
Speaking Truth to Power? Vernacular Discourse Strategies in Shi Chengjin's 'Rustic Words'

Jessica Moyer*¹

¹Smith College [Northampton] – United States

Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics of vernacular language at work in Shi Chengjin's (1659–after 1739) *Chuanjia bao* (Family treasure). This anthology of morality books, maxims, and advice for daily life uses a mélange of idioms ranging from a simple classical style to a highly colloquial vernacular. The collection opens with a didactic text in the vernacular called "Liyān" (Rustic words), and his vernacular rhetoric in that text sets the tone for the remainder of the compendium. Shi's use of the vernacular language allows him to maintain his cultural hybridization and symbolic partial alignment with the common people, which accompanies his rejection of the elite cultural pursuits that defined the gentry. He also uses the vernacular to create an alternate basis of ethical authority grounded in personal experience of everyday life. This vernacular voice, though coherent with and explicitly subordinate to state ideology, also directly criticizes members of the scholar-gentry class, offering a critique of elite misbehavior grounded in a middlebrow morality. This vernacular authority does not, importantly, allow Shi to propose an alternate ideology: he affirms the basic alignment of state and household as well as the authority of the state over households. Rather, Shi's vernacular construction of authority asserts that that very alignment of ordinary family life with higher political institutions enables lower-status individuals to critique higher-status ones in a distinctly quotidian voice. Jessica Moyer teaches Chinese language and literature at Smith College. She studied classics at Kenyon College, taught English at Qinghai Normal University in northwestern China, and received her M.A. and Ph.D. in Chinese literature from Yale University. Her research interests include genre theory, cultural history, vernacular language, gender history, and spatial practice.

*Speaker