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Article

Multidimensional Interpretation of the Division of Poetry into Tang and Song Schools in *Notes on the Art of Poetry*

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Abstract: At the very beginning of *Notes on the Art of Poetry*, Qian Zhongshu puts forward the core proposition of "dividing poetry into Tang and Song schools." This division, however, is by no means equivalent to treating "Tang" and "Song" as mere designations of historical dynasties. Breaking through the rigid framework of traditional poetic criticism, this view significantly deepens the arguments earlier presented in Yuan Mei's Suiyuan Remarks on Poetry and offers a brand-new perspective for the study of classical poetry—one fundamentally based on "aesthetic types" rather than strict "dynastic periodization." Grounded in the comprehensive exposition found in *Notes on the Art of Poetry*, this article systematically draws on contemporary research, including foundational analyses of Qian Zhongshu's theoretical frameworks and critical distinctions between name and reality in poetics. Furthermore, it connects the underlying poetic tenets of Suiyuan Remarks on Poetry with the practical critical analyses demonstrated in Annotated Selected Poems of the Song Dynasty. By synthesizing these diverse literary sources, the present study aims to elucidate the profound implications of "dividing poetry into Tang and Song schools" from three distinct dimensions: "refuting the dynastic thesis," "transcending the limits of time and era," and ultimately "returning to the foundation of individual nature." Through this multidimensional interpretation, the research highlights how this methodology revolutionizes our understanding of classical poetics, emphasizing intrinsic artistic temperament over chronological boundaries, thereby enriching the broader discourse on literary aesthetics and historical criticism.

Keywords: classical poetry; poetic criticism; aesthetic types; literary aesthetics; poetic style

1. Introduction

The study of Tang and Song poetry has long been a central topic in classical Chinese literary research. For a considerable time, scholars have been accustomed to dividing poetry into "Tang poetry" and "Song poetry" according to the historical dynasties in which the poets lived, resulting in the fixed assumption that "poems written in the Tang dynasty are Tang poetry, and poems written in the Song dynasty are Song poetry." While convenient for classifying and studying works from different periods, this dynastic method of division also brings problems, such as rigid categorization and neglect of the essential characteristics of poetic style [1]. Against this background, Qian Zhongshu opens *Notes on the Art of Poetry* with the proposition of "dividing poetry into Tang and Song schools," thereby subverting the traditional dynastic framework and redefining the connotations of "Tang" and "Song" in poetic criticism. This proposition is not a simple negation of the traditional division; rather, it reconstructs the aesthetic categories of classical poetics and provides crucial guidance for the in-depth study of classical poetry. Taking *Notes on the Art of Poetry* as its core, this article integrates relevant research and classical poetic works to interpret the profound implications of Qian Zhongshu's "dividing poetry into Tang and Song schools" from multiple dimensions, with the aim of offering a fresh perspective for the contemporary study of Tang and Song poetry.

2. Refuting the Dynastic Thesis

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Notes on the Art of Poetry begins with the statement: "Dividing poetry into Tang and Song, and further subdividing Tang poetry into Early, High, Mid, and Late Tang, has long been a commonplace among critics of poetry." This remark indicates that the idea of dividing poetry into Tang and Song is not Qian Zhongshu's original invention. Rather, it is a long-standing and significant topic in classical Chinese poetic criticism, with a discourse that can be traced back to the Qing dynasty and even earlier [2]. The Qing-dynasty poet Feng Xun once wrote, "Dividing Tang and Song is necessarily related to the juncture of the times, yet without disparaging Qi and Liang, one avoids vulgar elegance," explicitly linking the division to the fortunes of the age but not equating it with a dynastic division [3]. In his preface, Chen Yan wrote, "The Kaiyuan-Tianbao and Yuanhe reigns are the pivotal axes by which the world distinguishes Tang and Song poetry," treating the High Tang Kaiyuan-Tianbao period and the Mid-Tang Yuanhe period as key turning points in the transition of poetic styles, again without confining them within dynastic boundaries. Thus, discussions of "dividing poetry into Tang and Song schools" had already accumulated a certain academic foundation before Qian Zhongshu, laying the groundwork for his theoretical innovation.

A survey of traditional poetic criticism reveals that most critics fell into a core cognitive error [1, 4]. They directly equated "Tang-Song poetry" with "poems of the Tang dynasty" and "poems of the Song dynasty," mechanically binding poetic style to historical periods and forming an ossified habit of division. This habit was quite prevalent. For instance, the late-Ming and early-Qing scholar Qian Qianyi stated in his Preface to Elite Tang Poems: "Those in the world who discuss Tang poetry invariably speak of Early, High, Mid, and Late Tang." His discussion still did not break free from the framework of dynastic periodization, strictly limiting the division of Tang poetry to different phases within the Tang dynasty itself. This is essentially a continuation of the "dynastic" view of poetics.

Among traditional critics, Yuan Mei's viewpoint in Suiyuan Remarks on Poetry demonstrates a certain breakthrough. In Item 19 of Chapter 6, he clearly pointed out: "The division of poetry into Tang and Song is still strictly adhered to by people today. Yet they do not realize that poetry springs from a person's nature and temperament, whereas 'Tang' and 'Song' are merely the dynastic titles of emperors. How could a person's nature and temperament shift because of a dynastic title?" This argument explicitly repudiates the equation of Tang-Song boundaries with dynastic boundaries, proposing that "Tang poetry mostly embodies natural spirituality, while Song poetry lacks natural spontaneity." It aligns broadly with the core inclination of Qian Zhongshu's "dividing poetry into Tang and Song schools"; both emphasize the connection between poetic style and temperament rather than a linkage with dynasties. However, Yuan Mei's viewpoint still has obvious limitations. First, although he negated dynasty as the criterion for division, he did not specify what exactly constitutes the core dividing line between Tang and Song poetry, failing to construct a systematic framework. Second, his exposition implicitly tends to judge the superiority or inferiority of poetry based on the earliness or lateness of the era, falling short of treating the aesthetic values of Tang and Song poetry as equal. This also became a crucial entry point for Qian Zhongshu's further theoretical deepening.

Qian Zhongshu explicitly stated his thesis at the outset: "Tang poetry largely excels in graceful charm and rhythmic verve, while Song poetry largely prevails in structural sinew and intellectual contemplation." At the same time, he proposed "to classify by stylistic character rather than by historical change," emphasizing an approach that discusses poetry on its own terms and does not have to coincide with the order and disorder, prosperity and decline of dynastic politics. From the perspective of historical materialism, the economic base determines the superstructure [1]. We can readily recognize that literary culture, such as poetry, belongs to the realm of the "superstructure" and cannot be divorced from its social foundation and the background of the age. A seeming contradiction may arise here, but what Qian opposed was equating the designation of a dynasty with the appellation of the poetry of a certain period. This does not mean he denied that poetry from different historical stages possesses its own

distinctiveness. In his 1933 essay Preface to A Brief History of Chinese Literature, he wrote: "Those who discuss art should indeed trace the current back to its source; yet one must not cling stubbornly to the sameness of the root while neglecting the differences of the branches and leaves." This reflects his advocacy for tracing the source along the current according to the "structural character" of literary works, including poetry. Qian also remarked: "Furthermore, some critics strongly oppose the periodization of literary history [5]. Of course, the periods of literary history cannot be demarcated with absolute clarity, like frames of a grid. However, the prevailing styles and fashions of authors, which transform and transmit, mutate subtly and gradually become evident, can certainly be marked by their major and prominent features and thus differentiated." This is the intellectual foundation of his "dividing poetry into Tang and Song schools," which seeks commonalities amidst the complexity of poetic texts.

If poetry is not divided by dynasty, it follows that Tang-style poetry is not necessarily written by Tang people and Song-style poetry is not necessarily written by Song people. In the Tang dynasty, there were already forerunners of "Song-style poetic character." Han Yu's "Mountain Rocks" excels in "expository narration and argumentation," with "philosophical interest" far surpassing "rhythmic charm"; Qian Zhongshu even called it "opening the gateway to Song poetry." Du Fu's "Song of My Journey from the Capital to Fengxian" is permeated with "structural sinew and intellectual contemplation"; though written in the High Tang, it already possesses the "somber and forceful" quality of Song poetry, rather than the pure "Tang poetic natural spirituality" extolled in Suiyuan Remarks on Poetry [6, 7]. In the Song dynasty, there were also inheritors of "Tang-style poetic character." Mei Yaochen's "Mountain Tour in Lushan"---"Where might the homestead be? Beyond the clouds, a cock crows"---uses "inspired imagery" to construct a clear and spacious artistic realm, fully meeting the standard of "natural spirituality" in Suiyuan Remarks on Poetry and thoroughly overturning the prejudice that "there is no Tang poetry in the Song dynasty." The Preface to the Jiangxi School of Poetry states: "It is the poetry that is Jiangxi, not the person who is Jiangxi," confirming that poetic style has no necessary relationship with region. By the same logic, the division of poetry into Tang and Song also has no necessary connection to time, era, or place.

The article "A Superficial Analysis of Qian Zhongshu's Theory of 'Dividing Poetry into Tang and Song Schools'" further points out that the error of the traditional "dynastic thesis" lies in "confusing 'historical time' with 'aesthetic time.'" The Tang dynasty, as the golden age of poetry, formed the aesthetic paradigm of "graceful charm and rhythmic verve." However, this paradigm did not disappear with the fall of the Tang. Song poets, building on this inheritance, developed the new paradigm of "structural sinew and intellectual contemplation," yet they did not reject the aesthetic qualities of Tang poetry. The article takes Lu You as an example. Lu You wrote lines such as "At Melon Islet Ferry, boats amid night snow; at Dasan Pass, armored horses against autumn wind," which display the sinew of Song poetry. He also wrote lines like "In a small upstairs room, I listen all night to the spring rain; in the deep alley, tomorrow morning, someone will sell apricot blossoms," which embody the verve of Tang poetry. This amply demonstrates that "dynasty cannot constrain a poet's aesthetic choices," making the "dynastic thesis" untenable.

3. Transcending the Limits of Time and Era

Qian Zhongshu states in *Notes on the Art of Poetry*: "In the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, talented individuals emerged one after another, yet what they wrote could not go beyond the scope of Tang and Song, and can all be divided into the domains of Tang and Song." After demolishing the "dynastic thesis," the core proposition of "dividing poetry into Tang and Song schools" naturally extends to the following: Tang and Song poetry are independent "poetic domains" that transcend historical time. This view both absorbed the quintessence of Canglang Remarks on Poetry and broke through its "limitations of time and era," constructing a more inclusive poetic system. For example, the Qing-dynasty poet Yuan Mei's quatrain "Sightseeing" reads: "A shepherd boy rides a

yellow ox; his song shakes the forest grove. He intends to catch a chirping cicada, then suddenly shuts his mouth and stands still." The entire poem is fresh, natural, vivid, and lively, fully displaying the true character of Tang poetry's "natural beauty unadorned." Although not written in the Tang dynasty, it still belongs to the Tang poetic domain. "Those of lofty endowment incline toward the Tang; those of profound depths incline toward the Song."

The difference in poetic character lies not in the age, but in temperament and intellectual refinement. Those approaching the Tang originate from inspired feeling and express themselves naturally, like wind flowing over water. Those approaching the Song achieve their results through concentrated thought, with philosophical flavor subtly imbued, like a spring gushing from a crevice in the rocks. The poetry of later ages likewise does not go beyond the poetic domains of Tang and Song [8, 9]. As the German poet Schiller remarked: "The so-called difference between ancient and modern is not a matter of era, but of form." There were ancients who wrote modern-style poems, and moderns who wrote ancient-style poems. Moreover, some were able to write both ancient and modern-style poems. As Ye Xie stated: "Poetry after the Song has merely been a matter of flowers blooming and withering, and withering and blooming again."

Tang and Song poetry have both similarities and differences [10–12]. It is precisely these similarities and differences that, having broken through the limits of time and era and been transmitted for a thousand years, became the two great poetic domains for later ages. The Preface to Annotated Selected Poems of the Song Dynasty states: "Having Tang poetry as a model was both a great fortune for the Song people and a great misfortune for them." Tang poetry provided the Song with learnable experiences, but at the same time, its development also blocked some of the possibilities for the growth of Song poetry. Thus, Song poetry embarked on the unique direction of philosophical interest. As for commonalities, both Tang and Song poets had to face the even older classics that needed to be inherited and carried forward. For instance, the imagery and motifs created by pre-Tang literature such as The Book of Songs and Li Sao often appear in the poetry of both Tang and Song. The Tang poet Liu Yuxi wrote: "From the slope's head, gazing eastward, the spring breeze breathes life into the sweet pear trees everywhere," appropriating the "sweet pear tree" image from The Book of Songs. The Song poet Wu Qian wrote: "Although now it is peace and there are signs of plenty, I wish to recount the hardships told in the seventh month," appropriating The Ode of Bin July from The Book of Songs. It is evident that drawing upon pre-Tang cultural classics is one of their similarities---a major commonality transcending the eras. Their differences mainly concern differences in their style and temperament. In addition to some minor differences in rhetorical techniques, Qian Zhongshu's writings also frequently touch upon this. For instance, he pointed out that Song poets disliked using personal names and place names in poetry, while Tang poets used them quite often: "Dionysius' treatise On the Choice of Words first speaks of the effect of using personal names and place names in poetry.... Our ancient poets, when composing poetry, early on grasped this principle. Song Changbai's Liuting Remarks on Poetry, Chapter 13, 'Geography,' says: 'Jin Changzhen said: Poetic lines connecting geographical names often have a lofty and expansive atmosphere.' He then cites five-character couplets by Yu Xin, Jiang Zong, Du Fu, and Chu Guangxi as examples, saying that they 'all possess a grand and boundless atmosphere, their intent as expansive as the mountains and rivers.' Chapter 24, 'Ming Dynasty Lines,' states: 'Observer Jin said: Tang people using geographical names in poetry often achieve a grand atmosphere. I say that Ming people deeply grasped this method.'... Indeed, Ming people learning High Tang poetry took this as a shortcut. However, poets of the Jiangxi School were not fond of using personal and place names. This also marks a dividing line between Tang and Song."

Style and temperament are in themselves neither superior nor inferior; aesthetic commonalities shuttle through ancient and modern times. In Canglang Remarks on Poetry, Yan Yu proposed the concept of the "High Tang Manner." He held that "the poets of High Tang concentrate solely on inspiration, like the antelope hanging by its horns, leaving no trace to be found," and regarded "High Tang" as an extremely lofty paradigm

of poetry. This implicitly contains the value judgment of "Tang flourishing and Song declining." In *Notes on the Art of Poetry*, Qian Zhongshu does not deny the artistic achievements of Tang poetry. At the same time, he extensively quotes others to praise Song poetry. His high esteem for Wang Shizhen, his criticism of Zhu Yizun, and his appreciation for Tian Wen all manifest his fondness for Song poetry. Song poetry, with its "structural sinew and intellectual contemplation," supplements the deficiencies of Tang poetry. It is not a regression of "taking prose as poetry," but an expansion of the aesthetic paradigm of poetry. In *Notes on the Art of Poetry*, the difference between Tang and Song poetry lies in style and temperament, a difference in aesthetic emphasis. Precisely for this reason, Qian Zhongshu revised Yan Yu's view, unfolding the discussion with a parallel dualistic perspective, thus transcending the judgment of poetic style based on time and era.

4. Returning to the Foundation of Individual Nature

Style possesses individuality, which directly determines the aesthetic affiliation of a poem. Those with an unrestrained, spirited temperament and an open-minded, broad bosom mostly write poems belonging to the Tang poetic domain. Li Bai's line "Heaven has made my talents useful; I will surely be of use. A thousand pieces of gold scattered away will all come back again"—with its free and unconstrained poetic style—stands as a model of the Tang poetic domain. Those with a somber, introspective temperament and profound cultivation mostly write poems belonging to the Song poetic domain. Du Fu's line "If only I could obtain a great mansion with ten thousand rooms, to shelter all the impoverished scholars of the land and make them beam with joy"—with its magnanimous heart and somber poetic style—opens the precedent of the Song poetic domain [13–15]. Those with a multifaceted temperament and mixed cultivation can write poems crossing both Tang and Song domains. Su Shi, for example, possesses both the heroic abandon of "The Great River flows eastward" and the graceful restraint of "May we live long," making him a "cross-domain" poet.

Qian Zhongshu states that in the span of a single life, when young, talent and spirit soar, thus achieving the Tang mode; in later years, with profound and weighty thought, one becomes imbued with the Song tone. From this, it can be seen that life experience, changes in mindset, and the transformation of one's temperament and style affect the individual's aesthetic affiliation. Moreover, in his critical analyses of poets, he always takes "style and temperament" as the core, rather than generalizing based on the identity of "Song-dynasty poet." It is thus easy to see that the individual's temperament and style occupy a crucial position.

The paper "Interpreting 'Style': Qian Zhongshu's Division of Poetry into Tang and Song Schools" further elucidates the importance of "style and temperament" from the angle of "the distinction between name and reality." Traditional poetic criticism bound "style" to "dynasty" and "school affiliation." In contrast, Qian Zhongshu rectified names and realities, corresponding the "name" of "style" with the "reality" of "individual temperament." He shifted the criterion for judging the division of poetry into Tang and Song schools from "external identity" (dynasty) to "internal quality" (style and temperament), thereby restoring the core focus of this division to the poet-subject [16]. Take Tao Yuanming as another example: his poetry belongs to neither the Tang poetic domain nor the Song poetic domain. This is because his "style and temperament are unique—natural and unadorned, plain and unaffected, not seeking embellishment"—forming an independent aesthetic type. This further demonstrates that "individual style and temperament" are the ultimate basis for the aesthetic affiliation of poetry.

5. Conclusion

The theory of "dividing poetry into Tang and Song schools" is by no means a simplistic label for dividing poetry by dynasty; rather, it is a reconstruction of the aesthetic categories of classical poetics. Its core is to break the ingrained perception that "Tang-

dynasty poems are Tang poetry and Song-dynasty poems are Song poetry," and to redefine "Tang" and "Song" as two independent aesthetic types of poetry. This is also the central thesis that runs throughout the entire text.

From the perspective of poetic constitution, Tang poetry takes "graceful charm and rhythmic verve" as its soul. Although it reached its zenith in the High Tang manner, it did not disappear with the end of the High Tang. Moreover, it exhibits a certain cultural lag: the serene and distant style of Wei Yingwu in the Mid-Tang, and the subtle and lingering sentiment of Li Shangyin in the Late Tang, all continued its core qualities of being implicit and restrained, expressing emotions through scenery. This proves that the Tang poetic constitution possesses a vitality that transcends the age. Meanwhile, Song poetry opened up a new realm with "structural sinew and intellectual contemplation." It did not mechanically copy the path of Tang poetry, but integrated speculative thought into poetry, enriching the expressive dimension of poetry with allusions and philosophical principles. This innovation is not a regression into "taking prose as poetry," but an effective expansion of the aesthetic territory of Tang poetry. It fills the gap left by Tang poetry's emphasis on artistic conception and its relative neglect of intellectual speculation.

More crucially, "dividing poetry into Tang and Song schools" does not establish a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority between the two, but constructs an aesthetic configuration of "dual domains standing in parallel." The "graceful charm and rhythmic verve" of Tang poetry and the "structural sinew and intellectual contemplation" of Song poetry coexist in parallel, just like landscape poetry and frontier poetry, with no distinction of high or low, only a difference in aesthetic emphasis. To which domain a poem ultimately belongs is unrelated to dynasty, but is determined by the poet's style and temperament—either free and broad-minded, approaching Tang poetry, or somber and speculative, approaching Song poetry; a single poet may even embody the traits of both. This also returns to the essence of poetry being "grounded in the emotions."

Placed in a contemporary context, the value of this proposition becomes even more prominent. It inspires us, when reading poetry, not to be trapped in the prejudice of "dynastic superiority or inferiority." Instead, we should approach and understand works based on their aesthetic qualities and the poet's temperament. When creating, there is likewise no need to be fettered by the paradigms of "must learn from Tang" or "must learn from Song." One need only be rooted in one's genuine heart. Whether continuing the artistic conception of Tang poetry or drawing on the intellectual speculation of Song poetry, excellent works can be achieved. In short, the essence of "dividing poetry into Tang and Song schools" is a deconstruction of the dualistic oppositional thinking in classical poetics. It ultimately points to the deeper meaning that "poetry takes aesthetic value as its core and individual temperament as its foundation," providing a clear theoretical guide for contemporary research on and creation of classical poetry.

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