

# The Stylistic Characteristics and Aesthetic Norms of the Han-Wei-Jin Period Praise Genre——Taking the Preface and Praise of Eminent Ministers of the Three Kingdoms as an Example

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**Abstract:** Yuan Hong's Preface and Praise of Eminent Ministers of the Three Kingdoms, selected in the Anthology of Literature, provides a crucial perspective for examining the stylistic features of the praise genre during the Han-Wei-Jin period and the aesthetic norms of praise within the Anthology. By tracing the origins and evolutionary relationship between zan and song, this study proposes that their distinction lies not in form but in stylistic inheritance and the differing subjectivities of primary and subsidiary texts: the zan genre inherits the praise tradition, exhibiting characteristics of a subsidiary text, whereas the song genre possesses greater independence. Applying subtext theory to analyse Yuan Hong's Preface and Praise for Eminent Ministers of the Three Kingdoms reveals its extended preface-praise structure as a pinnacle of the genre's development. Functioning as a subtext, the preface theoretically constructs sovereign-minister relations and guides value judgements, delineating interpretative boundaries while emphasising core themes like 'encountering a sovereign' and 'the times'. This integrates Yuan Hong's reflections on Eastern Jin politics. The aesthetic orientation of the 'Zan' genre in the Anthology of Literature exhibits three defining characteristics: prioritising character appraisal over miscellaneous praise, valuing parallelism and metrical precision over free-verse simplicity, and favouring works where emotion and rhetoric excel while eschewing empty flattery. This aesthetic selection both perpetuates the Han-Wei tradition of the 'Zan' genre and propels its transformation from utilitarian to aesthetic purposes, offering a crucial perspective for understanding the evolution of medieval literary concepts.

**Keywords:** Wen Xuan; Praise genre; Preface and Praise of Eminent Ministers of the Three Kingdoms; Subtext theory; Yuan Hong

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Preface and Praise of Eminent Ministers of the Three Kingdoms is a collection of eulogies composed by Yuan Hong of the Eastern Jin dynasty. Xiao Tong's (1984) Wen Xuan explicitly records Yuan Hong's Preface and Praise of Eminent Ministers of the Three Kingdoms, stating: 'Therefore, I have once more compiled my reflections into this Praise.' The Anthology titled this work Preface and Praise for Eminent Ministers of the Three Kingdoms. Following the flourishing of anthology studies in the Tang dynasty, most scholars adopted the Anthology's classification under the category of praise. However, Fang Xuanling's Book of Jin still referred to it as 'Ode to Eminent Ministers of the Three Kingdoms,' and Xiang Xiu, one of the Six Commentators of the Anthology, also termed it 'Ode to Eminent Ministers' in Xiao Tong's Anthology. This demonstrates that commentators did not strictly distinguish between the two genres of ode and praise. Research on the genre of praise in the Han, Wei, and Jin dynasties has already outlined its fundamental characteristics and developmental trajectory, laying the groundwork for in-depth examination of specific texts. Since the Preface to the Wen Xuan excludes historical commentaries, and Xiao Tong provisionally placed praise within both the Praise and Historical Commentary (historical narrative with praise) categories, this paper primarily focuses on the former type of praise.

## 1.The Evolution of Praise and Ode from the Preface to the Praises of Eminent Ministers of the Three Kingdoms

Praise originated from ceremonial chants used to guide rituals such as sacrifices, or from the exchange of toasts

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between hosts and guests at banquets. Initially, it served as auxiliary speech accompanying formal rites. During the Han, Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties periods, both zan and song underwent a transformative process: from ‘addressing divine beings’ to ‘gradually encompassing human affairs’ and finally to ‘extending to minute objects.’ Zan itself evolved from its auxiliary function as ceremonial chanting to a role of extolling both persons and objects. Exemplified by the zàn and 人物赞 (praises of individuals), these texts functioned as ‘auxiliaries’—either elucidating pictorial content to extol the spirit and demeanour of depicted figures, or emerging from pictorial compendiums to interpret and praise the mountains, rivers, flora, and fauna within them, thus combining natural history with laudatory purposes. As praise texts gained literary sophistication and autonomy, the ‘purely descriptive praise’ evolved to directly extol historical figures or contemporary statesmen. Yuan Hong’s Preface and Praise for Eminent Ministers of the Three Kingdoms, for instance, employs rhymed quatrains to laud their virtues, interchanging with the ode form. Finally, miscellaneous and Buddhist praises excluded from the Anthology of Literature encompass diverse subjects including human affairs and skills: Dai Kui’s Praise of Leisurely Wanderings (human affairs), Cui Yuan’s ‘On the Form of Cursive Script’ (artistic skill). The boundaries between praise, ode, inscription, and admonition were blurred, as they all shared the function of ‘commending virtue and recording merit.’ Funeral orations, which ‘combine praise with commentary on deeds,’ also intersected with the genre of praise, reflecting the flexibility of literary classification during the Han, Wei, and Jin dynasties.

Given their shared characteristics and the coexistence of praise and criticism, it is understandable why they are regarded as belonging to the same genre—both pieces occupy a position between orthodox eulogies. However, the Wenshu’s adherence to the Wenxin Diaolong’s judgement—separating the seemingly similar Han Gaozu Gongchen Song and Sanguo Mingchen Xu Zan—actually demonstrates their distinct emphases. Whether rhyming, employing four-character phrases, or even text length are not decisive factors in distinguishing panegyrics. The classification primarily hinges on two aspects: stylistic inheritance and the subjectivity reflected in the main and subsidiary texts.

## **2. The Generation and Continuation of the Subtextual Meaning**

This preface and eulogy fully assimilates the Eastern Han tradition of placing the preface before the eulogy, employing a style where the preface supports the eulogy. Prior to this, such lengthy prefaces and eulogies had not appeared, thus it may be regarded as a pinnacle in the development of eulogies—just as poetry has its prefaces and lyrics have theirs, the subsequent elongation of prefaces further expanded the intertextual dialogue between primary and secondary texts.

The primary function of the primary text is to delineate the interpretative scope and establish a referential framework. The preface to the Three Kingdoms Eminent Ministers Preface and Praise devotes nearly half its length to tracing the historical evolution of ‘sovereign-minister relations,’ constructing a temporal evaluation scale progressing from ‘ideal type’ to ‘declining type’ and finally to ‘special type.’ This implicitly establishes the criteria for evaluating the figures discussed in the praises. Liu Xie (2010) in his *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* opens the preface by positing the core proposition: ‘A wise ruler cannot govern alone; thus ministers are appointed to assist him.’ It traces back to the ancient era of ‘alternating supremacy of the Three and Five’ when the ideal state was achieved where ‘the sovereign devised strategies while his ministers exerted their utmost efforts.’ The maxim that ‘when the second and eighth sons rose to prominence, the Tang dynasty flourished; when Yi Yin and Lü Shang were employed, Tang and Wu reigned in peace’ enshrines the highest value in ‘sovereign and minister complementing each other as if sealed by a token.’ This framework directly shapes the preface’s evaluations of historical figures, emphasising alignment with the ideal of ‘mutual harmony between sovereign and minister’ while condemning the chaos where ‘those in high office fail to govern with utmost impartiality, while subordinates inevitably seek advancement through private means.’ It identifies ‘the estrangement of sovereign and minister leading to the erosion of moral teachings’ as the root cause of disorder. This critique provides the context for the preface’s complex assessments of ‘eminent ministers in turbulent times.’ Xun Yu’s actions of ‘submitting to tyrannical courts and

pre-emptively plotting worldly affairs' are interpreted within the preface's framework of 'an age rife with chaos and ungoverned times' as salvific rather than unprincipled. Cui Yan's 'bending but not breaking' yet meeting a fate where 'jade shatters before the ruler' exemplifies the tragedy of the preface's 'people despise their superiors, and the times cannot tolerate the wise' – a tragic illustration of the prevailing disorder.

Within this defined scope, the preface guides readers through explicit value judgements to interpret the eulogy from a specific perspective. It explicitly posits the core contradiction between 'encountering or failing to encounter' favourable circumstances and 'facing turbulent times or serving a worthy ruler,' tightly binding the realisation of a minister's value to 'the times' and 'the sovereign.' This logic permeates the entire eulogy. The preface emphasises the conflict between 'the times' and 'principled integrity,' noting that 'when the times are turbulent, visibility is less favourable than concealment; when all things yearn for order, silence is less favourable than speech.' It stresses that the choices of distinguished ministers must align with their era. This perspective defends the pragmatic actions of figures in the eulogies, most notably Zhuge Liang's example of 'biding his time before acting.' The preface laments that 'when virtue exists but the times are unfavourable, Mencius sighed in regret; when the times are favourable but the ruler is lacking, Jia Yi wept in sorrow,' positioning the encounter with a worthy sovereign as pivotal to a distinguished minister's fulfilment. This perspective elevates the evaluations within the eulogies beyond simplistic dichotomies of loyalty versus treachery.

Finally, the preface and main text form a closed interpretative loop through mutual textual reference. The propositions raised in the preface find validation in the specific deeds of the figures celebrated within the eulogies. The case studies within the eulogies, in turn, reinforce the historical judgement of the preface. The preface asserts that 'benevolence and righteousness must be made manifest, hence the times honour their achievements; life and livelihood must be preserved, hence the discerning grasp their opportunities,' emphasising the balance between 'promoting the Way' and 'preserving oneself.' This resonates with Xun Yu's 'sacrificing his life to demonstrate righteousness' and Xun You's 'greatly preserving his reputation and integrity.' Though their paths to survival differed, both are commended for 'jointly promoting the Way': the former through sacrificing life to demonstrate righteousness, the latter through preserving virtue to safeguard existence. The eulogies' assessment of these distinguished ministers ultimately points to Yuan Hong's philosophy of unifying Confucian principles with practical governance, and to his own personal circumstances.

### **3.The Aesthetic Orientation of the Praise Genre in the Anthology of Literature**

The inclusion of the 'Praise of Dongfang Shuo's Painting' and the 'Preface and Praise of Eminent Ministers of the Three Kingdoms' in the Anthology's praise category shares common ground. The core rationale for selecting these two works lies in their departure from the traditional constraint of praise being 'brief yet not expansive'. Their relatively lengthy form and strong stylistic independence, with parallel prose serving as the preface, enable the authors to fully develop their arguments and showcase their literary brilliance. Wang Chu's *Literary Mind and Governance Techniques: On the Anthology's Selection Criteria and Talent Perspective* (2025) argues that Xiao Tong's aesthetic selection of the eulogy genre is reflected in the Anthology's editorial choices. This aesthetic orientation was not an isolated preference but deeply intertwined with the evolutionary trajectory of the eulogy genre since the Han and Wei dynasties and the prevailing trends of the Six Dynasties period.

Firstly, it prioritised character assessments over generic miscellaneous praises. All praises included in the Anthology centre on individuals: Xiahou Zhan's Praise of Dongfang Shuo's Portrait traces his spirit through the painting, while Yuan Hong's Preface and Praise of Eminent Ministers of the Three Kingdoms reveals their conduct through collective portraits. In contrast, works praising objects, such as Guo Pu's Praise of the Erya Diagram, were not favoured. This preference stemmed from two factors: firstly, the literary tradition outlined in the Preface to the Anthology, which posited that 'the rise of the praise genre followed the emergence of pictorial art'; secondly, the prevailing Southern Dynasties ethos of evaluating individuals. Wu Jiayi's *Research on Object-Praise in the Wei, Jin,*

and Southern and Northern Dynasties (2025) notes that this selection continued the developmental trajectory of the praise genre since the Han and Wei periods. Xiao Tong's rejection of miscellaneous praise actually reinforced this tradition, establishing the praise genre as a medium connecting historical reflection with contemporary ethics. On one hand, character praises provided literati with a reference point for talent and virtue, resonating with Xiao Tong's aspiration for the recognition of capable individuals. On the other hand, the rejection of miscellaneous praise equated to abandoning the aesthetic breakthrough of 'conveying emotions through objects,' thereby narrowing the thematic scope of the genre.

Secondly, it favoured the rhythmic precision of parallel prose over the simplicity of free verse. From a stylistic perspective, the four-character rhymed verse dominated the praise writings in the Anthology of Literature. For instance, the Preface and Praise of Eminent Ministers of the Three Kingdoms employs four-character lines throughout, with rhymes occurring every two lines or after eight lines. This approach maintains the conciseness of 'summarising to express the full sentiment' while also possessing the rhythmic beauty of 'shifting sounds and changing rhymes,' fully demonstrating the stylistic norm of 'concluding phrases in four-character lines, meandering through multiple rhymes.' This choice aligns both with the Six Dynasties' literary preference for parallel prose and with Xiao Tong's overarching principle of 'synthesising literary brilliance' and 'interweaving literary splendour' in his anthology selection. It thereby established an aesthetic paradigm for the praise genre in terms of sound, rhyme, and form. The Qi and Liang dynasties witnessed meticulous stylistic analysis, and the Wen Xuan's codification of parallel verse for *zan* epitomised the era's proliferation of literary genres and burgeoning stylistic discourse. While Han and Wei historical eulogies contained prose passages, Fan Ye pioneered rhymed verse for such works. Xiao Tong further codified this form, advancing the genre's formal maturity. This elevated the eulogy from an auxiliary text appended to classical works into an independent aesthetic medium. However, the proliferation of parallelism conventions often rendered praise and criticism formulaic.

Thirdly, it emphasised the triumph of both sentiment and rhetoric while eschewing empty flattery. Xiao Tong's endorsement of the eulogy genre ultimately hinged on the fusion of 'emotion' and 'expression.' Hong Xiujuan (2025), in her study *The Influence of Wei-Jin Neo-Taoism on Character Eulogies*, contends that this approach elevated praise beyond superficial flattery to evoke spiritual resonance, thereby liberating the genre from the rigidity of ceremonial commendations. The Praise of the Auxiliary Ministers of the Later Han, composed by Yang Xi of Shu Han in the fifth year of Yanxi, is a panegyric quoted in full from the Records of the Three Kingdoms. Positioning Shu Han as the legitimate dynasty, it centres on the revival of the 'imperial Han ancestral rites.' Its character assessments largely confine themselves to lauding achievements, employing few rhetorical devices. The narrative unfolds straightforwardly, with singular emotional focus and distinct political limitations. This particular eulogy to Zhuge Liang affirms only his administrative and military achievements, emphasising his instrumental value in 'supporting the sovereign.' In contrast, the Preface and Eulogies to Eminent Ministers of the Three Kingdoms praises Zhuge Liang as "the noble Kongming, whose vision was vast and profound. His capacity matched that of the common people, yet he alone possessed innate foresight." The phrase 'grand and far-reaching vision' captures his stature, while 'innate foresight' highlights his wisdom. The language is precise and resonant. Precisely because the preface primarily serves a narrative function, the panegyric can abstractly summarise the character's essence, reinforcing his uniqueness and the reverence held for him.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The stylistic distinctions in praise during the Han, Wei, and Jin periods determined the aesthetic variations in the Wen Xuan's anthology of eulogies. Its selection and categorisation of eulogies transcended mere stylistic classification, embodying the literary principle that 'matters arise from deep contemplation, while meaning finds expression through elegant prose.' By focusing on biographical panegyrics, standardising parallel-rhyme structures, and emphasising the fusion of emotion and rhetoric, the Wen Xuan not only established the panegyric's transition

from utilitarian to aesthetic form but also clearly distinguished it from historical commentary, historical narratives, and other genres, thereby constructing a relatively independent aesthetic system for the panegyric. The ‘preface-praise intertextuality’ in the Preface and Praise for Eminent Ministers of the Three Kingdoms achieves the ultimate expression of subtextual function. Its dialectical exploration of sovereign-minister relations and nuanced appraisal of renowned ministers in turbulent times transcends conventional understandings of the genre. This offers fresh perspectives on the flexibility of literary classification during the Han, Wei, and Jin dynasties, the role of subtext in classical literature, and the interplay between literary and political contexts, thereby presenting a more comprehensive narrative of medieval literary development.

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