

# The Popularization and Simplification of Literature in the Middle to Late Tang Dynasty

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## Abstract

During the middle to late Tang Dynasty, the weakening of the aristocratic class was evident as a rising nouveau-riche class emerged. The proportion of court officials from this nouveau-riche class increased continuously, and the newly ascended class sought urgent cultural manifestation. The most notable result was the emergence of a literary style, literary works, and literary forms marked by a more populist and simplified approach.

**Keywords:** Middle to Late Tang Dynasty, literature, popularization, simplification

## 1. Introduction

Since the Sui and Tang Dynasties, the imperial examinations, especially Empress Wu Zetian's policy of selecting scholars based on poetry and prose, opened up avenues of upward mobility for children from humble backgrounds, decisively impacting the rise of the emerging lower-class gentry. Chen Yinke stated, 'Under the reign of Empress Wu Zetian, there was a significant emphasis on the selection of literary talents, and unconventional individuals were employed. Consequently, the imperial examination became the target of nationwide competition.' At that time, among the people of Shandong and Jiangnan, many were adept in literary arts but were disregarded due to their lack of association with the influential groups in Chang'an. The political changes during that period provided them with an opportunity to ascend to the court, leading to the displacement of the established families 'political power and positions from Western Wei, Northern Zhou, Yang of Sui, and the early Tang Dynasty, overtaken by this emerging class' (Chen, 2011). Consequently, the emerging gentry continuously rose, and their cultural spirit found expression in literature, resulting in a phenomenon marked by a more populist and accessible literary style.

## 2. The Rising Gentry Class and Popularized Literature

The Emerging Gentry Class often originated from the middle or lower echelons, comprising individuals from humble backgrounds or fallen aristocrats. They possessed a deeper understanding of the hardships faced by common people and were well-acquainted with popular culture. The emerging gentry scholars and literati had a profound and ingrained empathy for the common people. Yu Yingshi contends that 'Apart from the Buddhists who continued their compassionate mission to save sentient beings during the Sui and Tang Dynasties, poets and literati such as Du Fu, Han Yu, Liu Zongyuan, Bai Juyi, and others were also representative of the "conscience of society" at that time' (Yu, 2003). He believed that the gentry literati of the Tang Dynasty represented popular culture, enabling them to voice the concerns of the common people. This representation was evident in literature, manifesting as populist literature that echoed the voices of the middle and lower classes. Literary forms such as the poetry of literati in the middle Tang Dynasty, literati folk songs, and Tang Dynasty legends were all examples of popularized literature.

### 2.1 The literati Yuefu Poetry

The literati Yuefu poetry underwent multifaceted transformations and innovations at the hands of emerging gentry scholars, advocating for a cultural shift towards a more popular and less refined style, diverging from the traditional literati Yuefu tone. In his "Midnight Talks at Cold Studio," Master Huihong of Song Dynasty noted: "When Bai Letian (Juyi) composed poetry, he would have an old woman interpret it. He asked: 'Do you understand?' If she did, he would record it; if she didn't, he would revise it" (Master Huihong, 1988). Bai Juyi

was devoted to speaking for the common people. His narrative poetry circulated widely among the populace. Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty lamented in “Eulogy to Bai Juyi”: “Young boys can sing the ‘Chang Hen Ge’ and the Northern ethnic people can sing the ‘Pipa Song’” indicating the broad dissemination of Bai Juyi’s poems (Chen, 2005). In Bai Juyi’s “Letter to Yuan Jiu”: “From Chang’an to Jiangxi, spanning three to four thousand miles, at every township, temple, inn, and on passing boats, there are often poems written by servants. Both gentlemen and commoners, monks and nuns, widows and maidens, frequently compose poems about the servants” (Chen, 2005).

Zhang Ji and Wang Jian, from a populist perspective, wrote numerous Yuefu poems rooted in folk customs. Zhang Ji’s “Jiangcun Xing,” “Yun Tong Xing,” “Chun Shui Qu,” “Chang Tang Hu,” “Ye Lao Ge,” and “Qiao Ke Yin,” and Wang Jian’s “Sai Shen Qu,” “Shen Shu Ci,” “Cu Can Ci,” “Dao Yi Qu,” “Tian Jia Xing,” “Cu Ci Ci,” and “Hai Ren Yao,” predominantly focused on rural life, folk rituals, natural scenery, and rural woodcutters. The poets attempted to break free from the confines of scholarly thoughts, adopting the perspectives of the most ordinary and common people, employing a folksy tone to depict customs and sentiments, expressing the simple desires of the people.

Consciously employing an archaic and accessible language, the poets utilized a plethora of onomatopoeic and mimetic words akin to colloquial expressions, reminiscent of folk songs. For instance, Zhang Ji’s “Dao Yi Qu” describes, “In autumn’s chill, the jade hairpin dances, tugging at the robe’s hem” and “Tian Jia Xing” portrays, “Although May is hot, the wheat breeze is clear, the loom clacks at the eaves. The wild silkworms spin cocoons, undisturbed, while autumn moths flutter amid the leaves.” These onomatopoeic phrases vividly and simply depict the scenes with lively and vivid imagery.

Zhang Ji and Wang Jian also ventured into composing Yuefu poetry in the common style prevalent among the people at that time (Liang, 2011). For instance, the traditional format of “Wan Zhuan Ge” utilized three, five, and seven-character lines, yet Zhang Ji wrote “Wan Zhuan Xing” entirely in five-character lines, while Wang Jian’s “Wan Zhuan Ci” adopted a form resembling miscellaneous folk poetry, demonstrating significant variations. Zhang and Wang’s secularized Yuefu poetry not only touched upon the sentiments of local customs but often carried a subtle satire, portraying the didactic aspect of Yuefu poetry in shaping societal customs. For example, Zhang Ji’s “Ye Lao Ge,” describing “sparse seedlings and excessive taxes, leading to food shortages; the grains sent to the government warehouses turn into soil,” depicting the impoverished people suffering from hunger while surplus grain sent to the government warehouses spoils. Similarly, “Jiangcun Xing” portrays “the scorching and drought-ridden weather in southern Jiangnan, making farming laborious and painful,” while “Mu Tong Ci” describes “cattle herds refraining from grazing; the government officials forcibly cut off their horns,” highlighting the people’s suffering while satirizing the oppressive rule of the authorities.

Likewise, Wang Jian’s “Tian Jia Liu Ke” describes “twin tombs lying directly to the west of the county road; I instruct the commoners to escort you,” and “Cu Can Ci” illustrates “three days after opening the cocoon, snow falls heavily. I must deliver the new cocoons to the county officials, while the village urges me to weave. Who should I sell these cocoons to?” Moreover, “Tian Jia Xing” depicts “not expecting wealth in return for labor; refraining from selling the young calf in the city. The food and clothing in the countryside lack disparity, leading to contentment without seeking the county officials’ gates,” illustrating deep sympathy for the impoverished commoners and disdain for the exploitative officials.

## 2.2 Folk Yuefu Poems

Liu Yuxi composed numerous folk Yuefu poems. Having been banished to various places for an extended period, he absorbed local ethnic customs. Historical records mention: “Following Innovation of the Wang Shuwen community downfall, as a member of the community, he was demoted and served as the Inspector of Lianzhou. Later, he was demoted again and became the Sima of Langzhou. Residing in the southwestern frontier, amidst uncultivated customs and remote terrains, he found it hard to relate... The local tribes cherished witchcraft, indulging in ritualistic dances and often singing folk tunes. Liu Yuxi sometimes involved himself in these activities, adopting the works of ancient poets to teach shamans and priests. Hence, the songs of the Yi people in the wild caves of Wuling frequently echoed Liu Yuxi’s words” (Liu, 1975). Liu Yuxi’s “new lyrics” encompassed both fixed tune forms, akin to modern lyrics like the “Bamboo Branch Songs,” and many new Yuefu poems without a fixed tune, such as “She Tian Xing,” “Tai Niang Ge,” “Di Shang Xing,” “Mo Yao Ge,” “Cha Tian Ge,” and more. These Yuefu poems depicted the life and customs of people in southern regions, exhibiting distinct regional features in their themes. The language used was simple and vivid, conveying a smooth and graceful style, vibrant and concise in expression.

For instance, “She Tian Xing” portrays the agricultural life of peasants in southwestern mountainous regions.

With delicate strokes, the poet describes the unique labor scenes of the local mountainous folk, akin to a lively and fluent portrait of local customs. Similarly, in “Huaiyin Xing,” the second section describes, “Today, turning the boat’s head, the golden sunbird points northwest. Amidst misty waves and spring grass, thousands of miles resemble the same hue,” while the fourth section describes, “What arouses your envy? Envy the swallows at the stern of the boat. Carrying mud to the mast, they meet each other after a night’s rest.” These verses exude an enchanting mood and a refreshing style, akin to a breeze brushing against one’s face.

Liu Yuxi’s folk Yuefu poems spanned various themes and artistic forms, pursuing innovation. This innovation was particularly evident in the “Bamboo Branch Songs.” His “Nine Bamboo Branch Songs” were created to mimic Qu Yuan’s “Nine Songs” and were meant to transform contemporary bamboo branch songs into new lyrics suitable for propagation. The Bamboo Branch Songs assimilated the style of folk songs, featuring clear and melodious rhythms and harmonious sounds. Liu Yuxi’s Bamboo Branch Songs swiftly became popular new lyrics, inspiring poets across regions to emulate and follow suit.

Liu Yuxi was attentive to the satirical and didactic functions of Yuefu poetry. He criticized the inadequacy of the contemporary Yuefu in fulfilling its role as a “night-recited poetry” (Qu, 1989) underscoring the need for more didactic and satirical Yuefu. In his “Dai Jing’an Jia Ren Yuan” preface, he mentioned, “Being stationed far away in an unassuming position, unable to compose funeral poems, and prohibited from composing lyrical poetry resembling the Chu court, I hereby compose the ‘Jia Ren Yuan’ to contribute to the Yuefu” (Qu, 1989). This demonstrates his aspiration for his compositions to be sung through Yuefu. This aspiration is evident in his other folk Yuefu poems, like “Cha Tian Ge,” which is explicitly marked as “awaiting inclusion by Yuefu composers.”

Liu Yuxi crafted numerous politically allegorical new Yuefu poems, displaying strong satirical elements. Examples include “Ju Wen Yao,” “Bai She Yin,” “Hun Jing Ci,” “Wu Fu Ci,” and others. These allegorical new Yuefu poems reflected prevalent social issues of the time, exhibiting pointed criticism and profound metaphorical meanings, aligning with the essence of Yuan and Bai’s new Yuefu poetry and satirical poetry. Notably, Liu Yuxi’s Yuefu poems were adopted and circulated within the court, set to music and sung. Bai Juyi’s “Liu yuxi’s New Poetry” attests to this: “New lyrics have gathered in the Palace of Immortals and are now being played as musical compositions,” serving as a clear testament to the incorporation and dissemination of Liu Yuxi’s Yuefu poems within the court. As Liu Yuxi, akin to Yuan and Bai, composed numerous Yuefu poems with satirical connotations, especially new Yuefu poems, and as these poems were sung and disseminated, this might be seen as another success of the new Yuefu movement.

### 2.3 *The Tang Dynasty Legends*

The Tang Dynasty legends, composed in classical Chinese, were short stories that narrated extraordinary events using historical narrative techniques. The mid-Tang period witnessed the peak of prosperity for Tang Dynasty legends. The bustling and flourishing urban centers, particularly the brothels and markets, often served as fertile ground for the creation of Tang Dynasty legends. Diverse forms of folk arts, prevalent in the common populace, were frequently internalized as techniques in the crafting of Tang Dynasty legends.

As a burgeoning gentry class, their interactions with the lower strata of society exposed them to the oral folklore prevalent among the common folk. They were well-versed in the vernacular tales circulating in society, the popularized renditions of Buddhist teachings, literary transformations, and the various folk arts exhibited in the brothels and markets. It was due to these interactions that they could readily assimilate a plethora of experiences from folk literature and arts, making them more likely candidates for creating Tang Dynasty legends. Additionally, the Tang Dynasty legends were an important literary form in the imperial examination system, acting as a significant impetus for gentry scholars from humble backgrounds to engage in their creation.

Zhao Yanwei, a Song Dynasty scholar in “Yunlu Manchao,” noted: “During the Tang Dynasty, when scholars presented their examination papers, they would initially submit works that were endorsed by prominent figures of the time, submitting their names to the chief examiners. Subsequently, they would offer their written works. If a few days passed and they were still unsatisfied, they referred to it as ‘heating up the papers.’ Works like ‘Records of the Strange’ and ‘Tang Legends’ were among them. These works included various literary styles, demonstrating historical talents, poetic skills, and argumentative prowess” (Zhao, 1996). This reveals that Tang Dynasty scholars not only submitted poems but also Tang Dynasty legends as part of their examination papers. In fact, Tang Dynasty legends were one of the main literary forms submitted as examination papers. Chen Yinke mentioned, “Tang Dynasty scholars submitted various forms of fiction to the chief examiners to demonstrate their knowledge, no different from those who submitted classical poetry” (Chen, 2001). The renowned Tang Dynasty legends from the mid-Tang period were often authored by gentry scholars from humble backgrounds or fallen aristocrats. Works such as Chen Xuanyou’s “The Tale of Separation,” Shen Jiji’s “The Biography of Ren

Shi,” Li Zhaowei’s “The Biography of Liu Yi,” Yuan Zhen’s “The Tale of Yingying,” Bai Xingjian’s “The Biography of Li Wa,” Jiang Fang’s “The Biography of Huo Xiaoyu,” Chen Hong’s “The Tale of Chang Hen Ge,” among others, were created by these legends. Among these authors, Yuan Zhen and Bai Xingjian were from fallen aristocratic backgrounds, while the rest were likely from humble backgrounds. Unfortunately, historical records about their origins are either vague or absent. Even Jiang Fang, who served as a middle bookman, surprisingly lacks a dedicated biography in the two official Tang histories, indicating that their backgrounds did not attract much attention from historians.

In Tang Dynasty legends, the gentry literati often portrayed the noble families and aristocrats as protagonists. The male protagonists mostly hailed from esteemed aristocratic families. These tales often depicted their infatuation with women from humble backgrounds or performers, leading to neglect of their official duties. Alternatively, after achieving success, they would eventually falter, betraying trust and abandoning their principles, resulting in personal misfortune and the decline of their families. This narrative design subtly reflected the gentry literati’s dissatisfaction with the dominant aristocratic culture.

### **3. The Impact of Utilitarian Imperial Examinations on the Popularization of Literature**

The Imperial Examination’s “poetry and prose” section emphasized ornate literary styles, focused on rhyme and elegance, and consequently was criticized for its superficiality within the imperial examination system. This trend of vulgarization and superficiality affected literature, leading to a more commonplace expression of literary works. For instance, Bai Juyi and Han Yu secularized everyday life as poetic themes, as well as the secularization expressed in the folk customs and themes of Zhang Ji, Wang Jian, and others mentioned earlier. Beyond the secularization of poetry, the effect of utilitarianism in the imperial examination also influenced the secularization of the poets themselves. Some poets, such as Du Mu, Bai Juyi, Yuan Zhen, Zhang Hu, and Wen Tingyun, indulged in libertine behaviors.

#### *3.1 The Popularization of Poetic Themes*

Prominent poets like Bai Juyi and Han Yu used everyday trivialities and daily life as poetic themes. For example, Bai Juyi had numerous such poems: he wrote about food in “Cooking Okra,” attire in “Washing Bamboo,” and travel in “Snow in Jiangzhou.” He chronicled mundane events, such as the death of a horse in “Traveling with a Small White Horse for a Long Time and Presenting it in Chousang Station,” receiving fabric from a friend in “Receiving Green Silk from Yuan Jiu and Making Clothes out of White Banyan” and “Cui, the Magistrate of Lake Hu, Gave Hongshi a Jade Zither and Huan Offered Beautiful Articles in Return,” as well as writing about scenes he encountered in daily life, like an old boat in “Emotion towards the Old Boats of Suzhou,” a tree in the county hall in “A Tree in the County Hall Blooms Late and Fades Early and is Unrecognized,” and a mountain stream in “A Song of Longmen Weir.” He also penned numerous odes to everyday objects such as mirrors, fans, wine cups, tea leaves, cool mats, felt tents, and stoves. Like ordinary people, Bai Juyi also lamented life’s cycles, aging, and the fleetingness of youth in several poems. Han Yu similarly depicted everyday life in his poetry, often using peculiar language to express mundane sentiments.

Apart from the popularization of themes, many poets also paid attention to the colloquialization of language. For instance, Bai Juyi, Zhang Ji, Wang Jian, Liu Yuxi, among others, significantly emphasized colloquial language in their poetry. Bai Juyi’s vernacular language in his poetry stood out prominently. Yu Bian of Ming Dynasty praised Bai’s colloquialism, stating, “Bai Letian’s poetry adeptly uses colloquial language, nearly capturing the essence of human emotions and physicality” (Chen, 2005). The colloquialization of language in Bai’s poems manifested in the abundant use of quantifiers and the incorporation of common vernacular and folk language. But in Zhu jincheng’s opinion, “The language is too simple, close to common saying” (Zhu, 1988). Liu Xizai highly praised Bai Juyi’s use of colloquial language stating that “common language is easy to use but it is difficult to use language that is both common and novel. This is where Bai Juyi excels” (Chen, 2005). The colloquialization of language in Zhang Ji and Wang Jian’s Yuefu poetry also echoed this trend, as did Liu Yuxi’s folk song Yuefu. The popularization of poetic themes and language vividly showcased the transition of poetry from the “refined” to the “commonplace.”

#### *3.2 The Poets’ Dissolute Behavior*

Since Bai Juyi’s appointment to a leisurely post in the Eastern Capital, he indulged in revelry, enamored with song and dance entertainers. In the preface of “Five Songs Celebrating Prosperity,” he wrote, “Seven years in April, after resigning from the Henan Prefecture, I returned to Luyedao. With self-provided dwelling and ample clothing, devoid of desires or pursuits, sometimes singing or dancing, I leisurely adapted to my circumstances, fortunate to be a man of He Luo” (Chen, 2005).

In his later years, Bai Juyi began housing numerous courtesans, personally instructing them in music and dance. Bai juyi had a concubine named Fan Su, who was good at singing, and a dancer named Xiaoman, adept at dancing. He once said, Cherry lips of Fan Su, willow waist of Xiaoman. This vivid portrayal of Fan Su's luscious lips resembling cherries and Xiaoman's supple willow-like waist origin at Bai Juyi's hand. Similarly, in "After Drinking, Writing on the Li and Ma Courtesans," Bai wrote about the seductive performance of entertainers in vibrant colors. In another poem, "Even the Small Courtyards Have Moonlight," Bai described the various courtesans or concubines under his patronage, including Lings, Guers, Zis, and Honges. These women were referred to as "Zang Huo," or family concubines. The poets' libertine lifestyles further influenced the trivialization of poetic themes.

Qian Zhongshu in "Records of Conversations on Art" mentioned, "Xiangshan's (Bai juyi) talent reflects the past and present; however, his poetry lacks depth, exuding an air of vulgarity. There remains a gap in the domain of profound poetic mastery" (Qian, 2007). The term "vulgarity" refers to the normalization of ideas, a characteristic prevalent in Bai's poetry. For instance, in "Ten Verses on Brewing Family Wine," Bai Juyi depicted the winemaking process in the narrative of an experienced farmer. He elaborated on the brewing methods, emphasizing the need for water from September 9th and malt from the seventh month of the Lunar calendar. Bai's poetic language significantly embraced colloquialisms, employing quantities in lines like "In the dim twilight of the western chambers, cooking heat rekindles the autumn lotus; by the fence, misty grasses thrive in a spring breeze" and "Transporting my home three thousand miles away, the fruit has ripened after six or seven years." His writing style utilized mundane, everyday language.

Du Mu, who was born of noble background family, he was equally mundane and superficial, portraying more frivolity. Having served in Yangzhou for ten years in a humble official position, although talented, Du Mu was unruly. He frequently visited brothels, reveling in the company of beautiful women, engaging in music, chess, and dance, leaving behind several superficial and flamboyant works. In "Farewell Thoughts," Du depicted himself as a carefree wanderer, embodying youthful recklessness and a penchant for indulgence: "Living freely, roaming far and wide, carrying wines by rivers, and being accompanied by the delicate figures of Chu. A decade in Yangzhou felt like a fleeting dream, earning me a name in the local brothels." This self-portrait revealed Du's youthful exuberance, using vivid and flamboyant language. Du had a particular fondness for a songstress who was strikingly beautiful. In one of his parting poems, he wrote, "Slender and graceful, barely thirteen, she's a sweet bean sprout at the start of spring. The ten-mile journey on a Yangzhou road in spring breezes; she rolled up the pearl curtains, and nothing compares." These poems portrayed Du Mu's libertine lifestyle. Additionally, Yuan Zhen had over a hundred "seductive poems," while Wen Tingyun had an abundance of sensual Yuefu.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The trend towards popularization and commonality in literature during the mid to late Tang Dynasty stands as a significant hallmark of literary development in that era. This shift was closely intertwined with the societal backdrop, cultural ambiance, and the emergence of urban middle-class strata. At its core, this trend was notably influenced by the rise of the new gentry class and the impact of the shallowness associated with the imperial examination system.

Firstly, the emergence of the new gentry class brought about a more common form of literature, seen in the likes of literati music bureau poems, literati folk songs, and Tang Dynasty legends. These expressions echoed the voices of the middle and lower classes, representing a form of literature more attuned to their concerns and experiences.

Secondly, the emphasis on literary elegance in the imperial examination system's selection process, particularly regarding poetry and prose, led to the popularization of poetic themes. This, in turn, influenced the dissolute behavior of poets themselves. This shift not only diversified the forms and themes of literature but also broadened its audience base, exerting a profound and far-reaching influence on the development of literature as a whole.

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