

Initiating New Trends and Inheriting the Literary Tradition: An Inquiry Into the *Du wen-Bi de* of Huang Benji, a Scholar From Hunan Province in the Late Qing Dynasty*

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The literary circle in Hunan regions during the late Qing Dynasty underwent an innovative transformation, and the creation of literary works was exceptionally prosperous. The emergence of this literary phenomenon was undoubtedly inseparable from the impetus provided by the Hunan Army Group. However, upon a close examination of its origin and development, it can be discerned that since the mid-Qing Dynasty, numerous scholars in Hunan had already been engaged in the exploration and practice of the concepts of literary creation. Among them, Huang Benji's *Du wen-Bi de* was a specialized literary work concentrating on literary composition. It possessed a complete system and novel viewpoints, embodying the distinctive literary perspective of Hunan scholars. Nevertheless, it has not been deeply explored. Through an analysis of the innovative aspects of the literary theory in *Du wen-Bi de* and its influence on Confucian classics, this study examines the guiding role of this literary work on the literary creation in the Hunan regions during the late Qing Dynasty and its theoretical value in literary thought.

Keywords: scholars in Hunan regions, Huang Benji, *Du wen-Bi de*

Introduction

In the late Qing Dynasty, the Hunan regions boasted an abundance of human resources. Counties and prefectures throughout the area established schools to nurture talents. Simultaneously, the printing industry in Hunan thrived, and the quantity of published books soared. Concurrently, there was an intense discourse on the theory of writing. Renowned writers such as Zeng Guofan, Wu Minshu, and Wang Xianqian were renowned for their essays. Nevertheless, their works were mostly scattered in their respective collections of essays, letters, and diaries. The sole exception was Huang Benji, a local scholar, who composed a specialized book on writing titled *Du wen-Bi de*. As a local scholar drawing inspiration from Hunan culture, he held unique insights into writing, and his ideas were unconventional. His contributions to fostering the creativity of Hunan scholars cannot be disregarded.

The Family Learning Inheritance of Huang Benji and His Literary Attainments

Huang Benji (1781-1856), who styled himself Zhongliang and was also known as Hu Chi, was a native of Ningxiang, Hunan Province. Boasting an extensive collection of works, *Du wen-Bi de* represents the outcome of

* **Acknowledgment:** This paper is supported by General Project for Philosophy and Social Sciences Research in Colleges and Universities of Jiangsu Province, "The Changes of Literary Writing of the Huxiang Image in the Poetry and Prose of the Late Qing Dynasty" (Project No.: 2022THZWJC20).

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Huang Benji's contemplation on writing and embodies his literary theory. He was brought up in a family characterized by poetry and propriety¹ (Deng, 2007, p. 446). His great-grandfather, Huang Daoen, produced six volumes of *Mingwen Shuofa* and eight volumes of *Compilation of Ancient Writings by Genres*. Clearly, when it comes to appraising and commenting on articles, a family tradition of learning has long existed. His father, Huang Xiangnan, was likewise a learned and virtuous gentleman and was at one time regarded by his maternal grandfather as "a talent proficient in Confucian classics and history". His mother, Liu Guangqi, originated from a prominent and influential family in Xiangtan, within which there were once four Hanlin scholars² (Huang, 1989, p. 1). It can thereby be deduced that his mother should likewise possess outstanding literary attainment. In light of the premature demise of their father, Huang Benji and his elder brother Huang Benqi were profoundly impacted by their mother's teachings during their childhood. Furthermore, Mrs. Liu attained success in steering her sons towards academic endeavors. She personally delivered lectures to her sons on the classics, enlisted teachers for them, and was exceptionally strict in their discipline³ (Huang, 1878, p. 1). The exemplary role of the ancestral predecessors, who were resolute in pursuing learning and proficient in literature, loomed conspicuously ahead, while the benevolent mother earnestly instructed from behind. Additionally, among the brothers, they frequently mutually assisted and enlightened one another in articles and academic studies⁴ (Huang, 2009a, p. 5). All these empowered Huang Benji to establish a solid academic foundation.

Besides the enlightenment from his family, the academic development of Huang Benji was also impacted by his hometown teachers and friends. For instance, He Xiling, Zeng Binggu, Weng Fengxi, Tang Taoshan, and others, all of whom were highly prestigious scholars in the local region. Among them, there were those who placed value on the study of statecraft, those who concentrated on Neo-Confucianism and ethical teachings, those who emphasized textual research and collation, and those who attached significance to the study of economics⁵ (Huang, 2009a, p. 178). The interactions and exchanges they had with Huang Benji exerted a considerable influence on the formation of the young Huang Benji's academic thoughts. Huang Benji was actively involved in a multitude of academic matters related to local culture. For example, he took part in the revision of *Hunan Local Specialties Records*⁶ (Huang, 2009a, p. 369). He availed himself of this opportunity to extensively peruse diverse types of books and developed a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of local traditions and anecdotes. This concurrently established an academic basis for Huang Benji's own literary creation and facilitated the dissemination of his literary reputation owing to his outstanding reputation within the local region. The literary standard of Huang Benji's works was highly commended in the Huxiang area. Furthermore, he was of equal renown with many others and his reputation spread throughout the local region. For instance, the individuals of that era compared Huang Benji and his elder brother to Lu Ji and Lu Yun⁷ (Huang, 1878, p. 1). Moreover,

¹ Concerning the cultural inheritance of the Huang Benji family, see Deng Xianhe, *Yuanxiang Qijiu Ji*, Volume 4, pp. 446.

² Details regarding the family members of Huang Benji, see (Tongzhi) *Ningxiang County Gazetteer*, Volume 31, concerning Civil Servants, woodblock-printed edition in the fifth year of the Tongzhi reign.

³ Concerning the circumstances of how Huang Benji's mother instructed the two brothers, see (Qing Dynasty) Huang Xiangnan, *Surviving manuscripts of Da Wei Shan Fang*, woodblock-printed edition in the 22nd year of the Daoguang reign.

⁴ With regard to the circumstances of mutual discussion and learning among the brothers of Huang Benji, see (Qing Dynasty), Huang Benji, *The Collection of Huang Benji*, p. 5.

⁵ With regard to the academic interactions between Huang Benji and his fellow townspeople friends, see (Qing Dynasty), Huang Benji, *The Collection of Huang Benji*, p. 178.

⁶ For the specific particulars concerning Huang Benji's involvement in the compilation of local chronicles, see (Qing Dynasty), Huang Benji, *The Collection of Huang Benji*, p. 369.

⁷ For details, please refer to (Qing Dynasty) Huang Xiangnan, *Surviving manuscripts of Da Wei Shan Fang*, woodblock-printed edition in the 22nd year of the Daoguang reign.

Huang Benji was frequently juxtaposed with other prominent personalities from Hunan Province⁸ (Huang, 1820, p. 67; Deng, 2008, p. 386). Huang Benji even obtained an assessment regarded as the foremost figure in the local literary circle of Ningxiang. For example, Xie Yucai once made such a statement, “I have remained in the Bingzhou area for more than twenty years. When people are heard discussing the most influential figure in the local literary circle, it is unanimously acknowledged that it is Huang Benji.” (Ji, 2010, p. 323). Wang Jince extolled Huang Benji as the most erudite entity in the local domain: “Among the renowned scholars in the Huxiang region during that period, when it comes to being erudite and versatile, Huang Benji was undoubtedly the foremost.” (Huang, 2009, p. 118). It can thereby be observed that the insights presented in Huang Benji’s dissertations stemmed from his profound erudition and cultivation, which constituted the creative basis for his specialized literary work *Du wen-Bi de*.

The Theoretical Innovation of the Article in *Du wen-Bi de* Under the Sway of the Textual Research Trend

Huang Benji has attained research achievements in the domains of Confucian classics, history, and epigraphy. These academic perceptions have likewise become significant resources for his article creation. For instance, in the preface composed by Yan Hailin for his work *San Chang Wu Zhai Wen Lue*, it was noted that his textual research works possess the flavor of ancient prose as well. He said,

Mr. Huang Benji from Ningxiang was highly talented and consciously assumed the responsibility of inheriting the literary tradition. When he was young, he was determined to compose ancient-style prose and placed little emphasis on contemporary prose writing. I once perused dozens of his works and held that his textual research articles were highly organized and could be regarded as exemplary in the creation of ancient-style prose. (Huang, 2009, p. 117)

Indeed, Huang Benji seamlessly incorporated textual research into his article composition. At the outset of *Du wen-Bi de*, he delved into the exegetical textual research of the articles. For instance, regarding the errors in his annotations of Zuo Si’s *Han Fu* and Li Shan’s annotations of *Wen Xuan*, he all made discriminations⁹ (Huang, 2009b, p. 5334).

Furthermore, in Huang Benji’s literary theory, there exist numerous original perspectives concerning the artistic features of the article, the profound meanings implicated in the words, and the intentions of the text structure arrangement. For instance, when expounding on the artistic features of narration, Huang Benji primarily took “Shi ji” as an example to undertake specific elaboration. He commended that “Shi ji” is distinctive in narration and characterization, differing from the historical biographies of subsequent generations. The cause resides in the leisure strokes that emerged in the narration of “Shi ji”. He asserted that at the turning points of the composition of “Shi ji”, it frequently broke through the conventional norms and achieved an engaging effect¹⁰ (Huang, 2009b, p. 5336). Huang Benji’s dissection of “Shi ji” is not merely restricted to the exploration of its narrative strengths. Moreover, he refutes the extant notion that “Shi ji” is “elegant and terse”. He contends that

⁸ Concerning the local designation of Huang Benji, see *Hunan Tongzhi*, Volume 193, the engraved edition of Jiaqing, p. 67; (Qing Dynasty), Deng Xianhe, *Poetry Collection of Nancun Thatched Cottage*, p. 386.

⁹ The exploration related to Huang Benji’s textual research on articles, see (Qing Dynasty) Huang Benji, *Du wen-Bi de*, Wang Shuizhao (ed.), *Historical Literary Discourses*, p. 5334.

¹⁰ Concerning Huang Benji’s assessment, see (Qing Dynasty) Huang Benji, *Du wen-Bi de*, Wang Shuizhao (ed.), *Historical Literary Discourses*, p. 5336.

the narration of historians does not necessarily have to be solely focused on conciseness¹¹ (Huang, 2009b, p. 5334). Such arguments could not be advanced unless one is scrupulously meticulous about the articles of “Shi ji” to the extent of scrutinizing every word and phrase, thoroughly highlighting the innovation of Huang Benji’s literary theory thought. Excluding the writing techniques, when assessing an article, the ideological connotation and emotional theme it encompasses are frequently of greater concern and value to literary critics. Huang Benji also concentrated on deliberating the rational and emotional connotations expressed in the article. For instance, when delving into the Confucian concepts of etiquette and law conveyed within the articles, two of Liu Zongyuan’s works were chosen for analysis. Special emphasis was placed on Liu Zongyuan’s discourse on filial piety and unfilial piety concerning the “action of lu mu”¹² in the text. By making comparisons between different writing backgrounds and targets, it was concluded that if the main body of building a hut beside the tomb was an ordinary civilian without an official position, they could, to a certain extent, not be constrained by etiquette and law and could be commended. Nevertheless, if one is a high-ranking official, enjoys the emolument from the imperial court, and holds a position among the scholar-bureaucrats, then it is necessary for one to take the records in the Confucian classics as the criterion for one’s conduct. At this juncture, the act of building a hut beside the tomb is regarded as unfilial¹³ (Wang, 2009b, p. 5342). Furthermore, Huang Benji was capable of transcending the conventional notions of literary evaluation, having the courage to criticize the works of the Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties, and taking whether it was reasonable as the assessment criterion. Taking Su Shi’s *On Duke Yin of Lu* as an illustration, Huang Benji indicated that this article by Su Shi contravened the taboo of loose discourse¹⁴ (Wang, 2009b, p. 5342). As this article explicitly presented the remarks opposing the regency of the empress dowager, Su Shi was unjustly imprisoned due to the “Wutai Poetry Case” and was fortunately spared thanks to the intercession of Empress Dowager Cao, who could be regarded as having bestowed great kindness upon Su Shi. Nevertheless, Su Shi composed an article to satirize Empress Dowager Cao, and Huang Benji was highly dissatisfied with this. This precisely manifests Huang Benji’s emphasis in his thesis on the “rationality” of the conception and the author’s stance of the article. He contends that an article should not merely conform to the norms of “reason” but also adopt “emotion” as the criterion. One must not neglect the human situation and discuss theories emptily. This aspect demonstrates his progressive literary theory thinking that is not confined by conventions.

The Temporal Nature and Influence of the Main Idea in Huang Benji’s Thesis

Besides appraising the works of ancient literary masters, Huang Benji also focused on the creation circumstances of the articles of this dynasty. He made remarks on all the ancient literary masters in the literary arena from the early Qing Dynasty to the middle and late Qing Dynasty. Firstly, Huang Benji directed the critical attack towards the articles of this dynasty that gradually became classicized by means of anthologies. Taking Xu Feiran’s “Twenty-Four Masters’ Literary Works of the Dynasty” as an example, he gave approval to the works of the writers included in the anthology.

¹¹ Concerning Huang Benji’s assertion that the narration of “Shi ji” ought not to pursue conciseness, see (Qing Dynasty) Huang Benji, *Du wen-Bi de*, Wang Shuizhao (ed.), *Historical Literary Discourses*, p. 5334.

¹² It pertains to the action of erecting a small house adjacent to the cemetery subsequent to the demise of one’s parents for the purpose of expressing one’s sorrow.

¹³ Regarding the remarks made by Huang Benji on Liu Zongyuan’s articles, see (Qing Dynasty) Huang Benji, *Du wen-Bi de*, Wang Shuizhao (ed.), *Historical Literary Discourses*, p. 5342.

¹⁴ Concerning Huang Benji’s critique of Su Shi’s articles, see (Qing Dynasty) Huang Benji, *Du wen-Bi de*, Wang Shuizhao (ed.), *Historical Literary Discourses*, p. 5342.

For instance, he maintained that in terms of narrative grammar, the two works, namely Hou Fangyu's *Biography of Master Situ* and Wei Xi's *Preface to Ren Wanggu's Collected Works*, lavishly commended the exquisite and nuanced portrayals of characters. He even voiced the lament that "Such a writing style makes one perceive it to be even superior to that of Sima Qian." (Wang, 2009, p. 5350). He was generous in his commendation of the articles of this dynasty, broke away from the constraints of preferring the past to the present, and courageously appreciated the outstanding works of the contemporary literary circle. This precisely manifests the objectivity and rationality of Huang Benji's treatise. Apart from the evaluation of the articles by ancient prose writers, Huang Benji also lavishly commended the articles produced by Confucian scholars of moral principles and textual research scholars that were conducive to moral education in society. For example, Huang Benji discovered the profound moral principles encompassed in the two articles authored by Li Guangdi, namely *Biography of the Filial Son Wang Yuan* and *Account of Wu Bozong's Search for His Brother*. He lauded the "filial piety and fraternal love" encompassed in the articles and took Li Guangdi's writings on ghosts and gods as an instance, indicating that although his articles were interspersed with exegetical content, the sincere sentiments of filial piety and fraternal love conveyed were not obstructed, and expressed the lament, "Who claims that exegetical quotations are not fine works in the world?" It is evident that Huang Benji's thesis does not succumb to preconceived and obsolete notions. On the contrary, he is capable of uncovering the true emotions of the article in areas that others have overlooked. Admittedly, while Huang Benji expressed his appreciation for the articles of the contemporary dynasty, rather direct criticisms also existed. For instance, the overall negative evaluation he gave to the entire book *Ancient Prose of Jixu Studio* by Fang Muru primarily focused on the criticism regarding its use of literary allusions¹⁵ (Huang, 2009b, p. 5351). The critical thought of Huang Benji concerning the articles of the contemporary dynasty resides in the fact that he holds an extremely adverse attitude towards the deliberately fabricated language patterns and writing styles, while having a preference for the natural and appropriately presented ones.

Concerning the influence of Huang Benji's *Du Wen Bi De*, Li Ren asserted in *Ji Huang Hu Chi Shu*: "In Mr. Huang's work *Chi Xue*, the utilization of the character 'xia' for discussing 'Records of the Grand Historian' was noted. This assertion has significantly enlightened subsequent scholars." (Luo, 2008, p. 456).

Nevertheless, aside from this, no substantial response appears to have been witnessed. A meticulous examination of his literary theory discloses that although influenced by a certain Neo-Confucianism ethos and attaching significant importance to the concept of the article conveying the moral message, he elaborated on the article in respects such as the application of words, the arrangement of materials, and the transitions of the narrative structure in detail. Furthermore, he was capable of not being constrained by the views of predecessors, daring to question and criticize the works of the eight masters that were regarded as exemplary during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Undoubtedly, he was highly perceptive and courageous.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that Huang Benji not only inherited and strengthened the traditional concept of literature and morality. For instance, he held the belief that plain and straightforward language is superior to the odd and stubborn, and put forward such thesis viewpoints as that literature can convey moral principles, be

¹⁵ Concerning the criticisms proffered by Huang Benji regarding Fang Muru's articles, see (Qing Dynasty) Huang Benji, *Du wen-Bi de*; Wang Shuizhao (ed.), *Historical Literary Discourses*, p. 5351.

abundant in virtue, and be dominated by sincerity, which were inherited from the ancient prose writers of the Tang and Song dynasties. Nevertheless, Huang Benji did not merely adhere to the old theories. Instead, he proposed insightful new theories during the process of analyzing specific articles and raised questions about the works of classic writers that were almost conclusive. His literary theory not only reflects the influence of the textual research trend of thought on the creative concepts of scholars but also presents a new style of the concept of literature and morality that dares to break through stereotypes and conventions. The unique aspects of his concepts in articles are deserving more in-depth exploration and research.

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