

Research on the Evolution of Poetic Styles in the Tang Dynasty from the Perspective of Social Development

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ABSTRACT

Tang Dynasty has witnessed the most glorious Chinese literature works, especially in the field of poetry. Tang poetry, with its unique artistic style and profound historical influence, is praised by later generations as the pinnacle of classic poetry. The evolution of Tang poetic styles is not an isolated literary subject, but related to the political, economic, and cultural background of the society at that time. This article aims to label time as an index to explore the evolution processes of Tang Dynasty poetry styles and the reasons and influences behind it, so as to throw light on the a deeper understanding Tang poetry and providing valuable insights and references to later composition of poetry.

Keywords: Poetic styles, Tang dynasty, Social development, Evolution.

1. INTRODUCTION

For the Chinese nation, Tang Dynasty was not only a golden age of social development, but also a peak period of innovation and prosperity in poetry and art. Yan Yu's *Canglang Poetry Talks* of the Southern Song Dynasty first proposed dividing the development of Tang poetry into four periods: early Tang, prosperous Tang, middle Tang, and late Tang. This periodization method was elaborated by Fang Hui of the Yuan Dynasty and established in Yang Shihong's *Tang Yin* (a collection of Tang Dynasty poems) of the Yuan Dynasty. In Gao Qi's *Tang Poetry Collection: General Preface* of the Ming Dynasty, this four-periodization has been finalized. This division has been widely accepted and recognized, becoming an important reference framework for studying the development of Tang poetry. According to *Complete Tang Poetry* and *Complete Tang Poetry External Compilation*, there were a total of 2873 Tang Dynasty poets (some sources say more than 2300), and there are now over 50,000 Tang poems that have been passed down, leaving a huge cultural wealth for future research. In the hundred years of Tang Dynasty, there have been some clear developments and evolution in the poetic styles. This study analyzes

the influencing factors and main characteristics of poetic style in different periods from the social development perspectives.

2. POETIC STYLE IN THE EARLY TANG DYNASTY

2.1 Social and Cultural Development Status

In the early Tang Dynasty, Li Tang Dynasty was like sunrise, shining with vibrant vitality and vigorous energy. At this moment, the country revealed infinite hope and possibilities. The stability of the political situation was like a fertile soil, providing a suitable environment for economic and cultural prosperity. The government has carefully planned and implemented a series of policies and measures, such as land reform and tax adjustments, to pave a path towards the revival of agricultural production. With the passage of time, the economic level has significantly improved, nourishing the vitality of the entire society. In terms of culture, the unification of the Sui Dynasty and the establishment of the Tang Dynasty integrated the cultures of the north and south, demonstrating

the diversity and inclusiveness of the Chinese nation. At the same time, the frequent exchanges between the Tang Dynasty and neighboring countries promoted cultural collision and exchange, which revitalized Chinese civilization through mutual learning. In the field of literature, five-character poetry and seven-character poetry gradually matured and been standardized during this period, and art forms such as prose, calligraphy, and painting also experienced unprecedented prosperity. The government attached great importance to the summary and inheritance of academy and culture. For example, Emperor Taizong of Tang ordered Kong Yingda and others to compile the *Five Classics of Justice*, which unified the interpretation of Confucian classics and laid a solid foundation for the inheritance of culture. The rulers of the early Tang Dynasty followed the will of the people, mediated conflicts, and gradually won the support and backing of the people. This harmonious social atmosphere is fully reflected in the field of poetry. The group of poets represented by the "Four Great Poets of the Early Tang Dynasty" carried a love and pursuit for literature and art, opposed extravagant literary styles, advocated for fresh and vigorous literature, and emphasized the social value and aesthetic pursuit of poetry. Their poetry works boldly innovated and attempted in terms of subject matter, form, style, etc., laying a solid foundation for the formation of the early Tang style of poetry. The splendor of the early Tang Dynasty not only witnessed the vigorous vitality of Li Tang Dynasty, but also demonstrated the splendor and prosperity of culture.

2.2 Poetic Style: Being Fresh and Vigorous

The poetry creation in early Tang Dynasty to some extent inherited the poetic style of the Southern Qi and Liang Dynasties, especially the style of "court-style poetry", which used flowery words, pursued form but lacked content. During this period, court poetry dominated, and the poetic style showed a clear tendency towards court style, forming the "Shangguan style" represented by Shangguan Yi. His poetry emphasized parallel with each other neatly and pursued the beauty of poetry's tone and language, but the content was mostly limited to the scope of the objects that court literature should compose. In the last 50 years of the early Tang Dynasty, the field of poetry underwent a refreshing transformation. The new style was like a spring breeze, injecting vitality into poetry. Poets abandoned the extravagance and

flashy of the Qi and Liang Dynasties, and instead pursued a fresh and vigorous expression. The spirit of the early Tang Dynasty is like forging a sword, refining every line of poetry. It emphasizes the intrinsic power of poetry, requiring it to have backbone and showcase the poets' resilience and passion. The four great poets of the early Tang Dynasty - Wang Bo, Yang Jiong, Lu Zhaolin, and Luo Binwang - opposed the extravagance of the Qi and Liang court in their poetry, advocating that poetry should express one's feelings directly, with full and profound emotions[1]. During this period, poetry was no longer limited to the narrow realm of the court, but expanded its horizons and paid more attention to social reality and life philosophy. Poets composed poems to explore the true meaning of life and contemplate the meaning of life. The early Tang Dynasty pursued a balance between literary and artistic qualities, requiring poetry to be profound in content, while also achieving a perfect artistic state in form. This pursuit made the poetry of the early Tang Dynasty shine brightly, not only reaching new heights in thought, but also demonstrating outstanding levels in artistic form, providing endless inspiration and enlightenment for future poets.. Every poem is a mark of the times, and every word embodies the poet's hard work.

2.3 Representing Poets and Poetry

The "Fenggu"(style and substance) of Tang poetry was proposed based on the national style and Han Wei style, summarizing and refining the "Fenggu" of Jian'an Period. It inherited the strong realism of the national style and Han and Wei style. The "Fenggu" of Tang poetry embodied the perfect unity of its realistic ideological content and vigorous expression. During the early Tang Dynasty, Chen Zi'ang proposed the standards for literary creation: the essence here is to advocate expressing one's strong emotions in simple and unadorned language, rather than focusing on embellishing the language to make poetry more beautiful. Court-style poetry is too monotonous and lacks its own soul. Chen Zi'ang's proposal of the "Han Wei Fenggu" strongly criticized the extravagant style of Qi and Liang poetry, which was characterized by "The colors and patterns are pursuing for richness, but the inspiration is completely lacking"[2]. In his creation of 38 poems titled *Encounters and Reflections*, he truly put into practice his proposition of "Han Wei Fenggu", which is of great significance. The line in the *Song of Climbing to Youzhou Terrace* that goes, "Before me, I see no ancient ones; Behind me, no ones to

come. Contemplating the vastness of heaven and earth, I am moved to tears, all alone” is considered a masterpiece by historians. “The Four Great Poets of the Early Tang Dynasty” made great contributions to the development of Tang poetry with their unique poetic styles. Unwilling to deliberately carve poetry, following the extravagant style, they transformed the poetic style into fresh and vigorous, attempting to change this extravagant and gorgeous palace style. They shifted poetic focus from the court to the common people. Yang Jiong’s *The Journey to the Army* expresses the poet’s resentment and desire to make achievements and serve the country. “Better to be a centurion than a scholar.” The poetic style is passionate and heroic, expressing the poet’s strong sense of responsibility and mission. Lu Zhaolin’s *Lotus in the Bonding Pond* uses lotus as a metaphor for people, expressing the poet’s feelings about the passing of time and the impermanence of life, as well as his worries and concerns about his own fate. This deep emotion and sense of crisis are also a manifestation of his character. In Wang Bo’s *Farewell to Du Shaofu’s Mission to Shuzhou*, the line “Long distance separates no bosom friends” showcases the poet’s broad mindedness and deep friendship, reflecting the spirit of fearlessness in the face of distance and ambition in all directions.

3. POETIC STYLE IN THE PROSPEROUS TANG DYNASTY

3.1 Social and Cultural Development Status

During the prosperous Tang Dynasty, the pulse of society was exceptionally active. The emergence of small and medium-sized merchants, as well as the subversion of the feudal system by the imperial examination system, have injected vitality into the common class. These changes, have revitalized the values, lifestyles, and psychological states of the entire society. The prosperity of the economy and political stability provide ample nourishment for the advancement of individual spirit. In this era, joining the border army has become a trend. Despite the long and arduous journey, people’s belief in dedicating themselves to the country and pursuing honor was as solid as a rock. This firm belief, like a seed, took root and sprouted in the soil of the prosperous Tang Dynasty, giving birth to a social ideology that advocated the strength of character. The implementation of the imperial examination system opened a door to officialdom for the common people of the world. Poets, as

spokespersons of this era, proactive and enterprising, aspired to make great achievements and regarded the world as their own responsibility. Their ambitious and lofty aspirations were more passionate and surging than those of poets during the Jian’an period. Not only that, the ruling class during the prosperous Tang Dynasty attached great importance to traditional culture and cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries. They were well aware that the power of culture could nurture a nation’s character and broad mindedness. Under such policy guidance, intellectuals in the prosperous Tang Dynasty not only drew inspiration from the strong and optimistic spirit of traditional culture, but also developed a vigorous and inclusive personality through collision and integration with foreign cultures. At the same time, communication between the Han and ethnic minorities has been continuously strengthened since the Han and Tang dynasties. Despite occasional tensions, peace and friendship remained the mainstream. The rulers adopted enlightened national policies, which promoted in-depth cultural exchange and integration between the two sides. This cultural exchange not only cultivated the broad spirit of the Tang people to look around the world and be a family under heaven, but also injected a majestic momentum and profound connotation into their poetry. Therefore, the poetry of the prosperous Tang Dynasty not only inherited the tradition of Jian’an style, but also radiated new vitality and vigor in this unique era background. The works of poets are filled with a sense of elegance, a high and bright tone, and a majestic momentum. The prosperity of this kind of poetry undoubtedly left a valuable spiritual wealth for future generations and has become the most glorious page in the history of Chinese literature.

3.2 Poetic Style: Being Grand and Majestic

The poetry of the prosperous Tang Dynasty, at the peak of its glory, continues to write the legendary spirit of the early Tang Dynasty, but endows it with a grander and more majestic soul. In the context of this era of great national strength and economic prosperity, the people of Prosperous Tang poetry carried the dream of making great achievements, and melted that irresistible momentum, uplifting emotions, and majestic atmosphere into their pens, painting a series of majestic and masculine beauty paintings. Although Chen Zi’ang of the early Tang Dynasty raised his

arms and shouted for the soul of “Fenggu”, his poetry appeared somewhat rational, lacking the flow of individuality. From *Encounters* to *On Climbing Youzhou Tower*, although one can see the traces of its “Fenggu”, it always feels like it lacks some warmth and depth of life. However, entering the prosperous Tang Dynasty, the poetic style underwent a major change. Poets not only broke free from the shackles of their predecessors, but also injected full emotions and feelings into their poetry, making every line and word full of the pulse of life. Their poetry is like the earth, with the grandeur of towering mountains, the rushing of rivers, lakes, and seas, and the delicacy and splendor of plants, trees, flowers, and birds. Confidence and optimism could be seen from the Tang Dynasty poets, as well as their desire and persistence to make achievements. Especially in frontier-border poetry, poets of the prosperous Tang Dynasty, with their powerful brushstrokes and lofty aspirations, outlined the ever-changing situation and heroic spirit of the frontier. Every poem was like a magnificent painting, making readers feel the rushing borderland wind, the neighing of war horses, and the shouting of warriors. This kind of spirit and sentiment was the unique charm and courage of the poetry of the “Fenggu” of the prosperous Tang Dynasty. In addition, the “style” was also reflected in its pursuit of the beauty of freedom and independence. Poets were no longer satisfied with merely depicting external scenery and grandeur, but have also begun to focus on inner freedom and independence, paying attention to the harmonious unity between individuals and the world, nature, and society. Their poetry were not only a praise and emotion for the external world, but also an exploration and expression of their inner world. This spiritual beauty is both sublime and profound, adding a touch of weight and depth to the poetry of the prosperous Tang Dynasty[3]. It can be said that the “style” of Tang Dynasty poetry is not only an artistic style, but also a spirit of the times and a national integrity. It has become the most glorious page in the history of Chinese literature with its unique charm and courage.

3.3 Representing Poets and Poetry

During the prosperous Tang Dynasty, poetic imagery carried people’s love and longing for nature, social reality, and frontier scenery, reflecting the three main features. Firstly, Tang Dynasty poets demonstrated their love and longing for nature through their depiction of natural scenery. For example, Li Bai’s *Invitation to Wine*: “Do you

not see the Yellow River come from the sky, rushing into the sea and never come back? Do you not see the mirrors bright in chambers high, grieve over your snow-white hair though once it was silk-black? When hopes are won, Oh! Drink your fill in high delight, and never leave your wine-cup empty in moonlight!” The rushing of the Yellow River and the reflection of the clear mirror reflect the fleeting sadness of life and the pursuit of immediate pleasure. In Wang Wei’s *On a Mission to the Frontier*, the line “In boundless desert lonely smokes rise straight; over endless river the sun sinks round” depicts the vastness and magnificence of the borderlands with concise and clear language, expressing the loneliness and resilience of the heart. These works not only delicately depict natural scenery, but also incorporate profound reflections on life philosophy, reflecting the open-minded, optimistic, and positive spirit of Tang Dynasty poets. Secondly, Tang Dynasty poets reflected social reality through poetry, exposing the complexity and diversity of the times. For example, Du Fu’s poetry embodies his own thoughts and emotions, patriotism, lamenting the difficulties of his situation, and exposing the dark reality. He wrote in his poem *Five Hundred Words of Lamentations from Changan to Fengxian County*: “Wine and meat rot behind vermilion gates while at the roadside people freeze to death.” It truthfully recorded the social reality and the suffering of the people at that time, expressed sympathy for social inequality and the suffering of the people, and demonstrated the literary spirit of caring for the country and the people. Finally, the Tang Dynasty frontier poets demonstrated their loyalty to the country and their desire for victory by depicting the scenery of the frontier. For example, in Gao Shi’s *Song of the Northern Frontier*, “Half of our warriors lie killed on the battleground; While pretty girls in camp still sing and dance their round. Grass withers in the desert as autumn is late; At sunset few men guard the lonely city gate.” By depicting the cruelty of the frontier war and the brave resistance of the soldiers, it is full of tragic spirit and deep affection for the country and the nation. These works not only expose the cruel reality of border wars, but also praise the indomitable spirit and sacrifice of soldiers, showcasing the tragic style of Tang Dynasty border poetry. In summary, the spirit of the prosperous Tang Dynasty is reflected in poetry, which includes both love and longing for natural scenery, profound exposure and reflection of social reality, as well as the display of frontier scenery and the expression of warrior sentiment. These poems are not only expressions of literature

and art, but also witnesses of the social landscape and people's emotions at that time, inheriting the cultural heritage and spiritual outlook of Tang poetry.

4. POETIC STYLE IN THE MIDDLE TO LATE TANG DYNASTY

4.1 *Social and Cultural Development Status*

The mid-to-late Tang Dynasty was a critical period for the Tang Dynasty's transition from prosperity to decline, and An Lushan Rebellion brought significant political, economic, and social crises to the Tang Dynasty. After the rebellion was suppressed, the contradiction between the central government and local separatist forces continued to escalate, and local governments gradually broke away from central control. The phenomenon of eunuchs monopolizing power became increasingly rampant. After experiencing the An Lushan Rebellion, the social order and people's mentality in the Tang Dynasty were significantly different from those in fore years. Under the pressure of internal and external troubles, the government began to pursue peace and lost the enterprising spirit of the prosperous Kaiyuan era. At the same time, powerful officials and traitor ministers controlled the court and excluded virtuous scholars, leading to the decline of scholarly conduct. People began to follow the trend and pursue quick success and instant benefits. During this period, the social atmosphere also underwent significant changes. Due to political corruption and continuous wars, people's lives were difficult, and many literati have begun to express their concerns about the fate of the country and their desire for a better life. Poets began to reflect their personal thoughts and feelings, showcasing the complex experiences of life in the era and presenting colorful lives with different temperaments. They conveyed the subtleties of life through poetry, showcasing the uniqueness of each individual's voice in the larger era.

4.2 *Poetic Style: Being Lonely and Melancholy*

After the chaos, the country's vitality was greatly damaged, and the harsh reality devastated the poets' soul. They shifted their appreciation from the majestic, vigorous, and bright beauty of the prosperous Tang Dynasty to their admiration for the subtle and introverted. The confidence and spirit of the prosperous Tang Dynasty disappeared, replaced

by a strong sense of loneliness, sadness, and sentimentality. Personalized features are beginning to manifest in poets[4]. The poetry styles of the middle Tang Dynasty were diverse and varied, with a preference for "strangeness" and "kurtosis". Poets used strange metaphors to stimulate the senses and lead readers into extreme psychological states. At the same time, their expression of emotions was more complex and delicate, paying attention to social reality while delving deeper into their inner world. Poetry became a channel for them to vent their frustrations, worries, and anger. The poetic style of the late Tang Dynasty tended towards melancholic beauty and ambiguity. Poets showed strong emotions of sadness and negativity in their writings. By borrowing from the past to satirize the present, reciting historical stories or characters, they expressed their inner dissatisfaction and criticism. Poetry became a sigh for them to vent their emotions and accuse society. After the chaos, the poets' emotional journey, from the progress and pride of the prosperous Tang Dynasty, to the diversity and delicacy of the middle Tang Dynasty, and then to the sorrow and confusion of the late Tang Dynasty, gradually revealed the dark inner world and helplessness towards the chaotic times.

4.3 *Representing Poets and Poetry*

After An Lushan Rebellion, poetry began to exhibit more personalized and self-expression characteristics. As for Du Fu, his self-image was prominently showcased in his poetry. In *Lament at the Head of the River*, he wrote "The old man of Shaoling choked back his sobs and silently wept, sneaking out on a spring day to stroll along the Qujiang", and in *Lament in Autumn Rain*, "The old man stays indoors, letting the weeds grow tall around the door." He is both a poet and "the old man" in his poems. His poetry depicts social changes and the trajectory of his own life. Li He inherited Du Fu's romantic tradition while innovating and breaking through, forming his own poetic style. Combined with his personal career experience, he expressed a strong sentimental temperament and pathological beauty in his poetry. He vented his inner distress and disappointment through peculiar imagination and absurd imagery. Such as "A hundred-year-old owl becomes a wood spirit, with a cackle and green flames rising from its nest" (*Divine Strings*), "The cold red flowers weep with dewdrops, their delicate cries tinged with color, while the warm fragrance lures dreams on the brocade quilt adorned with mandarin ducks" (*Thirteen Poems of Nanyuan*). In the late Tang

Dynasty, due to the decline of the times and the influence of the magnificent aesthetic taste of the late Tang, the poetic beauty of the prosperous Tang Dynasty, which was full and vigorous, bright and implicit, could no longer be reproduced. The yearning for the subtle and refined beauty of subtlety and subtlety was developed into a pursuit of the hazy realm by poets like Li Shangyin, while the magnificence of the prosperous Tang Dynasty turned into melancholy and beauty. In Li Shangyin's works, the misfortunes of love life and the hardships encountered in one's life are intertwined with worries about the fate of the Tang Dynasty, forming a melancholic and poignant poetic style. In the poem *Two Poems on Peonies Defeated by Rain*, "The tears spilled like jade disks, the sad zither's strings break my dreams frequently." and in *Untitled Two Poems*, "Once I was lonely, watching the dimming candle, but there was no news until the pomegranate blossomed red", he used a melancholic tone, beautiful images, and poetic style to express his emotions and feelings, infusing sentimental emotions into the hazy and magnificent poetic realm, blending multiple feelings into the vast and magnificent, forming a poignant beauty.

5. CONCLUSION

In the early Tang Dynasty, although poetry still followed the style of the previous dynasty, the gradual rise of Confucianism invisibly injected the characteristic of "Fenggu" into poetic style. Poets began to attempt to express their emotions and unique understanding of Confucianism through poetry. With the evolution of history, the poetry of the prosperous Tang Dynasty further reflected the characteristics of style and "Fenggu" based on the poetry of the early Tang Dynasty. In the era of strong national strength and prosperous economy, poets created vibrant poems with full emotions. Their poetry is full of love for life and longing for the future. However, during the middle to late Tang Dynasty, social contradictions became increasingly acute and the country gradually declined. The poetic style during this period also began to undergo a transformation. Poets began to pay attention to the fate and value of individuals, and their poetry was filled with emotions of loneliness, sadness, and sentimentality. The poetic style is gradually moving towards personalization, with each poet expressing their understandings of the world in their own ways. From the spirit of the early Tang Dynasty to the grandeur and boldness of the prosperous Tang Dynasty, and then to the

beauty and sadness of the mid to late Tang Dynasty, Tang poetry, with its rich appearance and profound connotation, presents the overall picture of Tang society and the spiritual pursuit of literati and officials. Therefore, the study of the evolution of Tang poetic styles is not only a review and summary of literary history, but also a profound exploration of the inheritance of Chinese cultural spirit. This study helps future generations to gain a deeper understanding of how poets of that era expressed their emotions and thoughts through poetry, opening up a broader space for literary creation in later generations, providing valuable inspiration and reference, and its influence has been widely spread, reflecting the profoundness and enduring value of Chinese literature.

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