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# An object-oriented study on *Yongwu shi*: poetry on eyeglasses in the Qing dynasty[1]

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**Abstract**
This paper suggests a different approach in the study of Qing dynasty *yongwu* poetry, which is to analyse the cultural significance of the object in this literary subgenre instead of its lyrical essence. Taking eyeglasses as an example, this paper surveys the general development of imported and domestic eyeglasses in China from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, and presents various literary interpretations assigned to this object through time. It further discusses Western and Chinese materiality, the economy and scholars' lives, political and social justification, as well as literary complexity and object identity, which are vital to the development of poetry on eyeglasses in the late imperial period.
**Keywords:** Kangxi, Qianlong, Yuan Mei, Materiality, Eyeglasses, *Yongwu*

## 1. Introduction

Like many subgenres of poetry, the quantity of *yongwu shi* 詠物詩 (poetry on objects or things) dating from the Qing dynasty is extremely large, since almost all Qing poets include many *yongwu* poems in their literary collections.[2] The Qing imperial court also officially acknowledged the significance of *yongwu* poetry through the compilation of an imperially reviewed anthology of *yongwu* poems in 1707.[3] Since Qing dynasty *yongwu* poetry flourished, and yet remains understudied, we could turn to the methodologies used to read *yongwu* poetry of earlier periods, such as: a cross-genre comparison using the concepts of "artifice" and "metaphor";[4] a review on the challenges to, and restoration of, the canonical notion and symbolic meanings of the object;[5] or a wide-ranging

1 This work is supported by the "BNU Young Scholar Fund" and the "Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities".
2 For remarks on the definition and essence of "poetry on things", see Grace S. Fong, "Wu Wenying's *Yongwu Ci*: poems as artifice and poems as metaphor", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 45/1, 1985, 323–9. Also see Fusheng Wu, "From object to symbol: the evolution of *Yongwu Shi* from Xiao Gang to Li Shangyin", *Asian Culture Quarterly* 37/3–4, 1999, 77–9; Jack, W. Chen, *The Poetics of Sovereignty: On Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Asia Center for the Harvard-Yenching Institute, 2010), 214–7.
3 Zhang Yushu 張玉書, *Yuding Peiwenzhai yongwu shixuan* 御定佩文齋詠物詩選, in *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983), vol. 1432–4.
4 Fong, "Wu Wenying's *Yongwu Ci*", 323–47.
5 Wu, "From object to symbol", 77–91.

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discussion of literary and emotional relationships between the "object" and the "poet".[6] These methodologies focus on *yongwu* poetry itself, helping us to understand the development of the poetic style and allegorical significance of the *yongwu* mode. In this paper, however, I would like to propose a shift away from methodologies that look at what defines *yongwu* poetry, to a focus on the object itself.

In conventional studies of *yongwu* poetry, the object is often assumed to be unchanging and detached from the real world, with no engagement with issues other than the poet's sentiments. This assumption can lead to the rather bland conclusion that the object is merely a vehicle for the poet's feelings. In fact, the object in the *yongwu* subgenre can be situated in a much more dynamic position, and the attributes of the object change with its relationship to the material, political, social or literary culture. Therefore, as an alternative approach, this paper studies *yongwu* poetry with a focus on the object, and evaluates the meanings and implications given to the object. This is not to see how a poet uses the object to express his feelings; on the contrary, it is to see how an object changes through time, how it relates to other cultural issues, and how it can be interpreted in different socio-political circumstances.

In this study, I focus on eyeglasses, an object imported from the West during the Ming dynasty and which never appeared in any literary work prior to this.[7] The divergent literary interpretations of this special object shed light on broader cultural concerns in the Qing dynasty, such as the negotiation between Western and Chinese conceptions of materiality, the economic and social pressures encountered by scholars in their everyday lives, and the changing relations between poetic form and the identity of an object.

## 2. Western import

Eyeglasses were invented in Europe in around the fourteenth century, although there remains some uncertainty about the evidence for this date.[8] There is no record of the invention of eyeglasses in China, but some argue that it was during the Song dynasty that people first started using eyeglasses, with reference to the old Chinese name *aidai* 靉靆 (literally, thick clouds blocking the sunshine), based on a passage in a book written by Zhao Xigu 趙希鵠 (fl. *c*. 1231) in around 1240. However, Joseph Needham (1900–95) pointed out the improbability of

6 Lin Shuzhen 林淑貞, *Zhongguo yongwu shi "tuowu yanzhi" xilun* 中國詠物詩「託物言志」析論 (Taipei: Wanjuanlou tushu youxian gongsi, 2002).

7 There are at least a few hundred poems on eyeglasses from the Qing dynasty. This assumption of the total number is based mainly on the search results of the *Zhongguo jiben gujiku* 中國基本古籍庫 (Database of Basic Chinese Classical Texts): of the approximately 800 collected works of Ming scholars, there are only two poems on eyeglasses, and of approximately 1,200 collected works of Qing scholars, there are about 100. However, many more collected works by Qing scholars are not included in this database, so the actual number of poems on eyeglasses should be greater, but it should not exceed a thousand.

8 Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China. Volume 4: Physics and Physical Technology. Part I: Physics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 120.

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this supposition, and it is commonly accepted that eyeglasses were a foreign import that arrived in China around the fifteenth century.[9]

In miscellaneous accounts by Ming and Qing scholars, there has always been confusion surrounding the precise origin of imported eyeglasses. The first frequently mentioned origin is the Arabic world, which is referred to as Tianfang Country (*Tianfang guo* 天方國) in traditional texts. The Ming scholar Lu Yingyang 陸應陽 (1542–1627) pointed out that one of the local products of the Arabic world is eyeglasses, and there were tribute-missions coming to the Ming court around the early fifteenth century via the Silk Road, which probably carried eyeglasses.[10] Since the old Chinese name for eyeglasses was *aidai*, probably a translation of the Arabic word "al-unwaināt" (literally, small eyes) or the Persian word "ainak" (sing.), the Arabic world could be the origin of imported eyeglasses.[11] However, most Ming and Qing scholars were unable to distinguish between different countries of the West, and they simply regarded eyeglasses as being from the Western Regions (*Xiyu* 西域).[12]

The second possible origin is Malacca, referred to as Manlajia 滿剌加 or Manla Country (*Manla guo* 滿剌國) in traditional texts. Eyeglasses were transported from Malacca to China by sea in the sixteenth century, but there is no proof that Malacca manufactured eyeglasses during that time; eyeglasses in Malacca were probably European productions that had been imported.[13] Nevertheless, since eyeglasses were transported to China by sea via the Maritime Silk Road, they were commonly described as "eyeglasses from the Western Oceans" (*Xiyang yanjing* 西洋眼鏡) among the literati in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In addition to these two possibilities, there are further assumptions about from when and where eyeglasses came. For example, a Qing scholar Wu Mingdao 吳銘道 (1671–1738) claimed that Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) brought eyeglasses to China during the Wanli reign (1573–1620),[14] but this idea is neither supported by any textual evidence nor verified in modern scholarship.[15] As for the Ming–Qing literary elite, the precise origin of eyeglasses probably did not matter to them as long as it was the West.

9 Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, 118–21. See also Joseph McDermott, "Chinese lenses and Chinese art", *Kaikodo Journal* XIX, 2001, 11. Although some Ming and Qing scholars argue that eyeglasses first entered China during the Yuan dynasty, there is again no solid evidence to support this assumption.

10 Lu Yingyang 陸應陽 (Cai Fangbing 蔡方炳, ed.), *Guanyu ji* 廣輿記 (Printed in 1686), *juan* 24, 27b.

11 Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, 120. See also Dong Shuyan 董树岩, "Yanjing ru Hua kao" 眼镜入华考, *Wuli tongbao*, no. 2, 1994, 39.

12 For a summary of Ming scholars' accounts on eyeglasses before the second half of the sixteenth century, see Li Shen 李慎, "Ming Qing zhiji Xiyang yanjing zai Zhongguo de chuanbo" 明清之际西洋眼镜在中国的传播 (MA dissertation, Ji'nan University, 2007), 10.

13 Li, "Ming Qing zhiji Xiyang yanjing zai Zhongguo de chuanbo", 19–20.

14 Wu Mingdao 吳銘道, *Guxue shanmin shihou* 古雪山民詩後, in *Siku weishoushu jikan* 四庫未收書輯刊 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2000), vol. 9.27, 343.

15 Li, "Ming Qing zhiji Xiyang yanjing zai Zhongguo de chuanbo", 49–50.

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Imported eyeglasses were extremely expensive following their early arrival in the mid-Ming period – a pair was even worth a fine horse.[16] Lang Ying 郎瑛 (1487–1566) mentioned that eyeglasses were seen as a treasure in the late fifteenth century and only a "lord" (*guiren* 貴人) could afford them:

> When I was young, I heard that a lord had eyeglasses. When he was old, he read books [through them], and small characters were shown larger in size. [Eyeglasses] are from the western seas, foreigners had them made and brought them to China, where [eyeglasses] became the treasure of the age.
>
> 少嘗聞貴人有眼鏡，老年觀書，小字看大。出西海中，虜人得而製之，以遺中國，為世寶也。[17]

Composed by Wu Kuan 吳寬 (1435–1504)[18] and entitled "Expressing my thanks to Lord Tu for his gift of eyeglasses from the western regions" (*Xie Tugong song Xiyu yanjing* 謝屠公送西域眼鏡), this long poem is the first known piece on imported eyeglasses, which also mentions the high value and Western origin of eyeglasses. Furthermore, it pays special attention to praising the pragmatic function of eyeglasses in the following lines:

> I was born addicted to embracing books,
> [but I am] short-sighted, and I suffer from this eye ailment.
> As for assisting officials,
> I cannot even finish [reading] those documents in the evening.
> You, the Minister must know me well,
> you sent me [eyeglasses] before I begged for them.
> Today I suddenly have these,
> and I feel my old illness has gone instantly.
>
> 予生抱書淫，視短苦目疾。
> 及玆佐吏曹，文案夕未畢。
> 太宰定知我，投贈不待乞。
> 一朝忽得此，舊疾覺頓失。[19]

Because imported eyeglasses were useful to scholars but so rare at that time, three attributes were commonly specified in literary composition: "foreignness", "expensiveness" and "usefulness". For another example from a later period, when Bian Ruyuan 邊汝元 (1653–1715), a poor scholar who failed the imperial examination several times, received a pair from a certain Lord Xin 信公 (Family name Pang 龐, details unknown), his excitement drove him to write the following poem:

16 Sun Chengze 孫承澤, *Yanshanzhai zaji* 硯山齋雜記, in *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshuguan, 1983), vol. 872, 187–8.

17 Lang Ying 郎瑛, *Qixiu xugao* 七修續稿, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), vol. 1123, 384.

18 Wu Kuan came first in both the metropolitan examination and the palace examination in the eighth year of the Chenghua reign (1472).

19 Wu Kuan 吳寬, *Jiacang ji* 家藏集, in *Siku quanshu huiyao* 四庫全書薈要 (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1985), vol. 413, 176–7.

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I neither have land to farm, nor money for business;
 I read books for half of my life, I am stubborn and pedantic.
I am now sixty, and my vision is blurry;
 my old eyes are unfocused, and I just feel sad and bitter.
The eyeglasses from the Western Oceans are round as a compass;
 the glass is clear, and the crystalline light shines.
Lord Pang sends a gift, and I have received a fine treasure;
 those "tadpoles" in my old boxes can all be counted.[20]
The eyeglasses restored my eye-vision as I returned to my youth;
 in the long night, I light the lamp, and soon it is the third watch.[21]
It is as fast as a gallant man riding a fine horse;
 chasing the wind in high speed, I sing "Ribbons and Dance".[22]
It is also like a poor fellow suddenly becoming rich – gaining a thousand taels of silver;
 he pockets the silver, enters the market, and takes whatever he wants.
I appreciate your gift, but have nothing in return;
 my household is poor, and I have hardly any newly filtered wine.
Wait for me to compose and present lines on grieving the autumn;
 when I carefully write like a "scorpion's sting" and "fly's head".[23]

無田可耕貲可賈，蠹魚半世迂而腐。
行年六十視茫茫，摩娑老眼獨悲苦。
西洋眼鏡圓如規，琉璃透徹晶光吐。
龐侯解贈獲佳珍，陳篋蝌蚪悉可數。
鏡復目光回少年，長夜張鐙倏三鼓。
快如赳赳壯士得乘黃，追風歷塊歌組舞。
又如貧兒暴富得千金，囊金入市恣所取。
感君雅貺奚以酬，家貧絶少酒新篘。
待余呈寫悲秋句，細作蠆尾兼蠅頭。[24]

Bian Ruyuan includes the keywords "western oceans" (*Xiyang* 西洋) and "a fine treasure" (*Jiazhen* 佳珍), which indicate the attributes of "foreignness" and "expensiveness" respectively, in the fifth and seventh lines, and further expresses his excitement about the "usefulness" in the sixth and seventh couplets: he can read as quickly as riding a fine horse and as much as he wants

20 The term "tadpoles" (*kedou* 蝌蚪) refers to overly complex ancient graphic designs of characters and also implies "small-sized characters". This line means that with eyeglasses, the poet could study those difficult texts which he left behind due to the decline of his vision.

21 This line means that the poet is devoted to reading and does not realize that time passes quickly.

22 The term "ribbons and dance" refers to the first stanza of the poem "Shu in the hunting-fields" in the *Book of Songs*: "Shu in the hunting-fields / Driving his team of four, / The reins like ribbons in his hand, / His helpers leaping as in the dance!" (叔於田, 乘乘馬. 執轡如組, 兩驂如舞). For the translation of the complete poem, see Arthur Waley (trans.), *The Book of Songs* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 66–7.

23 The term "a scorpion's sting" (*chaiwei* 蠆尾) refers to a special technique in calligraphy.

24 Bian Ruyuan 邊汝元, *Yushan shicao* 漁山詩草, in *Siku weishoushu jikan* 四庫未收書輯刊 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2000), vol. 8.23, 383.

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by wearing eyeglasses. Although Bian uses the term "grieving the autumn" (*beiqiu* 悲秋) in the final couplet, it does not suggest any sadness at all – this is a rhetorical tactic intended to emphasize the contradictory emotions he has presented, which taken together represent a positive response to the third attribute of eyeglasses.

Nevertheless, not all literati in the Ming and Qing periods could afford or receive imported eyeglasses; most of them used eyeglasses manufactured in China. The materiality of domestic eyeglasses, however, was different from that of the imported ones. When Chinese craftsmen started making eyeglasses in the regions of Guangdong and Fujian around the sixteenth century, they tended to use crystal for the lenses instead of glass. This is probably because the Chinese glass-making technique had its limits in reaching clarity, but the crystal-carving technique was mature.[25]

During the Qing dynasty, at least three different materials were used for making lenses simultaneously: imported Western glass, which is relatively rare and expensive; Chinese glass, which is very cheap but opaque; and crystal, which is probably the most popular material but the price fluctuated owing to the difference between crystals. As workshops on eyeglasses gradually spread across many regions of China, the price of domestic pairs dropped; by the seventeenth century even some common scholars could afford a pair.[26] For example, a detailed account by Ye Mengzhu 葉夢珠 (*c*. 1624–*c*. 1688) records the Chinese manufacture and price drop during the early Qing period:

> Eyeglasses – in my youth I occasionally saw old people using them, but I do not know their price; later I have heard that the best [eyeglasses] are made from the western oceans, each pair is worth four or five taels of silver; using glass for the lenses and elephant hide for the frame, and [eyeglasses] cannot be acquired by someone who is not powerful (or rich) enough. Since the Shunzhi period (1643–61), the price gradually dropped, and each pair was worth five to six maces.[27] Recently, many people in Su [zhou] and Hang[zhou] make them, and sell them all over the place; everyone can get [a pair], and even the most expensive pair costs just seven or eight cents, or four or five cents, or even two or three cents per pair – all can [be used to] clear up one's eyesight, and that is for common usage. However, there is one type [of eyeglasses] from the western oceans, where the lenses are thicker than leather, which [helps] a short-sighted person to see small things clearly – each pair [of this type] is still worth two taels of silver – but if a far-sighted and aged person wears it, he cannot [see things] clearly. This is not sold in the markets yet, but perhaps a few years later, most of the skilled craftsmen will be able to manufacture it, and accordingly, the price will drop day by day.
>
> 眼鏡，余幼時偶見高年者用之，亦不知其價，後聞制自西洋者最佳，每副値銀四、五兩，以玻璃為質，象皮為幹，非大力者不能致也。順治

25 For a discussion on the materiality and production of domestic eyeglasses, see McDermott, "Chinese lenses and Chinese art", 11–2.

26 Li, "Ming Qing zhiji Xiyang yanjing zai Zhongguo de chuanbo", 32–5.

27 One *liang* 兩 (tael) of silver is ten *qian* 錢 (mace), and one *qian* is ten *fen* 分 (cent).

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以後，其價漸賤，每副值銀不過五、六錢。近來蘇、杭人多製造之，遍地販賣，人人可得，每副值銀最貴者不過七、八分，甚而四、五分，直有二、三分一副者，皆堪明目，一般用也。惟西洋有一種質厚於皮，能使近視者秋毫皆晰，每副尚值銀價二兩，若遠視而年高者帶之則反不明。市間尚未有販賣者，恐再更幾年，此地巧工亦多能製，價亦日賤耳。[28]

Although the overall price had dropped, there were still different classes of eyeglasses; common scholars in the early Qing period could probably afford the low-quality ones, because the high-quality ones were much more expensive. Sun Chengze 孫承澤 (1593–1676) notes that materials used for making lenses normally determined the price:

When eyeglasses first entered China, it was named *aidai*. One pair of eyeglasses was as expensive as the price of a fine horse. Now, it is about three to five cents [per pair], but merely for [those lenses made] in Shandong with pale white sintered material.[29] [Lenses made in] glass are expensive; [those made in] crystal are especially expensive. For [a pair with] dark-coloured crystal [lenses], it is worth more than seven to eight taels of silver; but the price is gradually decreasing over time.[30] [Eyeglasses] really help in reading.

眼鏡初入中國，名曰靉靆。惟一鏡之貴，價準匹馬。今則三五分可得，然不過山東米汁燒料。玻瓈者，貴矣。水晶尤貴。水晶之墨色者，貴至七八金餘, 值以漸而減。真讀書之一助也。[31]

In the mid-Qing period, the number of workshops in the capital increased dramatically, as Li Guangting 李光庭 (fl. 1795) notes:

Several decades ago, there were just a few eyeglasses workshops at Liulichang, but today the number is many times over.

數十年前，琉璃廠眼鏡鋪不過數家，今則不啻倍蓰矣。[32]

Eyeglasses were also made in workshops located in the Qing imperial court for emperors or as gifts to officials.[33] Eventually, by the late Qing, eyeglasses, even

28 Ye Mengzhu 葉夢珠, *Yueshi bian* 閱世編 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981), 163.

29 The term *shaoliao* 燒料 (sintered material) refers to a type of material that is similar to, but not as good as, glass. However, the term *mizhi* 米汁 refers to *miganshui* 米泔水 (water used to rinse rice); in this case, it probably refers to the colour of the eyeglasses with a clear indication of opaqueness, but it may refer to part of the manufacturing process.

30 This line could also be translated as: "the price is decreased as [the colour of the lenses] fades".

31 Sun, *Yanshanzhai zaji*, 187–8.

32 Li Guangting 李光庭, *Xiangyan jieyi* 鄉言解頤, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), vol. 1272, 204.

33 Li, "Ming Qing zhiji Xiyang yanjing zai Zhongguo de chuanbo", 35–8. See also Hou Haozhi 侯皓之, "Pei cha qiuhao xi: Cong dang'an jizai tan Yongzheng huangi yu yanjing"

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the high-quality ones, had become less expensive. Chen Kangqi 陳康祺 (1840–90), for example, wrote:

> Nowadays, crystal eyeglasses are all over the empire, and even traders from marketplaces use them. This object became popular in the early period of the dynasty, when it was more precious than pearl or jade.
>
> 今水晶眼鏡徧天下，市井駔儈且用之矣。此物興於國初，珍貴逾珠玉。[34]

## 3. Chinese commodity

Material changes in the manufacturing of lenses led to a price drop, which made eyeglasses more readily available to a wider market of consumers, especially scholars who spent their entire lives reading and writing. At the same time, the three attributes of imported eyeglasses mentioned earlier became diversely weighted in early Qing poems on domestic eyeglasses: "foreignness" was almost erased due to changes in materiality, and "expensiveness" was intermittently omitted as the price of the eyeglasses scholars possessed oscillated with no fixed measure, again a derivative result of the changes in the materials of the glasses. The only constant attribute was "usefulness".

There is no need to emphasize how scholars clearly recognized the benefits of wearing eyeglasses, as Bian Ruyuan's passion, revealed in the previous example, already speaks of the strong tie between this object and the improvement in scholars' lives. On the other hand, the loss of eyeglasses could be damaging. Jing Meiyi 井眉一 (details unknown) even composed a series of three quatrains expressing his regret when he lost a pair of "eyeglasses with dark lenses" (*mojing yanjing* 墨精眼鏡), which must have been very expensive. His poems have, it seems, vanished over the course of time, but two series of matching poems, six quatrains in total, written by his friend Ji Maiyi 紀邁宜 (1678–?) survive, and the second piece contains a rhetorical joke about the loss:

> Collecting books of ten thousand volumes has increased your fatigue;
> you are gradually ageing, and this is probably not good for you.
> Since you have lost your dark treasure, you should quietly contemplate:
> the one who loves you most is the thief.
>
> 擁書萬卷增疲薾，漸老於君恐不宜。
> 自失紫珍應默照，最能相愛是偷兒。[35]

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佩察秋毫細：從檔案記載談雍正皇帝與眼鏡, *Gugong wenwu yuekan* 297, 2007, 58–60; and Kristina Kleutghen, "Chinese occidenterie: the diversity of 'Western' objects in eighteenth-century China", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 47/2, 2014, 120.

34 Chen Kangqi 陳康祺, *Langqian jiwen erbi* 郎潛紀聞二筆, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), vol. 1182, 428.

35 Ji Maiyi 紀邁宜, *Jianzhongtang shi* 儉重堂詩, in *Siku weishoushu jikan* 四庫未收書輯刊 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2000), vol. 8.26, 650.

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Ji Maiyi's interpretation of the loss of the eyeglasses is novel and comic, as he suggests that the thief is worried about Jing Maiyi's age and has to prevent Jing from becoming fatigued from reading books by taking his eyeglasses away. A noteworthy conceit within the text is the link between a scholar's age, the decline reading ability, and the assistance from eyeglasses, which Bian Ruyuan stated more directly in his poem: "The eyeglasses restored my eye-vision as I returned to my youth".

Eyeglasses could restore the eyesight of an aged scholar and allow him to read as if in his youth – this connection between eyeglasses and an aged scholar reflects the attribute of "usefulness", and eyeglasses are interpreted as an extension of one's scholarly life. Although it is difficult to determine when exactly this interpretation was formed in literary composition, eyeglasses were indeed praised in poetry as vital assistance for an aged scholar during the Ming–Qing transitional period. Qian Chengzhi 錢澄之 (1612–93), who once served at the Hanlin Academy of the Yongli 永曆 court of the Southern Ming (1646–62), composed "Poems on four friends" (*Siyou shi* 四友詩), probably after the age of fifty, in which he personified a bamboo cane (*zhuzhang* 竹杖), medicinal wine (*yaojiu* 藥酒) and a foot-stove (*jiaolu* 脚爐) alongside eyeglasses.[36] Another scholar, Tao Ji 陶季 (fl. *c*. 1661), who had no official title during the early Qing, wrote "Four pieces on acquiring friends" (*Deyou sishou* 得友四首), which personified and prioritized eyeglasses as his first friend, followed by a spittoon (*tuohu* 唾壺), a back-scratcher (*beisao* 背搔), and a cane (*guazhang* 挂杖).[37] Although one might encounter different health problems when getting old, canes and eyeglasses seem to have become indispensable companions for aged scholars.

Alongside the interpretation of life-extension, there are special interpretations which also evolved from "usefulness" in a courtly context, where Emperor Kangxi 康熙 (1654–1722, r. 1662–1722) played a substantial role. Although there is no mention of eyeglasses in his literary works, other texts show that the emperor did not only wear eyeglasses, but was also fond of granting eyeglasses to his officials. For example, Song Luo 宋犖 (1634–1714) recorded an event in 1703 in his self-written life-chronicle (*nianpu* 年譜):

> Yesterday I requested eyeglasses; today Wushi [name of an imperial bodyguard] brought out a pair of eyeglasses with a green frame, granted it to me and said, "This is the emperor's reserve pair. If this is no good, you will be granted with the pair which the emperor is wearing now".
>
> 臣昨曾求眼鏡，今五十捧出綠端玻璨眼鏡一枚，竝賜臣云:「上以備用者。不佳，即以上所現佩者賜爾。」[38]

36 Qian Chengzhi 錢澄之, *Tianjian shiji* 田間詩集, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), vol. 1401, 506.

37 Tao Ji 陶季, *Zhouche ji* 舟車集, in *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* 四庫全書存目叢書 (Ji'nan: Qilu shushe, 1997), vol. Ji. 258, 166–7.

38 Song Luo 宋犖, *Mantang nianpu* 漫堂年譜, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), vol. 554, 238.

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Emperor Kangxi seemed to care about the vision of his subject-officials, and the famous poet Wang Shizhen 王士禛 (1634–1711) was asked at the imperial court to try wearing a pair when he was 66 years old.[39] More interestingly, the emperor sometimes encouraged and insisted that his subjects should wear eyeglasses, and even those who were not willing to. Zhang Taijiao 張泰交 (1651–1706) recorded such a dialogue between himself and the emperor in 1705:

> I was summoned on the tenth day [of the fourth month]. The emperor asked, "Governor, are your eyes healed?" I responded, "No, I cannot bear the heat of the south. In autumn last year [my vision] became even more blurred. These two days when Your Majesty came, I feel slightly better". The emperor said, "Why don't you use eyeglasses?" I responded, "My eyes are ill, it's not that I have presbyopia. If I use eyeglasses, there is just one more layer of obstacle". The emperor said, "Once you try the right [ones], it will be fine".
>
> 初十日, 召見。上問:「巡撫眼好了麼?」奏:「不好, 受不得南方熱。去歲入秋更昏。這兩日皇上來, 還覺稍好。」上云:「何不用眼鏡?」奏:「臣是病眼, 不是老眼, 用眼鏡反多一番障蔽。」上云:「爾去試對了便好。」[40]

Receiving eyeglasses from Emperor Kangxi was seen by many scholar-officials as a significant event during their service to the imperial court. Some, as shown above, recorded the event in their own biographies or chronicles, and some composed poetry on the bestowed eyeglasses as a grateful reply to the emperor. Zha Shenxing 查愼行 (1650–1727), an eminent scholar of the Zhejiang region, composed two poems after he was granted a pair of eyeglasses; the first one reads:

> [Eyeglasses] sparkle like jade and are round as mirrors;
> suddenly [my vision] becomes clear and I see the blue sky.
> A bright pearl shines through the mud and sand;
> a small fire shares the light alongside the sun and moon.
> I can still inscribe small characters on a name-card;
> I am still allowed to work on new compilations in the Palace Library.
> Able to struggle on, I am so fortunate,
> my blurry eyes [can now] compete with [those of] a young fellow!
>
> 玉比晶瑩鏡比圓, 忽教披豁睹青天。
> 明珠吐暈泥沙外, 爝火分光日月邊。
> 名紙尚堪題細字, 秘書仍許對新編。
> 此生視息眞何幸, 雙眼摩挲敵少年。[41]

39 Hui Dong 惠棟, *Yuyang shanren zizhuan nianpu buzhu* 漁洋山人自撰年譜注補, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), vol. 554, 167.

40 Zhang Taijiao 張泰交, *Shouhutang ji* 受祜堂集, in *Siku jinhuishu congkan* 四庫禁燬書叢刊 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1997), vol. Ji. 53, 284–5.

41 Zha Shenxing 查愼行, *Jingyetang shiji* 敬業堂詩集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), vol. 2, 811. See also Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉 et al. (comp.), *Huangqing*

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The first line explains the topic "eyeglasses" and the second outlines its "usefulness", while the second and third couplets are extensions to these two lines, respectively. The poet's self-expression and response to Kangxi can be found in the last two lines, where the link between eyeglasses and life-extension is identical. Furthermore, wearing eyeglasses not only allows the poet to continue to write in small-size characters, but also to remain in officialdom (the third couplet). Eyeglasses thus extended both Zha Shenxing's life as a scholar and his official career at the imperial court. Moreover, because the eyeglasses were bestowed by the emperor, they can also be seen as a symbol of the emperor's encouragement and approval. Therefore, eyeglasses carry meanings both of life-extension and imperial acknowledgement of the scholar's service.

In general, scholars of the seventeenth century erased the attributes of "foreignness" and "expensiveness" from their poems on eyeglasses, fundamentally due to the change of materiality, but the attribute of "usefulness" remained and developed into different literary interpretations. Nevertheless, there is still a limit to the literary complexity of this particular object, because the pragmatic benefits of wearing eyeglasses are too obvious and strong, such that scholars could hardly present any arguments against them – not until the next century.

## 4. Negative attitudes

In the eighteenth century, eyeglasses were widely in use among the literati because of mass production and a significant drop in price. Eyeglasses became the topic of many *yongwu* poems, and Emperor Qianlong 乾隆 (1711–99, r. 1736–95) even brought them into a courtly event. In the 56th year of the Qianlong reign (1791), the emperor held an examination for officials at the Hanlin Academy (*Hanlin yuan* 翰林院) and the Household Administration of the Heir Apparent (*Zhanshi fu* 詹事府), at which he chose "Eyeglasses" (*yanjing* 眼鏡) as the topic for the poetry section of the examination, and proudly announced: "although I am eighty I do not use them" (*sui baxun bingyong* 雖八旬屏用) in a poem he composed soon after the examination.[42]

This examination was divided into three sections: Poetry, Rhapsody (*fu* 賦), and Commentary (*shu* 疏). According to the *Qing shilu* 清實錄 (Veritable Records of the Qing Dynasty), 96 officials participated in the examination. This resulted in one failure, eight were graded fourth class, 74 third class, 11 second class, and only Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849) and Wu Xinglan 吳省蘭

*wenying* 皇清文穎, in *Siku quanshu huiyao* 四庫全書薈要 (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1985), vol. 465, 207. The first poem is the same in these two works, but the second poem has two versions, where the wording is different in the first and third couplets. I think the poem in *Huangqing wenying* 皇清文穎 (Literary Masterpieces of the Imperial Qing) is a later version, because some imprecise expressions in the other version have been corrected. Yang Xuan 楊瑄 (fl. 1694–1723) also composed a set of three poems on receiving a pair of eyeglasses from Emperor Kangxi. See Zhang, *Huangqing wenying*, vol. 465, 447.

42 Aisin Gioro Hongli 愛新覺羅弘曆, *Yuzhi shiji* 御製詩集 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 1993), vol. 9, 326.

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(?–1810) achieved first class.[43] Ruan Yuan, who later became an influential scholar and official at the imperial court, was promoted mainly because his essays were greatly appreciated by Emperor Qianlong;[44] but there was an interesting rumour about Ruan Yuan's success in this examination:

> When Ruan Yuan first entered the Hanlin Academy, Hešen (1750–99) was the Chancellor. One day, the [Qianlong] emperor casually said to [He]šen, "The alternative name for eyeglasses is '*aidai*', I only know it recently". [He]šen left [the court], told [Ruan] Yuan, and said, "The emperor does not wear these". Soon there was the General Examination, the topic for poetry was "*aidai*", and only [Ruan] Yuan's composition was excellent. The emperor appreciated it, and promoted [Ruan Yuan] to the first grade. In less than a few years [Ruan Yuan] was positioned among the top but relatively non-demanding official posts.
>
> 阮元初入翰林時，和珅為掌院學士。一日，上從容謂珅曰：「眼鏡別名靉靆, 近始知之。」珅退以語元, 且曰：「上不御此也。」未幾大考, 詩題即《靉靆》, 元詩獨工, 上歎賞, 拔置第一, 不數年遂躋清要。[45]

Regardless of the authenticity of the story, Ruan Yuan's poem was indeed excellently composed, especially in the way he flattered the emperor:

> Wearing eyeglasses can brighten the eyes,
> [one] attempts to wipe and polish glass.
> A nice name, *aidai*, is spread;
> this elegant production is from Europe.
> [Wearing eyeglasses to] look through a door, one's eyes are bright as two moons;
> standing by a pond, I see a small ripple clearly.
> The interlinked rings can be separated;
> matching them together, the thin [lenses] scrape each other.[46]
> The jade mirror shows the tip of a brush;
> the crystal plate distinguishes the fingerprint.
> It offers cover from dust in the wind,
> the fog under flowers is not unreal.
> [However,] bright eyes do not need these [eyeglasses];
> the one who has double-eyeballs, he relies on nothing else.
> A sage originally does not wear [eyeglasses],
> his vision indeed represents the sign of longevity.

43 *Qing shilu* 清實錄 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), vol. 26, 417–8.

44 Betty Peh-T'i Wei, *Ruan Yuan, 1764–1849: The Life and Work of a Major Scholar-Official in Nineteenth-Century China before the Opium War* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006), 56. See also Chang Jianhua 常建华, *Qianlong shidian* 乾隆事典 (Beijing: Zijincheng chubanshe, 2010), 446.

45 Zhu Kejing 朱克敬, *Ming'an zazhi, Ming'an erzhi* 瞑庵雜識, 瞑庵二識 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1983), 72.

46 This couplet probably describes a type of eyeglasses where the two lenses fold on top of each other.

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引鏡能明眼，玻璃試拭磨。
佳名傳靉靆，雅製出歐羅。
窺戶穿雙月，臨池湛一波。
連環圓可解，合璧薄相磋。
玉鑑呈豪穎，晶盤辨指螺。
風中塵可障，花下霧非訛。
眸瞭寧須此，瞳重不恃他。
聖人原未御，目力壽徵多。[47]

The first two couplets respond to the assigned topic "Eyeglasses", and the following four couplets describe this object through narration and metaphor. The seventh couplet turns the subject from eyeglasses to the one who does not wear them, which leads to a presentational shift, the tactful flattery to the emperor, in the last couplet: if one does not wear eyeglasses, his vision would indeed be blurry; but the one who has double-eyeballs does not need to wear them. Since the ancient sage-king Shun 舜 is known to have double-eyeballs in both eyes, Ruan Yuan compares Qianlong to Shun, and suggests that the reason Qianlong does not wear eyeglasses is because he is a sage ruler.

The poem by the other first-graded participator, Wu Xinglan, does not survive, but the piece written by Liu Fenggao 劉鳳誥 (1760–1830), a single-eyed talent who succeeded in the second grade in the same examination, is presented here as a comparison to the piece by Ruan Yuan:[48]

[The emperor's] robust virtue reflects his Mirror of the Mind,[49]
being everlastingly respectful, he always sees limpidly.
[His] brightness is because he amends himself,
and he does not rely on *aidai*.
To put [eyeglasses] on the eyes,
through [it one] can gaze in quietude.
A pair hanging, [the lenses] are as clear as water;
an inch in diameter, [the lenses] are clean as if containing waves.[50]
The rippling spirit [in one's eyes] fits in the frame;
the growing brightness is due to the polish.
The crystal [lenses] are clearer than a copper concave mirror,
the ingenuity of the West is unsurpassable.
[Wearing eyeglasses, one can] subtly write [characters] as small as "a fly's head",[51]
and observe the mistakes in a wormed book.
A sage shines forever,
and sees through things in all places.

47 Ruan Yuan 阮元, *Yanjingshi ji* 揅經室集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), vol. 2, 753.
48 Liu Fenggao was also a good friend of Ruan Yuan; for an interesting introduction on their relationship, see Wei, *Ruan Yuan*, 336–40.
49 The "Mirror of the Mind", a Buddhist concept, is to reflect the Truth only if it is kept clean.
50 "Autumn waves" is a metaphor for one's clear vision.
51 The term "a fly's head" (*yingtou* 蠅頭) refers to characters written in small size, which are as small as a fly's head.

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健德昭心鏡，恒欽朗鑑多。
光明由正己，靉靆詎資他。
即以謀於目，因之靜可睋。
雙懸空剪水，寸徑淨含波。
漾采依輪廓，生輝重琢磨。
晶逾陽燧透，巧莫泰西過。
妙寫蠅頭細，能窺蠹簡訛。
聖人垂照久，象徹萬方羅。[52]

Reading this poem alongside the one composed by Ruan Yuan, we find some of the candidates' common considerations in these two examination pieces. Mentioning *aidai* and the Western origin in both poems is to demonstrate the candidates' knowledge, and we can assume that those who did not know this alternative name or the origin of eyeglasses would be graded lower. It is also essential that *aidai* should be placed within the first two couplets as a direct response to the topic. In the middle section, candidates need to demonstrate their ability to apply narration and metaphor; but these are basic skills for well-educated scholars, and it is sometimes extremely difficult to distinguish levels of skill in this respect. Therefore, the final part is the key to winning the competition – at this point, candidates should turn to praise of the emperor as their self-expression. Here, Liu's closing lines do not logically follow from the previous lines, as he jumps abruptly from praise of the "usefulness" of eyeglasses to praise of the emperor's power.[53] In a more sophisticated fashion, Ruan Yuan presents a common fact in the previous lines, and soon points out that the fact does not apply to the emperor, in order to conclude and praise the extraordinariness of Qianlong.

Since Qianlong did not wear eyeglasses in his old age, both Liu and Ruan must mention the "uselessness" of eyeglasses to the emperor in their poems as customary flattery to the emperor. However, they could not really deny the "usefulness" of eyeglasses, and it was also a requirement to praise eyeglasses through narration and metaphor in this examination context, so they had to present a metaphysical argument to solve the dilemma of praising eyeglasses and flattering the emperor. This is why Liu Fenggao argues that "[Qianlong's] brightness is because he amends himself, / and he does not rely on *aidai*", and Ruan Yuan claims that "the one (Qianlong) who has double-eyeballs, he relies on nothing else".

After the examination, Emperor Qianlong confirmed his negative attitude towards eyeglasses in a poem he composed under the same title, in which he also mentioned a metaphysical reason for avoiding eyeglasses:

52 Liu Fenggao 劉鳳誥, *Cunhuizhai ji* 存悔齋集, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), vol. 1486, 156.

53 It is also worth noting that Liu Fenggao tried in the third couplet to please the emperor in another way. "To put [eyeglasses] on the eyes, / through [it one] can gaze in quietude" (即以謀於目, 因之靜可睋), is composed imitating the "Imperial Style" (*yuzhi ti* 御製體) of Emperor Qianlong. For remarks on Emperor Qianlong's poetic style, as well as those imitational works written by the emperor's literary aides, see Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書, *Tanyi lu* 談藝錄 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2001), 205–18, 545–9, 553–5, 556–73.

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[Eyeglasses] borrow brightness by stealing it from the sunshine;
they travel afar and emerge from the ocean waves.
Malacca is the known origin,
[during] the Mongolian Yuan, [eyeglasses] had become abundant.
It has the extraordinary name of *aidai*;
in one's old age, [eyeglasses] help the blurry [vision].
[Eyeglasses] are not mirrors, but they can reflect;
they are not copper, how can they bear being polished?
As a utensil, glass is not favoured [in making lenses] because of its "dryness";
for its quality, crystal is valued because of its "tenderness".[54]
After all, eyeglasses provide a basis for men's ingenuity;
but [people] should prevent their eyes being led astray.
It is said [that by wearing eyeglasses, one can see things] thoroughly, but how can one avoid being obscured/deceived?[55]
One should rely on oneself instead of others (eyeglasses).
Although I am eighty I do not use them,
I compose [this poem] just to show the reason.

借明偷日照, 泛遠出洋波。
滿剌加稱始, 元蒙古乃多。
奇名曰靉靆, 老景助婆娑。
非鏡偏能鑑, 弗銅那藉磨。
器嫌玻璃燥, 品貴水晶和。
終屬資人巧, 應防致目訛。
云通豈免蔽, 在己可由他。
雖八旬屏用, 聊因示理哦。[56]

The first five couplets describe eyeglasses, with the poet acknowledging the "usefulness" in the sixth line. The sixth couplet is a watershed which shifts the focus to the negative side of wearing eyeglasses: if one wants to see things clearly, one should not rely on anything else but one's own vision; because eyeglasses are placed in between the eyes and the object for observation, it is unavoidable that the eyes are covered, or deceived, by eyeglasses. This interpretation represents the emperor's concern with being a ruler of the empire – the ruler, in theory, should always be direct when dealing with matters in order to prevent being deceived.

The same interpretation also appeared in other poems on eyeglasses by Emperor Qianlong. Before the composition of the above poem in 1791, when the emperor was 64 years old (1775), he claimed that he did not like eyeglasses, and: "If one relies on those (eyeglasses) to achieve brightness, / the brightness

54 Glass is "dry" because, in the Chinese understanding, it has the attribution of "fire", while crystal is "tender" because it has the attribution of "water".

55 The character *bi* 蔽 has two meanings, "being obscured" or "being deceived", and Emperor Qianlong is playing with both meanings here.

56 Hongli, *Yuzhi shiji*, vol. 9, 326.

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has already been obscured (deceived)" (賴彼做斯明, 斯明已有蔽).[57] When the emperor reached 87 (in 1798), he composed a quatrain entitled "Joking on eyeglasses" (*Xiti yanjing* 戲題眼鏡) to clarify his position against wearing them:

> I am ten [years] past seventy, and another eight [years] have been added;
> hundreds of pairs of eyeglasses have been offered to me from everyone.
> Borrowing an object from brightness is not a good plan;
> if a "fly's head" cannot be seen, what does it matter eventually?
>
> 古希過十還增八，眼鏡人人獻百方。
> 借物為明非善策，蠅頭弗見究何妨。[58]

In this poem, as a joke, the emperor completely abandoned the "usefulness" of eyeglasses and devoted himself to the metaphysical argument. Being against wearing eyeglasses was unusual among the literary elite at that time, since the second line indicates that many subject-officials at the imperial court were using eyeglasses and, in contrast to the Kangxi reign, they were even offered to the emperor as tribute. Nevertheless, the metaphysical denial towards eyeglasses is a new interpretation found especially in courtly compositions during the late Qianlong period, all because of the emperor's personal aversion to eyeglasses.

The negative attitude in Emperor Qianlong's poetry was never pragmatic, as he also understood the benefits that eyeglasses could bring to a person who frequently reads. Although he insisted on his metaphysical opposition, this is presumably nothing more than an excuse. The pragmatic reason for not wearing eyeglasses has never been clarified in Qianlong's compositions, except for a clue found in the following two lines that appeared in 1781 when he was seventy:

> Once I use them, I cannot give them up;
> [if I] give them up, I become dim-sighted.
>
> 一用不可舍，舍則如瞀定。[59]

The emperor's concern is that once he uses eyeglasses he would have to rely on them forever, thus he decides to cast them aside in the first place. However, if he had had the chance to read Yuan Mei's 袁枚 (1716–97) poems on eyeglasses, discussed below, his concern would probably be allayed.

Yuan Mei is generally acknowledged as one of the most talented and popular poets of the eighteenth century, an extreme opposite example to Emperor Qianlong who is commonly regarded as the worst poet in all of Chinese literary history, and Yuan Mei's literary thought and practice show his agenda of achieving uniqueness in composing poetry.[60] In this particular case of poetry on

57 Hongli, *Yuzhi shiji*, vol. 6, 697.
58 Hongli, *Yuzhi shiji*, vol. 10, 263.
59 Hongli, *Yuzhi shiji*, vol. 7, 476–7.
60 For a detailed study of Yuan Mei's literary thought and practice, see J.D. Schmidt, *Harmony Garden: The Life, Literary Criticism, and Poetry of Yuan Mei (1716–1798)* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 151–286.

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eyeglasses, Yuan Mei also argued the "uselessness" in a piece written in 1765, ten years before Qianlong's first piece:

> "Satirising eyeglasses"
> Eyesight is originally unrestrained,
> why would it rely on eyeglasses?
> Although [eyeglasses] make one see a thousand miles afar,
> one dislikes them [because one's vision is] covered by a layer [of lens].
> There is a string and one has to tie [the eyeglasses] across the nose first,[61]
> there are no tears but [the lenses] have already become icy.
> If [King] Yan of Xu had not lost his state [and perished],
> then [being short-sighted], he would have detested looking through [eyeglasses]. *Xunzi*: "King Yan of Xu's eyes could gaze upon *yan* (a small bird)", this is short-sightedness.
>
> 〈嘲眼鏡〉
> 眼光原自在，爭仗鏡爲能。
> 縱使窮千里，終嫌隔一層。
> 有繩先繫鼻，無淚已成冰。
> 徐偃不亡國，瞻焉便可憎。《荀子》：「徐偃王目可瞻焉」，卽近視也。[62]

Yuan Mei was 49 when he composed this poem, and he did not need to wear eyeglasses at that time. His disapproval of wearing eyeglasses in the first two couplets is similar to that of Emperor Qianlong, as he too disliked the idea of eyes being covered by lenses. But the third line suggests, more practically, that Yuan Mei did not like the feeling of wearing something extra on his face, and this idea is repeated in a poem he composed 30 years later, discussed below. The final couplet is, however, a joke. By saying "If [King] Yan of Xu had not lost his state [and perished], / then [being short-sighted], he would have detested looking through [eyeglasses]", Yuan Mei implies that it was lucky that King Yan of Xu lost his kingdom and died, because he would have hated wearing eyeglasses, like Yuan Mei, since he was short-sighted.

The annotation Yuan Mei added after this couplet is to prove that King Yan of Xu was short-sighted. Yuan believed that the character *yan* 焉 means "a small bird" and the term *zhanyan* 瞻焉 (to gaze upon a small bird) indicates short-sightedness.[63] However, there is a debate over the interpretation of the quoted

61 There was probably a string tying together the two lenses. For a brief survey of different types and accessories of eyeglasses, see Li, "Ming Qing zhiji Xiyang yanjing zai Zhongguo de chuanbo", 40–1.

62 Yuan Mei 袁枚, *Xiaocang shanfang shiwenji* 小倉山房詩文集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2006), vol. 1, 441.

63 This self-annotation shows Yuan Mei's own understanding of the following line in *Xunzi*, translated by John Knoblock:

> Moreover, in appearance King Yan of Xu's eyes [were so protruded that he] could see his forehead. 且徐偃王之狀，目可瞻馬（焉）。

In some earlier versions of *Xunzi*, the term *zhanyan* 瞻焉 (to see one's forehead) is written as *zhanma* 瞻馬 (to gaze a horse), but some commentators believe *ma* 馬 is a

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classical text. According to *Xunzi* 荀子, King Yan of Xu was an ugly person, so the term *zhanyan* is generally understood as "to see one's forehead" because it describes the King's ugliness; but this term may suggest short-sightedness under a different interpretation.[64] Yuan's motive for writing such a couplet was to make a joke on the discomfort of wearing eyeglasses; it is also possible that, considering Yuan Mei's personality, he noted his understanding of the line in *Xunzi* in order to show off his knowledge, although his claim on the King's short-sightedness is still debatable.[65]

Like Emperor Qianlong, Yuan Mei wrote more than one poem on eyeglasses; but unlike Qianlong's consistent disfavour, his attitude towards this object shifted twice during his later years. The first shift happened only three years after he composed the previous poem against wearing eyeglasses:

> "Praising Eyeglasses" Within three years, I suddenly satirize and praise [eyeglasses]; I grieve for becoming old so quickly.
>
> My old eyes suddenly return to youth,
> two eyeballs come out from the case.
> [Eyeglasses are like] the first reflection [of sunshine] on the spring ice,
> or the autumn moon already hanging in the sky.
> Small characters [can even be] recognized at dusk,
> and the thin fog [covering] a solitary flower has melted.

misprint of *yan* 焉, and *yan* means "forehead" (same as *yan* 顔). However, in Wang Xianqian's 王先謙 (1842–1917) annotation, he reads *zhanyan* 瞻焉 as *zhanma* 瞻馬, so this line suggests that the King cannot see small things clearly, but can only see big things (e.g. a horse) placed right in front of him – this indicates short-sightedness. For the translation and some notes on different annotations of the original line, see John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), vol. 1, 204, 295. For the original line and different annotations, see Wang Xianqian 王先謙, *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), vol. 1, 74.

However, Yuan Mei's understanding of this line is different from above interpretations. In a passage entitled "Illnesses of the Present Day which Appear in Ancient Books" (*Jin jibing xian gushu* 今疾病見古書), Yuan Mei writes:

> *Xunzi* says: "King Yan of Xu's eyes could gaze upon *yan*". [The character] *yan* [means] a small bird. [So] this is short-sightedness of the present day.《荀子》曰：「徐偃王目可瞻焉。」焉，鳥之微者。即今近視也。

Yuan Mei reached the conclusion of short-sightedness from a different approach. However, he did not give a logical explanation as to why the King seeing a small bird is proof that the King is short-sighted. But if one can clearly see a small bird in the distance, would it not suggest that the person is far-sighted? See Wang Yingzhi 王英志 (ed.), *Yuan Mei quanji* 袁枚全集 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1993), vol. 5, 479.

64 Wang Xianqian, *Xunzi jijie*, vol. 1, 74. In addition, for different stories about King Yan of Xu, see Xu Yulong 徐玉龍, *Shizhuan yu minjian gushi zhong de Xu Yanwang gushi yanjiu* 史傳與民間故事中的徐偃王故事研究, *Donghua Zhongguo wenxue yanjiu*, no. 7, 2009, 49–64.

65 Yuan Mei's writings, in both his poetry and poetic criticism, are full of exaggerations and mistakes. For a detailed discussion of this issue, as well as Yuan Mei's habit of showing off, see Qian, *Tanyi lu*, vol. 2, 768–72.

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In this life, wherever I look at,
  how dare I be without you!

〈頌眼鏡〉三年之中，忽嘲忽頌，傷老之速也。
老眼忽還童，雙睛出匣中。
春冰初照影，秋月已當空。
細字黃昏得，孤花薄霧融。
今生留盼處，敢不與君同。[66]

Returning to the cliché of praising the "usefulness" of eyeglasses, Yuan Mei acknowledges the benefit of wearing eyeglasses in the first six lines, and the last two lines contain a passionate expression of his gratitude to eyeglasses as an intimate friend through personification. However, a dramatic second shift in Yuan's attitude to wearing eyeglasses is found in 1796, one year before his death:

"I [started] using eyeglasses since fifty, now I am eighty. Once in a while I take them off, and I feel [my vision] clear; I compose a poem on parting from eyeglasses"
Who has replaced the two eyeballs for me?
  When I remove the *aidai*, my eyes have suddenly cleared.
I am actually parting from you in my old age;
  it has been thirty years that I am obliged to you.
In a river, because it is late spring, the ice has just melted;
  when the moon approaches midnight, its light becomes much brighter.
From now on, on my nose and by my ears,
  there will never be a worry encumbering me the rest of my life.

〈余五十歲用眼鏡，今八十矣。偶爾去之，轉覺清朗，作別眼鏡詩〉
是誰替我換雙睛，靉靆捐除眼忽清。
與汝竟成垂老別，叨光已領卅年情。
水因春暮冰方解，月到更深魄倍明。
從此鼻端兼耳畔，永無牽挂累餘生。[67]

This poem would probably release Emperor Qianlong from the concern that "Once I use them, I cannot give them up; / [Once I] give them up, I will become dim-sighted". Perhaps in Yuan Mei's old age, his short-sightedness improved, but one can leave this for ophthalmologists. In comparison with Yuan Mei's first or second poem, his feeling about eyeglasses in this poem is much more complex – it is neither strong disapproval nor enthusiastic praise. Yuan does not discredit the "usefulness" of eyeglasses although he feels happy that there will be no more burdens on his face, and he also shows his gratitude towards eyeglasses, again, through personification in the second couplet. A subtle interpretation appears in the third couplet, where Yuan uses a perceptional

66 Yuan, *Xiaocang shanfang shiwenji*, vol. 1, 477.
67 Yuan, *Xiaocang shanfang shiwenji*, vol. 2, 1030.

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explanation for the late improvement of his eyesight, which enriches this poem with a taste of philosophical reasoning.

When both Qianlong and Yuan Mei denied or twisted the "usefulness" of eyeglasses, it demonstrates that the literati had been freed from the conventional way of recognizing eyeglasses merely as an object, which improves their living conditions or extends their scholarly life, and considered how this object could possibly be interpreted beyond its pragmatic attributes in a broader context. The courtly approach, initiated by Qianlong and echoed by his subject-officials, is political and metaphysical, whereas Yuan Mei's approach evokes literary complexity. The general interest in eyeglasses shifted away from pragmatism, and more poets regarded eyeglasses as a device for enriching their literary activities, especially when eyeglasses were introduced into a very special genre: "linked verse" (*lianju* 聯句).

In the late summer of 1765, the year Yuan Mei satirized eyeglasses, Qian Weicheng 錢維城 (literary name Chashan 茶山, 1720–72),[68] a scholar Wu 吳 (literary name Quanzi 泉子, details unknown), Qian Weiqiao 錢維喬 (literary name Shucan 樹參, 1739–1806),[69] and a son-in-law of Qian Weicheng (literary name Qiaoying 翹英, details unknown) gathered together. They chose eyeglasses as the topic for their linked verse, and composed, in turns, 48 pentasyllabic lines, in the form of extended regulated verse (*pailü* 排律).[70]

As the most senior participant, Qian Weicheng composed the first three lines of this linked verse. Scholar Wu wrote two lines afterwards, where the first of these two lines should match Qian Weicheng's third line to make a parallel couplet. Qian Weiqiao then wrote two lines after Wu, and his first line matches the second line of Wu. The son-in-law was the last one to compose due to his junior position, and his two lines also follow the same rule for parallelism. After completing this round, Qian Weicheng continued to write two lines as the beginning of a new round, and the other poets proceeded with what they did in the first round. Four more rounds were completed in the same sequence. But in the last round, the son-in-law was not involved, and Qian Weicheng composed a single line, after Wu's two lines, to end the poem sequence.

This joint composition of linked verse mainly focuses on the individual's mastery of literary diction, because each poet should compose a matching line to the previous line written by another poet in order to make a perfect parallel couplet (except for the first and last couplets). The content of this linked verse is, however, prosaic. Descriptions, metaphors and allusions for eyeglasses are skilfully presented to praise eyeglasses from different angles, but neither a clear idea nor an emotive expression can be detected from the traditional

68 Qian Weicheng, who came first in the palace examination in 1745, was the Provincial Education Commissioner of Zhejiang (*Zhejiang xuezheng* 浙江學政) at that time.

69 Qian Weiqiao, a younger brother of Qian Weicheng, received the title of Provincial Graduate (*Juren* 舉人) in 1762.

70 There are two versions of this linked verse: the version recorded in Qian Weicheng's poetry collection is slightly different from that in Qian Weiqiao's collection. See Qian Weicheng 錢維城, *Qian Wenmin Gong quanji* 錢文敏公全集, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), vol. 1442, 605; Qian Weiqiao 錢維喬, *Zhuchu shiwenchao* 竹初詩文鈔, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), vol. 1460, 36.

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perspective of literary quality. This is mainly because each couplet is composed by two different poets (except the first couplet), and consistency of personal expression is the least of one's concern during the writing process. The ultimate purpose of writing linked verse is never to present a poetic interpretation of the chosen topic, but to give a chance and space for poets to demonstrate or exchange intellectual prowess around that topic. Therefore, eyeglasses just happened to be the topic of this particular linked verse. These poets possibly considered "eyeglasses" as an interesting topic for linked verse, but they were more excited about the prospect of writing linked verse together. Nevertheless, this poem is still a sign that eyeglasses were no longer seen as a merely pragmatic object for the literati, and scholars discovered more meanings from this object that they had been writing about for more than two centuries.

## 5. Object identity

It is very common that one sees eyeglasses of the Qing dynasty simply as "foreign" objects. However, this view is perhaps not accurate enough, since not all eyeglasses of the Qing dynasty were imported, or made from imported materials, and most of them were in fact manufactured by Chinese craftsmen using Chinese materials, even at the imperial court.[71] Although eyeglasses were invented in the West and the techniques for making them were likewise learned from Westerners, the Chinese literati of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries seldom labelled their own eyeglasses with the attribute of "foreignness" in their poetry unless the eyeglasses they wrote about were indeed imported.

However, in the nineteenth century, with a much more open reception of Western material culture, imported eyeglasses, or eyeglasses with imported materials, re-entered the sight of the literati, when the attributes of "foreignness" and "expensiveness" reappeared in some of their works. For example, the following two poems are found in the "*Shishang*" 時尚 (Fashion) section in the *Chaoshi congzai* 朝市叢載 (Records of the Court and Marketplace), a travel guide to Beijing city, by Yang Jingting 楊靜亭 (fl. *c*. 1845) and Li Hongruo 李虹若 (fl. *c*. 1888):

> "Eyeglasses"
> He wears square-toed shoes to [follow] fashion;
> he wobbles on the street, seemingly pedantic and literate.
> He wears eyeglasses to pretend to be short-sighted,
> so as to make people think he is a scholar.
>
> 〈眼鏡〉
> 方鞋穿著趁時新，搖擺街前迂且文。
> 眼鏡戴來裝近視，教人知是讀書人。[72]

71 For discussions on the mass production of domestic eyeglasses and the quality improvement, see McDermott, "Chinese lenses and Chinese art", 12–4.

72 Yang Jingting 楊靜亭 (Li Hongruo 李虹若, ed.), *Chaoshi congzai* 朝市叢載 (Printed in 1887), *juan* 7, 41.

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> "Foreign material eyeglasses"
> [Foreign-]glass eyeglasses are the best;
> there are always rich people [wearing them] to show off.
> But in noontime, one cannot walk with one's face held high;
> [because] sunlight will shine [through the lenses] and burn his eyebrows.

> 〈洋料眼鏡〉
> 玻璃眼鏡最爲高，作濶由來是富豪。
> 晌午卻難揚面走，陽光生火燎眉毛。[73]

Written in the style of "doggerel" (*dayoushi* 打油詩), both poems satirize those who wear eyeglasses. The first poem suggests that the person wearing eyeglasses is uneducated and probably rich enough to follow fashion; eyeglasses are a symbol of being educated. Considering those traditional interpretations for eyeglasses, either as a useful tool for a scholar or as a friend of an old man, this poem draws an equal mark between eyeglasses and an educated person – eyeglasses represent the identity of the literati. The second poem is more direct in satirizing rich people who wear expensive eyeglasses: eyeglasses become a luxury of the rich who wear them ostentatiously. Moreover, both poems imply that these rich people do not appreciate the "usefulness" of eyeglasses and wear them where it is unnecessary – not in a study, but on the street. Notwithstanding the two poems which state some simple facts of the time, between the lines a slight feeling of the poet's jealousy can still be sensed.

When materiality changed once again and the attributes of "foreignness" and "expensiveness" were reintroduced to the interpretations of imported eyeglasses, scholars relinquished their privilege of having eyeglasses as their unique signature because this object became a luxury for the rich as it was in the mid-Ming period. On the other hand, the cheap price and mass production of domestic eyeglasses also broke the strong tie between scholars and eyeglasses, because the price became so cheap that even merchants, who were traditionally perceived as being at the bottom of the social scale,[74] were using eyeglasses in the nineteenth century – as Chen Kangqi described it with contempt, "even traders from marketplaces use them".[75] This is the time when the use of eyeglasses expanded beyond scholars' lives, and the literati made their last effort to equate the identity of eyeglasses and themselves through their writings, so as to reclaim that privilege, but in a rather forced and ironic way.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the way in which eyeglasses were depicted in classical poetry, as well as offering more general observations on the material development of eyeglasses in late imperial China. In the fifteenth century, when

73 Yang, *Chaoshi congzai*, 41–2.

74 Traditional society recognized four kinds of people. These are, in declining order: literati (*shi* 士), farmers (*nong* 農), craftsmen (*gong* 工), and merchants (*shang* 商).

75 Chen, *Langqian jiwen erbi*, 428.

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imported eyeglasses were first introduced to the literati, this Western object was treasured and its attributes of "foreignness", "expensiveness" and "usefulness" were emphasized in poetry. Soon, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when domestic eyeglasses dominated the market and the overall price drop made eyeglasses available to more scholars, the literary reception concentrated mainly on the pragmatic benefits that eyeglasses brought to scholars' lives. Nevertheless, as a topic for composing poetry, eyeglasses were given more complex interpretations in the further literary development in the eighteenth century, and the literati even tried to argue against the "usefulness" of eyeglasses through different approaches. Eventually, a late change of materiality in the nineteenth century led to a destruction of the unique bond between scholars and eyeglasses, and yet scholars tried to restore this unique bond by assigning a scholarly identity to eyeglasses.

As a case study of Qing dynasty *yongwu* poetry with a focus on the object, this paper demonstrates a shifting process where the literati consistently endow the object with renewed interpretations, and the diversity of these interpretations often results from the engagements with material change, economic configuration, courtly obligation, literary complexity, social intercourse and the cultural life of the literati. Nevertheless, this paper attempts neither to deny nor to alter the lyrical essence of *yongwu* poetry; it suggests an alternative way of studying *yongwu* poetry and ponders why the activity of composing *yongwu* poetry could flourish during the Qing period from an object-oriented perspective.

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