

## Article

*2024 International Conference on Art and Design, Education, Media and Social Sciences (DEMSS 2024)***Textual Variations and Historical Context: Revisiting the Kaicheng Era Poetic Examination in Yunxi Youyi**Miaoyan Hua <sup>1,\*</sup><sup>1</sup> Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Shanghai, China

\* Correspondence: Miaoyan Hua, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Shanghai, China

**Abstract:** This paper examines the historical and cultural significance of the record *Reviving Ancient Practices in Yunxi Youyi*. It focuses on the Kaicheng-era poetic examination, during which Li Hong's poem *The Dance of the Feathered Garments* earned top honors. The imperial edict by Emperor Wenzong sought to revive traditional cultural practices by emphasizing the stylistic norms of the Qi and Liang dynasties in poetry. Li Hong's achievements, rooted in his imperial lineage and poetic excellence, exemplify the interplay between political patronage and literary merit. The study also explores the textual variations across primary sources, including *Records of Tang Poetry* and *Tai-ping Guangji*, analyzing their implications for reconstructing the examination's historical context. Additional evidence from epitaphs and literary connections with figures such as Li Shangyin further sheds light on Li Hong's life and career, suggesting his prominence in the Tang intellectual milieu. Finally, the study highlights Emperor Wenzong's broader cultural aspirations, including the reconstruction of Kaiyuan-era music and dance, as reflected in the examination's themes. This analysis underscores the intertwined roles of politics, culture, and literature in Tang Dynasty examinations, offering fresh insights into the period's intellectual and cultural landscape.

**Keywords:** Tang Dynasty examinations; Li Hong; Yunxi Youyi; Emperor Wenzong; *The Dance of the Feathered Garments*

**1. Introduction**

On the Record "Reviving Ancient Practices" in *Yunxi Youyi*:

In the autumn of the first year of the Kaicheng era, an imperial edict directed the Minister of Rites, Gao Kai, to resume oversight of the examination rolls. The edict stated:

"Clan heirs are the protective walls of the state, ensuring continuity for hundreds of generations. Their titles and ranks must not be allowed to lapse. Previously, the Bureau of Imperial Clan Affairs sent candidates to examinations, but some lacked substance and tarnished the reputation of the examinations. You, my minister, should rigorously select those of true talent, avoiding any impediment to able candidates. For the essay topics, follow the usual conventions, and for poetry, adhere to the stylistic norms of the Qi and Liang dynasties".

Candidates were tested on the essay "Harmonious Performance of Qin and Se" and the poem "The Dance of the Feathered Garments." Among the five most outstanding poetic compositions, the best was by Li Hong, followed by Wang Shou's essay "Daylight Slanting." The latter was said to resemble the celebrated "Snow Fu" and "Moon Fu" from the *Selections of Refined Literature*. Since Li Hong was of imperial descent, with a virtuous

Received: 25 November 2024

Revised: 12 December 2024

Accepted: 03 January 2024

Published: 07 January 2025



**Copyright:** © 2024 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

character and exceptional talent, it was imperative to act with fairness and not betray the imperial mandate. Consequently, Li was awarded the top position on the examination roll.

The poem "The Dance of the Feathered Garments" by Li Hong employed a prescribed rhyme scheme:

"In the era of Kaiyuan's peace,  
All nations offered blessings for abundant harvests.  
The Pear Garden presented venerable tunes,  
While the imperial throne introduced new creations.  
The phoenix pipes rose and fell in harmony,  
Gossamer garments swayed with elegant grace.  
After the banquet, the water pavilion lay deserted,  
The imperial carriage departed, leaving tender spring grass.  
Though Penglai's wonders are long past,  
Celestial music endures in its legacy.  
Who would reject this hallowed sound?  
The enlightened sovereign knows how to carry on the good".

Upon reading the text, the emperor remarked:

"A close relative like Li Hong surely does not disgrace his lineage. Possessing the intellectual acuity of Liu An, he could author great works; embodying the integrity of Ma Fu, he could serve as a role model. When Qin Shi Huang unified the empire, his sons and brothers were reduced to commoners, weakening the foundation of his rule. Why should Cao Yong not have criticized this?"

A commentary follows:

"Li's writings are precise and polished, his conduct exemplary. He earned recognition at the enlightened court and found opportunities in the households of Wei and Xiao. However, his career ended as governor of Yue and Qi prefectures, never attaining higher office—perhaps this was his fate." [1]

## 2. Annotated Edition of *Yunxi Youyi*

The annotated edition of *Yunxi Youyi* provides substantial evidence for Li Hong's life and achievements, such as citations from *Tangshi Jishi*. Nevertheless, there is room for further exploration of Li's biography and literary career based on the primary text. This article will analyze available materials to examine the historical facts surrounding Li Hong's participation in the poetic examination on *The Dance of the Feathered Garments*.

As one of the primary sources referenced in the annotated edition (hereafter referred to as "the annotated edition"), Ji Yougong's *Records of Tang Poetry (Tangshi Jishi)* includes the following account:

Li Hong

"In the era of Kaiyuan's peace, all nations offered blessings for abundant harvests. The Pear Garden grew weary of old tunes, and the imperial throne introduced new creations. The phoenix pipes alternated in intricate harmony, while gossamer garments swayed with elegant grace. After the banquet, the water pavilion lay deserted; the imperial carriage departed, leaving fragrant grass. Though Penglai's wonders are long past, celestial music endures in its legacy. Who would reject this hallowed sound? The enlightened sovereign knows how to carry on the good."

Li Hong composed this poem on *The Dance of the Feathered Garments* in the second year of the Kaicheng era. That autumn, the emperor instructed Gao Kai to resume oversight of the examination rolls. The edict read:

"Clan heirs are the protective walls of the state, ensuring continuity for hundreds of generations. Their titles and ranks must not be allowed to lapse. Previously, the Bureau of Imperial Clan Affairs sent candidates to examinations, but some

lacked substance and tarnished the reputation of the examinations. You, my minister, should rigorously select those of true talent, avoiding any impediment to able candidates. For the essay topics, follow the usual conventions, and for poetry, adhere to the stylistic norms of the Qi and Liang dynasties."

Candidates were tested on the essay "Harmonious Performance of Qin and Se" and the poem *The Dance of the Feathered Garments*. Among the five most outstanding compositions, Li Hong's was deemed the best, followed by Wang Mu. The emperor commented: "A close relative like Li Hong surely does not disgrace his lineage."

Minister Gao Kai submitted a memorial: "Yesterday, I presented the examination topics assigned by Your Majesty. With the imperial intellect and divine virtue, this year's topics possess an elegance and depth unprecedented in history. Candidates read them with admiration, dedicating extraordinary effort to their compositions. Compared to last year, the quality of this year's submissions is markedly superior.

Of the candidates, Li Hong's poem *The Dance of the Feathered Garments* stood out as unparalleled in both diction and structure. I have recited it over thirty times, and even a poet like He Xun could not surpass it. Li is a member of the imperial clan, a rare talent among his peers, and I awarded him the top position to commend his abilities." [2]

Another important source referenced in the annotated edition of *Yunxi Youyi* is the entry on "Li Hong" in *Taiping Guangji*, which largely corresponds to the text under the entry "Reviving Ancient Practices" in the annotated edition. Therefore, it will not be reiterated here. (*Taiping Guangji*, Compiled by Li Fang et al., Siku Quanshu edition, Volume 181, "Gongju 4"). Aside from the previously noted variation in wording between "Phoenix Pipes Rose and Fell in Harmony" (*feng guan shi can ci*) and "Phoenix Pipes Alternated in Harmony" (*feng guan di can ci*), there are other notable textual differences between the two accounts.

First, the variation between "The Pear Garden Presented Venerable Tunes" (*li yuan xian jiu qu*) and "The Pear Garden Grew Weary of Old Tunes" (*li yuan yan jiu qu*) in *Yunxi Youyi* is worth attention. Although this difference involves only a single character, it holds more interpretive significance than the aforementioned variation in the phoenix pipes line. The phrase "The Pear Garden Grew Weary of Old Tunes" is closely tied to the historical context of the poetic examination on *The Dance of the Feathered Garments* held in the first year of the Kaicheng era. A careful analysis of the semantics suggests that the version in *Taiping Guangji*, which reads "Grew Weary of Old Tunes," aligns more coherently with "The Pear Garden Grew Weary of Old Tunes" and "The Imperial Throne Introduced New Creations." However, this assertion requires further corroboration from additional textual materials.

Consulting *Tang Que Shi*, authored by Gao Yanxiu during the Later Jin period, we find the following account in Volume II:

The monk Canliaozi remarked: "At the beginning of the Kaicheng era, Emperor Wenzong indulged in studying classical texts, esteeming antiquity and scorning superficial scholarship. He frequently expressed a desire to abolish the music of Zheng and Wei and revive the orthodox sounds of the early dynasties. Among the music officials of the Taichang Temple was Weichi Zhang, an expert in ancient music. He created compositions following traditional methods, excelling in playing the flute, bell, zither, and se, capturing their essence flawlessly. Thus, he composed *The Dance of the Feathered Garments* and presented it to the emperor. An imperial decree summoned officials ranked third or higher in the Central Secretariat and various ministries to wear formal court attire and attend a ceremonial performance. Witnessing the performance, they exclaimed, 'Is this not

celestial music? Could it come from Yingzhou?' The composition was subsequently bestowed upon the Imperial Academy as the topic for the jinshi examination essays." [3]

This suggests that the examination topic on *The Dance of the Feathered Garments* in the first year of Kaicheng stemmed from Weichi Zhang's presentation of *The Dance of the Feathered Garments* to Emperor Wenzong. Weichi Zhang, a music official of the Taichang Temple, was highly skilled in ancient music and earned the emperor's approval for his creation. This resonates with Emperor Wenzong's aspiration to "abolish the music of Zheng and Wei and revive the orthodox sounds of early dynasties".

Further evidence of Emperor Wenzong's efforts to reconstruct the music and dance associated with *The Dance of the Feathered Garments* is found in several entries in *Bai Kong Liutie*:

Dignified Posture: "Feng Ding was renowned for his stately demeanor, comparable to the two Fengs of Han. Emperor Wenzong ordered the performance of the *Dance of the Feathered Garments*, incorporating elements from the 'Cloud Harmony' music. It was performed in the courtyard with numerous music officials standing in their designated places, impressing the emperor" [4].

The Dance of the Feathered Garments: "When Feng Ding was promoted to Taichang Shaoqing, Emperor Wenzong repeatedly ordered the performance of the *Dance of the Feathered Garments*, enhanced with elements from the 'Cloud Harmony' music. These performances became a court tradition" [5].

Jade Chimes: "Emperor Wenzong favored elegant music and ordered Feng Ding, Taichang Minister, to collect *The Elegant Music of Kaiyuan* and create new compositions based on the 'Cloud Harmony' structure, which featured four jade chimes" [6].

Standing in Designated Places: "As Taichang Shaoqing, Feng Ding oversaw performances of *The Dance of the Feathered Garments*, incorporating elements from 'Cloud Harmony.' His meticulous organization and classical scholarship earned the emperor's praise" [7].

These sources affirm that Emperor Wenzong's attempt to revive the "orthodox sounds of early dynasties" included the reconstruction of *The Dance of the Feathered Garments* and other elements of "Kaiyuan Elegant Music." Taichang music official Weichi Zhang's composition *The Dance of the Feathered Garments* received the emperor's commendation, as did the work of Feng Ding, who was similarly celebrated for his scholarship and classical sensibilities. This indicates that Emperor Wenzong was not only uncritical of "Kaiyuan Elegant Music" but deeply intent on restoring it.

In Li Hong's poem *The Dance of the Feathered Garments*, the lines "The Pear Garden Presented Venerable Tunes" and "The Imperial Throne Introduced New Creations" appear to collectively reference *The Dance of the Feathered Garments*. Therefore, the phrase "The Pear Garden Presented Venerable Tunes" is the most accurate interpretation.

In addition to the debate over the terms "presented" and "grew weary," the account in *Yunxi Youyi* places Li Hong's poem *The Dance of the Feathered Garments* at the top of the first Kaicheng examination, followed by Wang Shou's essay *Daylight Slanting*, which is likened to the *Fu on Snow* and *Fu on the Moon* in the *Selections of Refined Literature*. However, in *Records of Tang Poetry*, Ji Yougong cites Gao Kai's memorial, which lists the order of excellence for that year's examination topics as follows: Li Hong's *The Dance of the Feathered Garments*, Zhang Tang (or Zhang Tang)'s work, Shen Huangzhong's *Harmonious Performance of Qin and Se*, Wang Mu (or Wang Shou)'s composition, and finally Liu Tang's poem [8].

The above analysis demonstrates that the textual sequence recorded in *Records of Tang Poetry* is likely more reliable when reconstructing the historical events of the examination.

Apart from the evidence found in the epitaph materials, several additional sources provide further support for reconstructing the life of Li Hong. For instance, Li Shangyin

composed a poem titled "*Forty Rhymes on the Pine Paintings and Calligraphy Sent by Li Hong*" (*Li Hong suo yi hua song shi shu liang zhi de si shi yun*), which suggests that the two shared a personal connection, likely stemming from their having passed the imperial examinations in the same year [9].

Another reference to Li Hong can be found in Volume II of *Collected Inscriptions on Treasures* (*Baoke Congbian*), under the entry "Names Inscribed on the Two Sides of the Rear Stele of the Confucian Temple by Han of the Han Dynasty." This entry reads as follows:

"The two inscriptions are less than a foot wide and match the height of the stele, likely carved on its flanks. Zhao's record of Han's rear stele also includes the reverse side; could this refer to it, or perhaps another stele? During the Dazhong Xiangfu era, the calligrapher Yin Xi of the Hanlin Academy was commissioned to inscribe praises for the Seventy-Two Sages, and this was engraved above the text. Additionally, County Magistrate Kong Jing, a 44th-generation descendant of Confucius, composed an account of the temple's affairs.

This makes it clear that the stele belongs to the Confucian forest, and the name of Han's stele inscription is definitively recorded. Among the inscriptions is one by the Tang Dynasty figure Li Hong, as well as an inscription by Xin Ruoyu from the Qingli era. The dates are carved above the characters in Han script, though the passage of time has left some parts of the stone worn and illegible. What a pity!"

The lamentable damage to the stele inscriptions not only obscures Li Hong's contribution to the text but also underscores the limited material available to reconstruct his biography. Based on existing evidence, Li Hong likely lived between 800 and 870 CE. He passed the imperial examination in the second year of Kaicheng (837 CE) with his poem *The Dance of the Feathered Garments*, served as Prefect of Xingzhou, and perhaps also held posts in Yue and Qi prefectures. He had a concubine named Chen Taiyi and fathered at least five sons. His connection with Li Shangyin further attests to his cultural and intellectual standing.

A reexamination of the original text of *Yunxi Youyi* reveals that Li Hong's career trajectory is summarized as "earning distinction at the enlightened court and gaining opportunities in the households of Wei and Xiao." This raises the possibility that his political ascent was supported by prominent aristocratic clans such as the Weis and Xiaos, though this hypothesis cannot be conclusively verified.

### 3. Conclusion

This study underscores the intricate interplay between politics, culture, and literature in the Tang Dynasty, as revealed through a detailed analysis of *Yunxi Youyi* and its related texts. The record *Reviving Ancient Practices* illustrates Emperor Wenzong's cultural policies, particularly his efforts to restore traditional values and aesthetic norms through institutional mechanisms such as the Kaicheng-era poetic examination. Li Hong's triumph, epitomized by his acclaimed poem *The Dance of the Feathered Garments*, exemplifies the confluence of imperial endorsement, literary talent, and noble lineage in shaping intellectual and political trajectories within the Tang court.

The exploration of textual variations across key sources, including *Records of Tang Poetry* and *Taiping Guangji*, highlights both the complexities and possibilities inherent in reconstructing historical contexts. These variations not only reflect the evolving interpretations of the events but also offer valuable insights into Tang literary traditions and historiography. Further evidence, such as Li Hong's connections with prominent contemporaries like Li Shangyin and his contributions to Tang poetry, reinforces his significance within the broader intellectual and cultural milieu of his time.

This study concludes that the Tang examination system was more than a means of academic evaluation; it was a cultural institution that reinforced imperial ideology while shaping the intellectual landscape of the dynasty. Reexamining figures like Li Hong and



works such as *The Dance of the Feathered Garments* provides a richer understanding of the dynamic interrelation between tradition, innovation, and political aspiration in Tang China.

## References

1. S. Fan and W. Tang, *Yunxi Youyi* [Annotated and Collated Edition], vol. 1, p. 43. Zhonghua Book Company, 2017.
2. Y. Ji, *Tangshi Jishi* [Records of Tang Poetry], Southern Song, Jiading 17th Year Edition, vol. 52, 1224.
3. Y. Gao, *Tang Que Shi* [Fragmentary History of Tang], Zhibuzuzhai Congshu Edition, vol. 2, n.d.
4. J. Bai and Z. Kong, *Bai Kong Liutie* [Six Volumes by Bai and Kong], Jiaping Edition, vol. 21.
5. J. Bai and Z. Kong, *Bai Kong Liutie* [Six Volumes by Bai and Kong], Jiaping Edition, vol. 61.
6. J. Bai and Z. Kong, *Bai Kong Liutie* [Six Volumes by Bai and Kong], Jiaping Edition, vol. 62.
7. J. Bai and Z. Kong, *Bai Kong Liutie* [Six Volumes by Bai and Kong], Jiaping Edition, vol. 74.
8. Y. Ji, *Records of Tang Poetry*, vol. 52, n.d.
9. D. Peng, *Complete Tang Poems* [900 Volumes, Kangxi Edition], vol. 541.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of GBP and/or the editor(s). GBP and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.