

Urban Scenery, Lyrical Lingnan: A Review of Wen Yushe's

Gleaning Scenes and Sights

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Abstract

Wen Yushe's poetry collection *Gleaning Scenes and Sights* (《物色撷英》) weaves together the natural landscapes, historical sites, human portraits, and reading reflections, which combine to reveal the characteristics of urban and rural Lingnan area, into a spiritual cartography that possesses both classical charm and contemporary resonance. This review takes the poem "Viewing the Horizon" as the entry point for aesthetic analysis, examining how the poet transforms everyday scenery into spiritual imagery, and traces this thread through the collection's four sections to reveal his creative principle that "scenery is none other than mindscape". Through close readings of representative works—"Muttering in the Tower" from the travel and nostalgia section, "The Elder Professor" from the human portraiture section, and "Encountering Lu You in Unrolling the Scroll" from the reading reflections section—this review demonstrates how the poet, with his precise yet spirited classical poetic language, channels Zong Baihua's aesthetics and the classical Chinese poetic tradition, accomplishing a Lingnan poet's literary-spiritual practice in a contemporary context. The collection is not merely a compilation of personal aesthetic experiences but also a manifesto of aesthetic education through poetry.

Keyword: Wen Yushe, *Gleaning Scenes and Sights*, Lingnan poetry, landscape writing, aesthetic education

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Guangzhou, China, Wen Yushe is more than a poetry composer. From English language education to aesthetic education practice, from the dialogue between poetry and painting to art theory, his academic trajectory consistently revolves around a single core—discovering, experiencing, and transmitting beauty in everyday reality. *Gleaning Scenes and Sights* (《物色撷英》), published by Huacheng Publishing House, stands as the finest testament to his commitment to aesthetic education rendered in verse. The collection's four sections—Scenery and Landscape (物色风景), Sites and Excursions (访迹探胜), Character Portraits (人物品藻), and Reading Reflections (读书杂感)—together delineate the poetic contours of Lingnan's cities and countryside.

The title foregrounds the term “wu se” (物色, “scenery” or “the gleanings of scenes”), and the opening section naturally turns to the natural and cultural landscapes of Guangzhou, a renowned cultural city in Lingnan. Those who have lived in or visited Guangzhou know that the city's beauty is not ostentatious—the shimmering ripples of Liwan Lake (荔湾湖), the tree-lined paths of Yuexiu Park (越秀公园), the sunset glow over Haizhu Lake (海珠湖)—all are tucked away in the folds of daily life. The poet's brush acts as a gentle engraving tool, carving these ordinary scenes into verse. His celebration of Canton Tower (广州塔), affectionately nicknamed “Slim Waist” (小蛮腰), is particularly striking. He situates this modern landmark within a dialogue between the Pearl River's nightscape and the spiritual character of Lingnan, capturing both the boldness of “its sharpness piercing through dust and smoke” (锋芒破尘烟) and the tenderness of “ripples that slightly furrow its brow” (波动微皱眉). This interplay of hardness and softness perfectly embodies Lingnan's regional spirit—gentle yet resilient. The

poet also lavishes considerable attention on the region's flora. For Wen, the lychee is not merely a fine fruit—"The immortal maiden steps across the sea with cloudy strides, / Her ribbon leaves green traces upon the fruit"(仙姑过海踱云步, 丝带挂果绿纹路) (P6)—it also carries Su Dongpo's (苏东坡) thousand-year sentiment of "I would gladly be a Lingnan native forever" (不辞长作岭南人). Meanwhile, the kapok, Guangzhou's "hero flower", possesses in his verse both the grandeur of "golden petals spanning the sky in layered surges" (金瓣横空, 叠浪千层) (P188) and the warmth of "Dewdrops form on the petals in the mist, as charming and gorgeous as Xiangfei¹" (遇雾挂珠, 湘妃色楚) (P188)—the very symbol of the city's character thus rendered with exquisite precision.

In Xiaogang Park (晓港公园), "the jade-green water ripples as fish shadows play, / the century-old banyan's breeze casts ample shade" (水碧纹荡鱼影亲, 风流老树百载荫) (P11) captures a moment of direct perception; in Dongshan Lake (东山湖), "the glistening ripples trace a clear palette" (粼粼湖纹绘清彩) (P33) freezes a play of light and shadow; along the Pearl River, "pleasure boats painted in sunset hues" (游船涂脂夕照里) (P155) renders an oil-painting texture at dusk.

The poems Red Bottlebrush (红千层), Phoenix Flower (凤凰花), and Crape Myrtle (紫薇) employ both five- and seven-character lines in traditional Chinese poetry, capturing not only form and color but also the very spirit of their subjects. The two longer ci (词)

¹ Xiangfei (湘妃), or the Xiang Consorts, refers to the legendary wives of Emperor Shun, Ehuang and Nüying, who mourned him by the Xiang River and became associated with tears, bamboo, and faithful grief in Chinese poetic tradition.

poems, “First Bloom of the Red” (一萼红) on the Lingnan kapok and “Locking the Window in Cold” (锁窗寒) on the crape myrtle, reveal the author’s mastery of the classical ci form. He writes of the kapok with “golden petals spanning the sky in layered surges” (金瓣横空，叠浪千层) (P188), and of the crape myrtle’s winter scene as “bare branches stretch, devoid of color, / a tree of withered transparency bearing winter’s mark”(枯枝纵、生色无时，一树憔悴透空印) (P189).

The series on the banyan tree is particularly outstanding. The line “Strands, tassels, draping, clinging, bewitching, illuminating the eye with color” (条条绦绦依依妖娆点亮了眼色) (P37) employs prose-like syntax, breaking free from the conventional meter of classical Chinese poetry, yet the form perfectly matches the cascading movement of the banyan’s aerial roots. The repeated syllables in “Drooping, dangling, drifting, undulating, setting off the vivid dark green” (垂垂坠坠飘飘荡荡衬分明墨绿) (P37) create a rhythmic sway that approximates the synesthetic experimentation of modern poetry.

If the foregoing works focus primarily on “wu se” itself—the fine-grained depiction of natural scenery and urban landmarks—then the poet’s deeper interest lies in the momentary intersection between “wu se” and “xin se” (心色, “mindscape” or “the color of the heart”). He is not content merely to produce attractive landscape photographs; rather, he seeks, in every ordinary moment of looking, to capture the subtle instant when the heart is quietly stirred. This creative orientation finds its most refined and penetrating expression in the poem “Viewing the Horizon” (All poems are presented with Chinese-English parallel texts, here and throughout.):

珠江东去迎朝阳，

The Pearl River flows east to greet the rising sun,

微风徐来皱波床。

A gentle breeze arrives, wrinkling the water's bed.

往昔常言地平线，

In the past I often spoke of the horizon,

今晨偶遇热心房。

This morning I chanced upon it in a fervent heart. (P21)

This brief four-line poem condenses virtually the entire aesthetic logic of Wen's landscape poetry. The opening line sets the Pearl River, the mother river of Lingnan, as its backdrop; the eastward-flowing water and the ascending sun establish a dual momentum of time and space, implying a life-direction that is forward-moving and renewing. The second line shifts deftly from the river's grandeur to the subtle ripples on its surface—the character *zhou* (皱, “wrinkle”) is exquisitely chosen, simultaneously delineating the water's texture and intimating a gentle disturbance of the mind, laying the emotional groundwork for the poem's final line. The third line, “In the past I often spoke of the horizon”, marks the poem's crucial turning point: the “horizon”, which had previously existed merely as an abstract concept within the poet's intellectual repertoire, is now consciously distinguished from lived, bodily experience. The closing line, “This morning I chanced upon it in a fervent heart”, through the quotidian gesture of “chancing upon” (偶遇), draws the horizon back from the distant skyline

to the horizon of the heart—revealing that the true “horizon” is not where the eye can reach, but rather that moment of sudden clarity and palpitation when mind and landscape meet.

The brilliance of this poem lies in its completion of a leap from “cognition” to “embodied knowing”. “In the past I often spoke” represents book knowledge, colloquial clichés, cultural preconceptions, while “this morning I chanced upon” marks a personal, present, unrepeatable moment of authentic experience. The poet’s closing with “a fervent heart” internalizes the external landscape as an emotional vibration, restoring warmth and pulse to the “horizon”—a geographical term that had nearly become a dead metaphor. This approach precisely echoes modern Chinese aesthetician Zong Baihua’s (宗白华) aesthetic principle, frequently invoked throughout the collection: “transform solid scenery into virtual realm, create images as symbols” (化实景而为虚境，创形象以为象征). “Viewing the Horizon” distills from the most ordinary morning scene on the Pearl River a spiritual image that embodies the subtle tension between knowing and feeling, between distance and interiority, between concept and experience. It is not merely a record of the poet’s personal aesthetic awakening but also provides readers with a key to understanding the entire *Gleaning Scenes and Sights*: every landscape the poet depicts ultimately points toward the horizon of the heart.

If the first section emphasizes the immediate capture of “present scenes”, then the second section, “Sites and Excursions”, turns its gaze toward historical sites embedded in the depths of time. The poet’s travels extend throughout Lingnan and beyond; his travel poems are by no means simple sightseeing records—he excels at capturing fleeting insights amid mountains and ruins, using the landscapes of distant places to reflect upon his own situation,

making each journey a spiritual exercise. From the dusk over the Pearl River to the Meiguan Ancient Trail (梅关古道)² and the misty waves of Dongting Lake (洞庭湖), the poet's brush is at once serene and expansive; as the pages turn, readers too seem to embark on poetic journeys.

In "Musings at Tianzi Pier" (天字码头怀古), "river islets gather mist as waters meditate, / Lingnan's mountains and seas reflect a heavenly mindscape" (江渚凝雾水冥思, 岭南海山天心境) (P232) evokes emotion through scenery, forgoing impassioned rhetoric for a brooding depth of thought. In "Nian Nu Jiao • At Su Dongpo's Former Residence" (念奴娇 • 东坡故居), the second stanza recounts Dongpo's late-life resolution to "grow old here, making Lingnan his home" (在此计终老, 岭南为家), and the closing line "Fortune moves like the wind; unexpectedly, he stayed but three months" (时运如风, 不料只住三月) (P221) carries immense weight with a light touch, capturing the full poignancy of displacement. "Pu Sa Man • Canton Tower" uses a classical ci tune to celebrate a contemporary landmark; "the Pearl River unfurls its jade-green belt, / waves ripple across Pazhou" (珠江舒碧带, 琶洲漾波澜) (P245) integrates new architecture into traditional landscape imagery without the

² The Meiguan Ancient Trail (梅关古道) was the primary route through which the Guangfu people (广府人)—the Cantonese-speaking inhabitants of the Pearl River Delta, named after the historical Guangzhou Prefecture (Guangzhou Fu 广州府)—migrated to the region. It served as the largest passageway for ancient Central Plains and Jiangnan populations to move southward to the Guangdong Delta due to warfare and other causes, and remains an important "ancestral homeland" (桑梓地) for the origins and development of Guangfu culture. In the winter of the fourth year of the Kaiyuan reign of the Tang dynasty (726 CE), the Chancellor and poet Zhang Jiuling (张九龄) opened the Meiguan Ancient Trail, reshaping Lingnan's trade routes and making it the most important thoroughfare through the Nanling Mountains—used for population migration, military mobilization, merchant travel, and diplomatic missions alike. This route led to Zhuji Lane (珠玑巷), the first major commercial town that ancient Central Plains settlers reached after crossing the Meiling Pass into Lingnan, and thus the place known as the hometown of the Guangfu people.

slightest sense of incongruity. And "Qing Yu An • Guangfu Temple Fair" (广府庙会) travels from "a single road of a thousand-year trading route" (千年商道一条路) to "the march of the era" (时代进行曲) (P245), mixing ancient and modern diction in a way that, while somewhat abrupt, vividly captures the vitality of traditional festivals in the present age.

Among these nostalgic works, "Muttering in the Tower" (楼中呓) deserves particular attention:

灰蒙翼然苍茫黛，

Gray and hazy, with poised eaves, a vast dusky green,

悠悠难觉千古在。

Leisurely, one barely feels the millennia are present.

鸿鹄曾此栖息过？

Did the swan goose once rest here？

云山诗意骚客爱。

Cloudy peaks and poetic charm—the literati's delight. (P219)

This short poem, composed upon ascending Guangzhou's Honghu Tower (鸿鹄楼), forms an intriguing counterpart to "Viewing the Horizon". The latter looks "downward" and "inward"—river currents, ripples, the heart—drawing the distant back to the self; Muttering in the Tower, by contrast, looks "upward" and "outward"—the vast sky, millennia of time, the legend of the swan goose—casting the self into the immense. Yet the two poems are structurally isomorphic: both adopt a "contingent" stance of observation ("this morning I chanced upon" / "ascending the tower and gazing in all directions") to trigger a perception of something more

immense (the horizon / the millennia). The line “Did the swan goose once rest here?”—framed as a question rather than a certainty—precisely captures the true meaning of nostalgic reflection: we can never definitively know the face of history, but the very act of questioning already establishes a genuine connection between the present mind and the past. The closing line, “Cloudy peaks and poetic charm—the literati’s delight,” concludes with a touch of self-deprecation, gently returning the “millennial” reflection to the literatus’s personal taste—neither overly grave nor frivolous, exemplifying the distinctive sense of measure that characterizes Wen’s nostalgic poetry. This technique of “lifting the heavy with a light touch” (举重若轻) is identical to the closing gesture of “a fervent heart” in “Viewing the Horizon”—whether confronting the horizon or the rivers and mountains of a thousand years, the poet ultimately returns the external sublime to internal perception.

The third section, “Character Portraits”, reveals another facet of the poet and educator as a practitioner of aesthetic education—a profound concern for “the human”. Here one finds tributes to the spiritual bearing of great figures and tender expressions toward teachers, friends, and family. Unlike conventional character sketches, Wen’s character poems do not seek to delineate physical appearance or biographical details in fine brushwork; rather, they strive to establish spiritual portraits in just a few words. On the epigraph scholar Rong Geng (容庚, 1894–1983), he writes: “Ghost locks guard the Sword of the King of Yue, / Wild horses gallop across the Compendium of Bronze Inscriptions” (鬼锁封护越王剑, 野马奔奏金文编) (P262). “Ghost locks guard” evokes both the mystery surrounding the excavation of the King of Yue’s sword and the “unlocking” of ancient script that Rong’s magnum opus *Compendium of Bronze*

Inscriptions (金文编) accomplished; “wild horses gallop” vividly captures the dynamic, untamed force of his bronze-script calligraphy, as if wild steeds were racing across the grasslands of ancient philology. The couplet interweaves archaeological discovery with scholarly creation on multiple levels. On Deng Erya (邓尔雅, 1884–1954), he writes: “A single lineage of four hundred years of family learning”(一脉家学四百年) (P265), condensing four centuries of cultural transmission into a numerical shorthand that carries profound weight through its very brevity.

Among these character poems, “The Elder Professor” (老教授) stands as an especially fine example of Wen’s art of portraiture:

鲐背之年豪兴飞，

At ninety, his spirited joy takes flight,

烟霞缭绕酒八杯。

Mist and rosy clouds swirl round eight cups of wine.

冻梨神采大小雅，

With the hue of age yet the verve of the Greater and Lesser Odes,

灿若繁星胜花蕾。

Bright as a myriad stars, surpassing flower buds.

致逸然，骚未老，雅幽韵扬话语妙，

With ease and grace, his poetic spirit undimmed, his elegant resonance carries wit;

心了了，学问好，诗情画意风景俏。

His mind clear and discerning, his learning profound—poetic sentiment and pictorial

beauty make the scene fair. (P261)

This poem's formal structure already reveals the poet's craft: the first four lines adopt the five- and seven-syllable meter, while the final six lines shift to a three-three-seven pattern, the rhythm moving from orderly restraint to gradual release, mirroring the elder professor's transition from quietly seated wine-drinking to increasingly animated, soaring discourse. "At ninety" (鲐背之年) indicates advanced age, yet "his spirited joy takes flight" (豪兴飞) depicts the same subject in dynamic motion—between stasis and movement, a vitality that defies old age springs forth from the page. "Mist and rosy clouds swirl" may literally describe the rising vapors of wine at the table, but more significantly, it externalizes the spiritual radiance accumulated through a lifetime of scholarship—yan xia (烟霞, "mist and rosy clouds") belongs to the lexicon of Daoist immortals; here applied to a scholar's bearing, it implies that "scholarship is a form of cultivation." The line "With the hue of age yet the verve of the Greater and Lesser Odes" (冻梨神采大小雅) is the most exquisite: dong li (冻梨, "frozen pear") refers to the deep brown complexion of the very old, a sign of physical decline, yet the poet immediately reverses this with "verve" (神采), and compounds it with Greater and Lesser Odes (大小雅)—which simultaneously refers to the Greater Odes and Lesser Odes of *the Book of Songs* (诗经), evoking the professor's learned and elegant conversation, and connotes "magnanimity" (雅量), capturing his expansive composure. The closing line, "poetic sentiment and pictorial beauty make the scene fair" (诗情画意风景俏), ends with the character qiao (俏, "fair" or "lively"), rendering the ninety-something scholar's countenance vivid and buoyant, utterly devoid of any twilight gloom. Not a single word of "respect" appears in the poem, yet

respect suffuses every line; not a word of “affection”, yet warmth imbues every character. This method of “transmitting spirit through image” (以象传神) is the hallmark of Wen’s character poetry—he neither judges his subjects’ historical standing nor enumerates their scholarly achievements, but rather captures a single moment of wine and conversation, allowing their spiritual essence to manifest on its own.

What unites these character poems is their use of allusion, imagery, and numerical shorthand to suggest the spiritual stature of their subjects, rather than heaping on praise. The poet infuses each figure he portrays with poetic warmth, leaving readers with a palpable sense of sincerity and human connection. One also discerns an educator’s sustained attention to “the person”—and this attention is precisely the emotional foundation of his aesthetic education practice.

The fourth section, “Reading Reflections”, captures the poet’s contemplation in his study. Long immersed in art and aesthetic education, Wen’s reading is remarkably broad. These poems of “Reading Reflections” are by no means mechanical transcripts of excerpts, but rather interweave insights from the classics with immediate life situations, making reading an authentic dialogue with both the self and the sages of old. The association of a stretch of autumn rain with Su Shi’s “Ding Feng Bo”(定风波)—the open-mindedness of “In a straw cloak, through mist and rain, I pass my life” (一蓑烟雨任平生) (P272) set against the reality of “huddled in a corner of the room” (蜷缩在屋里角落处) (P272)—creates a subtle contrast that is at once homage and self-mockery. The two diary-style short pieces on Lu Xun (鲁迅) capture his state of mind during the Baiyun Tower (白云楼) period with “grief, anger, resentment, and

sorrow, / ninety years of wind and rain at Baiyun Tower” (悲怒怨恨与哀愁，九十风雨白云楼) (P275), restrained in expression yet intense in emotion. The group on the renowned Southern Song dynasty poet of China Lu You (陆游) comments that the “Fang Weng”³ (放翁) “passionately advocated for recovery, repeatedly offering strategies, / but none took him seriously—his words but wind past the ear” (喜论恢复常献策，无人当真耳边风) (P279), combining the historian’s judgment with a quiet lament for the fate of scholars throughout the ages.

Among these poems of “Reading Reflections”, the group “Encountering Lu You in Unrolling the Scroll”(展卷遇陆游) merits closer attention:

黄卷横竖字千行，

Thousands of characters in horizontal and vertical lines on yellowed scrolls;

古道犹存缺热肠。

the ancient way remains, yet warm-hearted passion is lacking.

面对无常问苍茫，

Facing the vicissitudes, I question the vast firmament;

好整以暇渡沧桑。

with composure I navigate the vicissitudes of time.

Lu You (1125–1210)

³ Fang Weng" (放翁) is the self-assumed style name (号 in Chinese) of the renowned Southern Song dynasty poet Lu You (陆游, 1125–1210).

I

陆杨范尤四大家，

Lu, Yang, Fan, and You—the four great masters,

南宋文坛笔生花。

Their brushes blossomed on the Southern Song literary scene.

诗才气度宗李杜，

In poetic genius and bearing, they followed Li and Du,

词文史学胜钰佳。

In Ci poetry and historical learning, they surpassed fine jade.

II

雄奇高蹈一放翁，

A man of majestic vision and lofty strides—this Fang Weng,

酒来千杯无敌逢。

A thousand cups of wine, and he meets no match.

喜论恢复常献策，

He passionately advocated for recovery, repeatedly offering strategies,

无人当真耳边风。

But none took him seriously—his words but wind past the ear. (P279)

The first poem, with its image of “their brushes blossomed”(笔生花), situates Lu You within the literary historical canon, a fairly conventional literary-historical evaluation. The true depth resides in the second poem. After establishing the “Fang Weng’s” heroic image through

“majestic vision and lofty strides” and “a thousand cups of wine”, the poem abruptly concludes with the couplet: “He passionately advocated for recovery, repeatedly offering strategies, / but none took him seriously—his words but wind past the ear.” In these fourteen characters lies an immense tension: a poet who devoted his life to the cause of recovering the north, his ardent sincerity in realpolitik dismissed as nothing more than “wind past the ear”. The poet does not directly express his own emotion, but juxtaposes these facts, allowing the reader to taste the absurdity and sorrow within. This technique is identical to the juxtaposition in “Viewing the Horizon” of “In the past I often spoke” and “This morning I chanced upon”—both operate through the contrast of two experiential worlds, allowing meaning to emerge in the fissure between them. Thus it becomes clear that whether facing a morning scene on the Pearl River or a thousand-year poetic history, Wen Yushe consistently maintains a self-aware stance of “thinking poetry through poetry”: he sees in Lu You’s fate not merely history, but the universal condition of those who “speak earnestly, while listeners remain oblivious”; and in composing this insight into poetry, he is himself responding to the fate of “none take it seriously”—at least poetry takes it seriously.

At this point, the internal connections among the four sections become clear: the first section, “Scenery and Landscape”, is the poet’s dialogue with nature; the second, “Sites and Excursions”, is his dialogue with history; the third, “Character Portraits”, is his dialogue with others; and the fourth, “Reading Reflections”, is his dialogue with the classics. These four dialogues converge upon a single core question: how to maintain perceptual acuity, emotional warmth, and intellectual independence amid the complexities of reality. This is the spiritual

main thread running through the entire collection, and precisely the fundamental concern of Wen Yushe as a practitioner of aesthetic education.

Surveying the collection's linguistic style, Wen's poetry is metrically precise yet never stiff, possessing the flavor of classical verse while constantly incorporating the fresh vitality of modern life. He has a gift for selecting richly colored, vividly textured imagery—golden radiance, flowing fire, bright clouds—creating a sumptuous visual impact that might be described as “sculpted forms filling the eye”. Yet this “sculpting” is never empty rhetorical accumulation; it adheres closely to the spirit of each object depicted. It is precisely within this artistic self-awareness that Wen Yushe accomplishes the literary-spiritual practice of a contemporary Lingnan poet—with poetry as his brush and aesthetic education as his heart, he inscribes his own answer upon this beloved soil.

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