

# THE ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF ZHANG YAN'S EROTIC POETRY

YanLi Chen

*School of International Education, Zhejiang Yuexiu University, Shaoxing 312000, Zhejiang, China.*

*Corresponding Email: 6131381@qq.com*

**Abstract:** Zhang Yan, a prominent lyric poet during the Song-Yuan transition, infused his amorous works with personal tribulations and a profound sense of "Shuli zhi bei" (the grief of national subjugation) due to his identity as a loyal adherent of the fallen dynasty. This unique perspective distinguished his 26 amorous ci poems from traditional counterparts. In terms of artistic features, his works exhibit three notable characteristics: thematically, they dilute carnal desire while intensifying emotional depth and thematic richness; stylistically, they replace sensual flamboyance with an elegant and restrained diction to elevate poetic refinement; technically, his nostalgic lament for the fallen regime and personal misfortunes manifests through melancholic imagery and subdued emotional tones. The attenuation of eroticism, cultivation of refined elegance, and employment of desolate imagery collectively construct an ethereal aesthetic realm that transcends conventional amorous poetry. Such artistic innovations establish Zhang Yan's distinctive departure from traditional amorous ci through his spiritually resonant rather than physically indulgent creations.

**Keywords:** Zhang Yan; Erotic poetry; Remnant scholar - gentry status; Artistic characteristics

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In ancient China, the term "yanqing" signified eroticism and illicit romantic relationships. The earliest work to explicitly use "yanqing" in its title was *Yanqing dai Guo Shi zeng Lu Zhaolin* ("A Poem of Amorous Sentiments Composed on Behalf of Lady Guo for Lu Zhaolin") by the Tang poet Luo Binwang. This poem narrates the story of Lady Guo's love affair with Lu Zhaolin, who later betrayed her by pursuing another romantic entanglement, illustrating "yanqing" as extramarital passion. Over time, the semantic scope of "yanqing" expanded to encompass all forms of romantic relationships between men and women. Thus, in its broadest sense, "yanqing ci" refers to lyric poetry that explores diverse manifestations of romantic love, often interwoven with depictions of feminine beauty and amorous sentiments.

From the late Tang and Five Dynasties to the end of the Southern Song, "yanqing ci" gradually transcended its early characterization as "enslaved by passion, devoid of elegant and refined tones"[1]. Poets purified the romantic themes within these works, elevating them into expressions of refined elegance and moral integrity conveyed through gentle and restrained aesthetics. By the late Song period, "yanqing ci" shed its preoccupation with carnal desire and sentimental longing, instead amplifying the poet's subjective consciousness, enriching thematic depth, and ultimately achieving a poetic realm that balanced softness without coquetry and accessibility without vulgarity.

As a ci poet spanning the Song-Yuan transition, Zhang Yan's amorous compositions were deeply influenced by Jiang Kui's style. Building upon Jiang's legacy, Zhang further refined his works through an ethereal yet substantial aesthetic. Through continuous innovation and refinement, Zhang's poetry attained a lucid and flowing tone, spacious and expansive imagery, and ethereally elegant diction, thereby achieving an unprecedented degree of literary elevation. This artistic evolution solidified his unique contribution to the tradition of "yanqing ci," transforming it into a vehicle for both emotional resonance and intellectual sophistication.

## 2 THE DILUTION OF EROTICISM

Erotic poetry often emphasizes "gentle beauty", depicting love, parting, and pleasure. Early Dunhuang folk songs expressed love and hate directly, and "Flower - between School" poetry followed a tender style. There were also purely erotic works in the mid - and late Song Dynasty. However, Zhang Yan's erotic poetry lacks explicit eroticism and direct emotional expression, replaced by nostalgia and complaints.

Zhang Yan's erotic poetry mainly deals with love setbacks, closely linked to his personal and national tragedies. Before the Song Dynasty fell, Zhang lived a luxurious life, loved by his wives and concubines and admired by courtesans. After the fall, he lost his former glory, living in poverty and separation from his loved ones. His poetry mainly expresses. For example, in "Remembering Old Travels" (Passing by the Old Garden with Feelings ), the first part recalls past sweet moments with his wife and concubines, while the second part depicts his current bitter and lonely life and longing for his loved ones. Zhang's love tragedy, caused by the nation's fall, is intertwined with his longing for his homeland.

Zhang Yan's identity change also brought a sense of contrast to his erotic poetry. As a former noble and current, the contrast between his past and present life is reflected in his works. In "South Tower Order ", he sighs at the autumn scenery in a foreign land, recalling his past behavior in the pleasure world. The description of his scene with a courtesan is very bold, but after indulgence, he falls into deep thought, and his emotions shift from indulgence to melancholy. The stark contrast between his past and present life, due to the fall of the nation, has erased the of his erotic poetry, leaving only the.

Most of Zhang Yan's erotic poetry is not purely about eroticism, "but is intertwined with the feeling of contrast and the rise and fall of the nation" [2]. In "Long Pavilion" (Feelings on the Old Residence), the first part describes the present scene and the poet's mood. The appearance of the former residence is still beautiful, but the people have changed. The poet recalls the past and feels heartbroken. He can't help but think of the past when he parted with his lover, a scene that is hard to forget. The poet's life has changed dramatically due to the family's downfall, and the contrast between past and present makes him feel even more sorrowful about the destruction of his home and nation.

In "Leaning on the" (Writing Sentiments for Someone at a Banquet), "National Fragrance" (Orioles, Willows, and Smoky Dikes), and "Memory of a Fair Lady" (The Beauty of the Wind and Moon), although they are erotic, they all contain endless longing for lovers. However, the strong contrast between past and present has diluted this longing, allowing feelings of melancholy and the to arise spontaneously. Zhang Yan's erotic poetry, both in content and expression, has diluted the element of eroticism, incorporating feelings of personal and national tragedy. This has enabled him to transcend the limitations of writing about love for its own sake, adding depth and emotional intensity to his works.

### 3 REFINED TASTE

In the Southern Tang and early Northern Song periods, poets began to infuse their personal awareness into erotic poetry, leading to a reduction and internalization of its overtly sensual elements. This paved the way for a new style of writing about tender emotions with refined elegance. Zhang Yan's erotic poetry stands out for its clear, elegant, and proper style, moving away from the softness and vulgarity of earlier works. It also shifts the focus from personal emotional entanglements to a broader sense of national and familial tragedy, thus elevating the tone of his works to a higher, more refined level.

Most of Zhang Yan's erotic poems are marked by deep, implicit, and elegant emotions, offering a fresh and sophisticated aesthetic that is truly thought-provoking. Take his "The Beauty of Yu" for example: "Your eyebrows, like painted emerald, gather the traces of spring. It's hard to cut off the source of sorrow. The broken silk thread can't bind the beauty of youth. It follows the fallen petals and drifting water to the ends of the earth. I once mistakenly recognized it as Zhang Tai, but it turned out to be Yang Pass. I'll carry my new hatred with the willow catkins. I wonder which family's yearning is just a tiny bit." Here, the poet uses the willow as a metaphor, suggesting that past vows have faded like smoke, leaving him in solitary longing. Even if he breaks the willow branch, he can't reclaim his youth. The allusions to "Zhang Tai" and "Yang Pass" both signify places of parting. The lines "I'll carry my new hatred with the willow catkins. I wonder which family's yearning is just a tiny bit" express his uncertainty about where his loved one has married. By linking a speck of willow fluff to a trace of yearning, the conception is truly ingenious, giving rise to a sense of melancholy. The poem's tone is clear and elegant, with deep-felt emotions, yet no trace of vulgarity.

Zhang Yan rejected the subtlety of the Flower-between-School and the lyricism of Liu Yong. He advocated a refined style to counteract the prevailing trends of vulgarity and lewdness, strongly promoting the principle of "discarding the vulgar and the lewd, and being joyful without excess." By integrating the elegance and depth of the refined style with the boldness and breadth of the unrestrained style, Zhang Yan developed his own clear and proper lyrical voice. In the face of harsh reality, his erotic poetry no longer experiences drastic emotional fluctuations but focuses on recalling past moments of happiness. Thus, when writing about erotic themes, Zhang Yan is not enslaved by emotions but can, at a certain level, convey a sense of the rise and fall of nations. For instance, in "The Return of Ruan Lang" ("Drunk, I don't believe there are cuckoos crying, Twenty years in the south of the Yangtze River"), "The Peaceful Joy" ("The flower-gatherer is gone"), and "Treading on the" ("On a suburban outing, I come across a girl throwing a flower into the water, and I get it, so I jokingly write this"), all erotic works, it's hard to find elements of eroticism, only a strong sense of sorrow for the fallen nation permeates them.

Having fallen from a life of wealth and leisure to one of wandering and hardship, Zhang Yan, like Bai Juyi, developed a sense of empathy for women of the lower classes due to their shared experiences and circumstances. For example, in "Memory of a Fair Lady" ("The Beauty of Wu") ("Sighing at myself, I am among the reeds and bamboo, ten thousand miles away at the ends of the earth") and "National Fragrance" ("We looked at each other, tears streaming down our faces, covering our faces with shame, afraid to speak of the past"), the works are named erotic but are actually refined erotic poetry. The poet mainly stands on the side of unfortunate women to express his boundless sympathy for them, and this feeling of sympathy has lost its erotic basis. Take "The Longing" ("Farewell to Xiao Qian") as an example: "Coming and going heart, short and long pavilions. Only a cloud separates them in between. I wonder where to look for it. Sullen and frowning, Hating and angry, We are both fallen people at the ends of the earth. This feeling is as deep as the mist and water." The first part of the poem follows the traditional style of erotic poetry, but the second part, with the lines "We are both fallen people at the ends of the earth, This feeling is as deep as the mist and water," conveys a sense of personal history and offers a new perspective. The poet, due to the destruction of his home and country, wanders about, while the woman in the poem has fallen from her previous life of song and dance into poverty and. The impoverished and faded courtesan makes the poet think of his own dramatic change in status, thus generating a feeling of empathy. The woman in the poem therefore becomes more three-dimensional, approachable, and respectable. She has shed the heavy makeup of her past and appears before us as a woman who has tasted the hardships of life.

Compared to the superficial and vulgar erotic poetry of Liu Yong, Kang Yu zhi, and others, Zhang Yan's erotic poetry contains no lewd or shallow elements. It is more about a pure appreciation for beauty. For example, in the three erotic poems "Butterflies and Flowers" ("Gift to Yang Rouqing"), "Memory of a Fair Lady" ("The Beauty of Wu"), and "Good

Things Near" ("Gift to Xiao Qian"), all contain the word (pretend), depicting the shy demeanor of a loving woman trying to conceal her feelings. If the poet viewed these women who earn their living by selling smiles through colored glasses, it would be hard to discover their endearing qualities. It's only because the poet experienced the earth-shaking changes of the fall of the Southern Song Dynasty and his own dramatic personal changes that he can view the courtesans, who share a similar fate, as equals. This leads him to feel sympathy for them and to re-examine these women who have fallen into the dust with a respectful gaze. As a result, his erotic poetry becomes a refined version in terms of emotional identification.

In conclusion, Zhang Yan's erotic poetry, "with its clear and proper writing style"[3], portrays the poet's emotions while incorporating a sense of national sorrow, thus diluting the erotic elements and eliminating any trace of vulgarity. The dramatic change in Zhang Yan's status also enabled him to feel a sense of empathy for the lower-class courtesans, thereby broadening the ideological scope of erotic poetry and enriching its content. In Zhang Yan's erotic poetry, "the writing style is elegant, and the emotions are even more so"[4].

#### 4 DESOLATE TONE

After the fall of the Song Dynasty, Zhang Yan's love poems were marked by his longing for his homeland and his personal experiences. The pleasure-seeking and enjoyment in his works were merely a facade to cover his loneliness and emptiness. He no longer had the leisure and elegance of a wealthy man. His difficult life, emotional emptiness, and national and family hatred weighed heavily on him, and all these emotions were poured into his poetry. Thus, reading Zhang Yan's love poems, we can sense his desolate writing style, low-spirited emotions, and deep sadness, even when he writes about joyous occasions and grand banquets.

In the "Court Medium" written during the Qingming Festival: "During the Qingming Festival, the rain falls heavily, and the tide floods the sandy head. I am coldly watched by pear blossoms as I bitterly yearn for distant lands. Swallows dart behind curtains, orioles flit among households, clouds fill windows, mist veils terraces. On waking from drunkenness, crows cry. I break a willow branch, but on returning, for which home is it meant?"

The first two lines depict the poet traveling in the rain to dispel his loneliness during exile. The Qingming Festival is usually associated with drizzling rain, but the poet uses the word (loud rain) to create a lively scene that contrasts with his lonely heart. The phrase "I am coldly watched by pear blossoms" reverses the usual perspective, making the pear blossoms seem to coldly observe the poet. This "cold" gaze highlights the author's miserable situation in the rain and his longing for home. The poet's unspoken bitterness, sorrow, and hatred can only be silently endured by him. In the following lines, "Swallows dart behind curtains, orioles flit among households, clouds fill windows, mist veils terraces. On waking from drunkenness, crows cry," the poet tries to alleviate his loneliness by visiting a pleasure house and drinking, but the loneliness returns after the drunkenness wears off. The last two lines, "I break a willow branch, but on returning, for which home is it meant?" show that the poet, realizing he has no home to return to, feels desolate and helpless. Liu Xizai said, "Zhang Yutian's poetry is clear, profound, desolate, and lingering." [5] This assessment aptly captures the essence of Zhang Yan's work.

Under the poet's pen, love poems have lost their charm and allure, presenting instead a scene of pain and desolation. For example, "Leaning on the Luo Xiang" (Writing Sentiments for Someone at a Banquet) would likely be filled with a luxurious and passionate style if written by Liu Yong or Wen Tingyun, but Zhang Yan's version is filled with heartbreak and choking desolation. The lively banquet scene fails to dispel the poet's loneliness and only adds to his misery and sorrow.

In "Memory of a Fair Lady": "Fair maiden in the moonlight, I recognize her carriage in the willow shade. Her spring-deep makeup is less bright, her eyes flow like water, reflecting blooming flowers. Her oriole-like voice slips through patterned. People praise her low singing. Afraid of misleading Zhou Lang's drunken eyes, she leans on her fan and pretends to hide. Why must the red be shattered? Listen to the end of the tune, is it not worthy of sighs? No one knows this feeling, which bright moon belongs to which home? Dust rolls on, old age approaches. Entrust emotions to the pipa. I sigh at myself, among the withered reeds and bamboo, ten thousand miles away at the ends of the earth.

The first part depicts a charming and talented courtesan. The poet once wandered here, enjoying a life of luxury and song. However, time has been unkind, and the past are gone, with the former lover's whereabouts unknown. Only "Dust rolls on, old age approaches. Entrust emotions to the pipa." remains. How can this not make one feel and? The phrase "I sigh at myself, among the withered reeds and bamboo, ten thousand miles away at the ends of the earth"[6] uses desolate imagery to convey a sense of loneliness and sorrow.

In Zhang Yan's love poems, there are other desolate works, such as "South Tower Order" ("Fearing the autumn wind in a foreign land") with the line "I hear that it is cool at night," where the cool night reflects a cooler heart. In "Crossing the River Cloud" ("In the land of brocade fragrance"), the line "Books are far away, only a slice of moon and reeds on the empty river" depicts a vast river with only a sliver of moon and reeds swaying, creating a desolate and cold atmosphere. In "Long Pavilion" ("Feelings on the Old Residence"), the line "Hate the west wind for not sheltering the cold cicadas, sweeping away all the leaves in the forest" uses the metaphor of the Yuan dynasty's brutal suppression of the Han people, evoking sympathy. The words "hate" and "sweeping away" both carry a desolate meaning. In "Reduced Word Osmanthus" ("Locked Fragrance Pavilion"), the line "Who accompanies my lonely chanting. Breaking chrysanthemums shatters my heart" conveys a sense of coldness and broken heart.

Zhang Yan proposed in "The Source of Poetry: Clear Emptiness: "Poetry should be clear and empty, not solid and substantial." [2] Clear emptiness leads to ancient elegance and steepness, while solidity and substantiality lead to

stagnation and obscurity." Zhang Yan not only summed up the Song poetry experience in theory but also drew on the strengths of many poets. While inheriting Jiang Kui's "clear emptiness" style, he transformed Jiang's lean hardness into steepness and lightness into desolation, giving his love poems a desolate beauty. Zhang Yan often uses words with a low - spirited emotional tone, such as "sorrow," "emptiness," "clarity," "coldness," "chill," "distance," and "depth." He also employs cold - colored imagery like fallen leaves, west wind, autumn sounds, empty rivers, and dusk to convey his state of mind and pour out his desolate emotions. This shows the "steepness" of his writing.

Zhang Yan's love poems, with their strong contrast between past and present, evoke a sense of the "sorrow of the millet and the" The element of eroticism is diluted, replaced by a clear, elegant style that moves away from softness and vulgarity. The poet, with an equal status, reviews this vulnerable group and pours in endless sympathy, making the love poems more elegant in both writing and emotion. The desolate writing style and low - spirited emotions create a non - vulgar and non - obscene world, distinguishing his work from traditional love poetry.

The Ciyuan (The Origins of Ci Poetry) asserts: "To engage with 'the breeze and moon' is to refine one's moral character," [7] emphasizing that depictions of romantic themes should serve to "cultivate temperament" rather than merely chronicle amorous affairs. It further declares: "Ci poetry must strive for elegance and uprightness . When one's aspirations are enslaved by passion, the work loses its refined and dignified tone." [7] Even when portraying romantic love, poets must avoid being dominated by mere sentiment, instead "discarding frivolous ornamentation to achieve joy without indulgence ." Only works embodying "elegance and uprightness" were deemed exemplary.

Following the fall of the Song dynasty, Zhang Yan's amorous ci poetry became imbued with "the grief of millet's growth" — a metaphor for lamenting dynastic collapse — and profound reflections on personal tribulations. This infusion of historical gravity and existential depth endowed his amorous compositions with a solemn richness, enabling them to transcend "the conventional categorization of ci as a genre fixated on amorous themes" . By intertwining political allegory with emotional resonance, Zhang Yan's works elevated the traditionally marginalized "yanqing ci" into a medium for both lyrical beauty and intellectual contemplation.

"Family and national misfortune make poets fortunate." [8] The fall of the Song Dynasty gave Zhang Yan the identity of a remnant scholar - gentry. The "sorrow of the millet and the" and his personal experiences enriched the of his poetry. Influenced by various factors, Zhang Yan's love poems are not merely about eroticism but involve more rational thinking.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Liu X Y. The Creation of Zhang Yan's Ci Poetry from the Perspective of Adherent Literature: A Case Study of Love-themed Ci. Hubei: Ancient and Modern Literary Creation, 2022(23):12.
- [2] Yang H M. A Study of Zhang Yan's Poetry. Shandong: Qi Lu Bookstore Press, 1989: 98.102.
- [3] He Y L. A Study on Allusions in Zhang Yan's Ci Poetry. Fujian: Journal of Fujian Normal University, 2020(12): 233.
- [4] Zhang L Y, Zhang Y W. The White - Haired Remnant Scholar Cannot Bear the Sorrow, the Sunset Makes Him Sad as the Last - Guarding —— On the Artistic Characteristics of Zhang Yan's Poetry . Heilongjiang: Journal of Mudanjiang Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), 2007, (07): 96.
- [5] Liu X Z. Comments on the Art of Literature. Anthology of Ci Poetry Criticism. Beijing: People's Literature Press, 1986: 3696.
- [6] Tang G Z. Anthology of Ci Poetry Criticism. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1986: 259.
- [7] Zhang Yan. Ciyuan (Vol. 2). In Cihua Congbian (Collected Critiques on Ci Poetry) (Vol. 1). Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1998: 255, 256.
- [8] Xu F H. Half Is Transmitting Hate in the Air—Discussing the New Changes in Zhang Yan's Erotic Poetry. Henan: Journal of Nanyang Normal University, 2004, (11): 205.