdah, or write about spring and autumn, showing the delicacy of women's emotions. Here is an example of Zhu Xiaoqin's works.

认得依依倍觉怜，寒光寂寞锁朝烟。有怀南浦枝谁赠，  
为恨西风雨正绵。倦意慵心怜此日，柔情弱态想当年。一  
声羌笛高楼月，仍送行人曲岸边。

As a poet in purdah, Zhu Xiaoqin changed his perspective from home country to boudoir, and "Willow" means "stay", so as to write the feelings of pedestrians and women, which is narrower than the poetry of the writers of the relic people, but still has a certain ability to feel.

The third is the singing and harmony of the imperial examination personnel. These people, different states of mind, facing the same imagery, will still be different. Compared with the "motherland" in the minds of the remnants, the victors of the imperial examination regarded "autumn willow" as an inevitable process from spring to autumn, and their words were full of vigor. For example, the frustrated literati, their mood is closer to the sad sigh of the original poem of "Autumn Willow". For example, Xiang Liansheng, who was known as the "sad man of ancient times", wrote:

若忆西陵苏小墓，冷风红舞夕阳边。

Xiang Liansheng, who was "born young and worried", turned his full frustration into a lotus flower that was cold and withered by the West Lake, and he saw it for himself.

In short, different groups have different interpretations of the poem "Autumn Willow", and different interpretations have different influences, which lays the groundwork for the subsequent political interpretation of the subsequent poem "Autumn Willow".

## 2.3. The interweaving of two interpretations

The two interpretations we are talking about here refer to the "death theory" and "old prostitute theory" of the poem "Autumn Willow", which are not only more convincing in the Qing dynasty, but also recognized by some modern and contemporary scholars.

The "Death Ming Theory" is the more influential of the two, and it even led to the disaster of the poem "Autumn Willow" in the prison of words. Commentators who hold this interpretation include Qu Fu, Zheng Hong, Chen Yan, and so on. They affirmed the relationship between the poem "Autumn Willow" and the demise of the Hong Guang Dynasty, as well as the decline of the Southern Ming Dynasty. In the process of interpretation, they did not hesitate to conceal each sentence from historical facts, such as Zheng Hong's belief that "枚叔" was alluding to Hou Fangyu and Li Zhaoyuan's belief that "桃根桃叶" (peach root and peach leaf) refers to when the concubine was favored. The list goes on and on. Their method of annotation is heavily influenced by the Qing dynasty's research of evidence, and although they consider the text in conjunction with history and try to find clues, this method is too pedantic compared with modern and contemporary interpretation. Based on ethereal speculation, focusing only on the deep meaning of the poem and ignoring

the artistic beauty of the original poem, although "I don't think these claims can be regarded as completely far-fetched and dismissed", we also need to be cautious about their arguments.

The former prostitute said: "It began with Gao Bingmou. Gao Bingmou's story began with a conversation with Tang Baonian. During this conversation, Gao Bingmou learned that Kou Baimen and Zheng Tuniang happened to be present by the Daming Lake where "Autumn Willow" was written, which was based on the content of this dialogue. Compared with the former statement, the far-fetched degree of Gao Shuo has decreased, which is more in line with the aesthetics and acceptance of general readers. However, there is a question about Gao's explanation that is debatable - did Zheng and Kou travel to Jinan in the 14th year of Shunzhi? Moreover, the credibility of the high source of the account is also questionable, and the "Zheng Tuniang Theory" decades ago may have been proposed in response to the "Motherland Theory"? It is true that Gao broke the rigid and pedantic air of traditional commentaries on the Autumn Willow and provided a new option for future generations of readers. However, it fell into the trap of "the Ming Dynasty Demise Theory" comparison.

### 3. Commentary on the Contemporary "Autumn Willow"

In the contemporary commentary, some people still adhere to the traditional "fall of the Ming Dynasty" and "old prostitutes", such as Qian Zhonglian, Yan Dichang, etc., and some people try to revise these traditional views, such as Wang Limin, Zhang Peiheng, etc., and some scholars try to return to the background of Wang Shizhen's writing and explore the main theme of the poem "Autumn Willow", such as Li Shenghua and Zhou Xinglu. This section introduces and reviews these statements.

Mr. Qian Zhonglian, who has always been known for his research on Qing poetry, adopted the traditional interpretation of the "theory of the demise of the Ming Dynasty" for this group of poems. Mr. Qian believed that the poems were based on the "shaking state" of the willow tree, but he insisted that this group of poems was written as "the Fu Dynasty has perished", and then analyzed the original poems one by one. In terms of interpretation, there is little difference from the interpretation of his predecessors, however, Mr. Qian has come to a debatable conclusion about this poem, "showing Wang Shizhen's centrifugation of the new dynasty". In fact, if the author really had a centrifuge, there would be no need to take the Qing Dynasty imperial examination so that he could later go to Yangzhou.

Mr. Yan Dichang, who also teaches at Jiangsu Normal University with Mr. Qian, makes a rough examination of the skills of "Qiu Willow" in the "History of Qing Poetry". Mr. Yan rejects the Qian Theory's "anti-Qing warriors" and so on, and this act that affects Wang Shizhen's subsequent reputation in the bereaved group will obviously not appear in the poem. It seems that it is precisely based on Wang Shizhen's political stance and later interpersonal relationships that Mr. Yan thinks that this poem is "taking advantage of the rise of women like Zheng Tuniang to ridicule the blessing of the king and bring disaster to the country, and take his own demise", which seems to be seeking a corresponding balance between the simple "old prostitute theory" and "the theory of the demise of the Ming Dynasty".

Like the search for balance, Zhang Peiheng and others try

to find a balance between the "theory of the demise of the Ming Dynasty" and the "theory of rise and fall" in the poem "Autumn Willow". On the one hand, they affirmed the "lingering and sadness" of the poem "Autumn Willow", and on the other hand, they believed that some of the sentences in the poem "allude to the demise of the Hongguang dynasty and its causes". Compared with the previous explanation, Zhang and others did not examine the ability to conceal every sentence like their predecessors but focused on grasping the main theme of the poem from the overall content and emotion of the poem and came up with such a sublimated connotation - "the inner grief and confusion that an individual person has in the face of all this".

Although many researchers believe that "Qiu Liu" has an inseparable relationship with the Southern Ming Dynasty, Wang Limin, who was educated by Mr. Yan Dichang, refutes the above view in his monograph "Wang Shizhen Poetry Study" Zhang Ben for the "Rise and Fall Theory". Whether from the living environment of Yuyang or the content of his poems, the impassioned "thoughts of the motherland" that prevailed in that era were not reflected in "Autumn Willow". On the contrary, the decaying social conditions at that time, and the gentle sad emotions in the poem, can correspond to the general loss and confusion of the era when the prosperous era had not yet begun. The haggard willow, the past that is difficult to recall, can be summed up by "the sense of prosperity and decline". Compared with "Thoughts of the Motherland", "The Sense of Prosperity and Decline" has a broader ideological aesthetic charm, which is consistent with the aesthetic acceptance of the poem "Autumn Willow".

At the same time, some scholars have also explored the meaning behind the poem "Autumn Willow" from the perspective of the writing background of the poem "Autumn Willow" and Wang Shizhen's personal experience. As Zhou Xinglu pointed out, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, Wang Shizhen's famous family in the new city Wang family suffered an unprecedented blow, and the family elders fled, went into seclusion, or were martyred, and the bloody war scenes left an unforgettable shadow in the young Wang Shizhen's heart. At the time of the creation of the poem "Autumn Willow", Wang Shizhen had already won the prize, and the ardent hope of his fathers and grandparents for him to revive the lintel, intertwined with the unpredictable background of the times he personally faced, weaving the lost and confused hazy beauty of the poem "Autumn Willow".

### 4. Conclusion

From the above annotations of the hundreds of years of "Autumn Willow" poems, we can see that traditional commentators either go to history word by word to find skills or turn to speculate and judge, while modern and contemporary scholars are more willing to analyze the poem without separating the literary meaning and writing background mentality and try not to destroy the original aesthetic atmosphere of the poem.

It is true that there is no clear standard for the superiority of these two research methods. But judging from the reception of the poem "Autumn Willow", different research commentaries have influenced the dissemination of this work.

According to the existing papers, the research on "Autumn Willow" can be divided into three categories: one is the study of the ability and main purpose, the second is the study of the derivative works of "Autumn Willow", and the third is the study of "Autumn Willow" and Shen Yun theory. However, it

is a pity that the Yoshikawa clan's "original path" and so on, as mentioned above, have not been cared for in the academic community.

Looking at the hundreds of years of interpretation and research of the poem "Autumn Willow", we can see the importance of examining the author based on the text. Limited to rigid literary thinking, a group of commentators put aside the author and the general background and directly corresponded to historical facts, piercing and appending, and quoting inappropriately. This kind of behavior of unloading the original poem into eight pieces and abandoning the book to the end should be disrespectful to both the author and the reader.

Zhuang Zhongbai once said: "If righteousness can be attached, it is not deep; if metaphor can be specific, it is not broad. "I wonder if this can be applied to the interpretation process of the poem "Autumn Willow", from the index examination of the dead country and the former prostitute to the interpretation of the emotional tone of the poem's content, doesn't it fully prove this?"

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