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Some Chin Dynasty (金代) Issues in Literary Criticism

John Timothy Wixted

ABSTRACT

This essay takes a close look at the state of Chinese poetry in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, as defined by the on-going debate and interaction between two aesthetic schools: poets who emphasized substance, clear classical style and scholarship, and those who emphasized original style and expression, startling diction and the importance of poetic form. Representatives of the first group include Chao Ping-wen and Wang Jo-hsu, and of the second, Li Ch'un-fu and Lei Yuan. One way to interpret the aesthetic and literary critical issue here is as a productive tension between late T'ang Hsi-k'un style poetry, stressing originality for its own sake and striking turns of phrase, and the Chiang-hsi style of composition, initially inspired by the precepts of Huang T'ing-chien. Poems written in the latter style, with their clean classical form, tended however to degenerate into mechanical, formulaic exercises in versification.

KEY WORDS

poetic composition
laws of versification
Chiang-hsi style
formulaic versification
Hsi-k'un style

form over content
rough diction
startling turns of phrase
substance over expression
unadorned style

The late twelfth and early thirteenth century was an age in which the Chiang-hsi 江西 style of poetic composition was at its height. Although initially inspired by the precepts of Huang T'ing-chien 黃庭堅 (1045-1105), such poetry often degenerated into formulaic versification. Moreover, the tradition of late-T'ang Hsi-k'un style poetry 西崑體詩—in which unusual and startling turns-of-phrase, as well as originality for its own sake, were prized—persisted into Sung and Chin times.¹

In his monumental history of Chinese literary criticism, Kuo Shao-yü outlines two schools of critical thought in the Chin dynasty, distinguished in terms of the diction deemed appropriate to poetic expression. One group, represented by Chao Ping-wen 趙秉文 (1159-1232) and Wang Jo-hsü 王若虛 (1174-1243), is said to have emphasized substance over expression, the use of less flowery language in comprehensible, classical style, and the importance of scholarship. The other group, said to include Li Ch'un-fu 李純夫 (1185-1231) and Lei Yüan 雷淵 (1184-1231), advocated original expression, unusual style, and startling and rough diction, while setting much store on form.² Among these writers, only the critical views of Wang Jo-hsü are available in other than fragmentary form.

An emphasis on content as opposed to beauty of language is evident in the advice given to Wang Jo-hsü by his uncle and teacher, Chou Ang 周昂 (d. 1211):

When writing is well-constructed externally but poorly put together internally, then even though it may be good enough to astonish a group gathered at a banquet, it cannot survive the lone reader; it may be praised in public lip-service, but it will not prompt the reader's head-nodding in private.

Chou also taught Wang:

Writing should make idea its master and language its servant. When the master is strong and the servant is weak, there is no command that will not be obeyed. But people nowadays often make their servants haughty, to the point where insubordination is difficult to control. In extreme cases, the master becomes servant. Even if one employs the utmost skill in phrasing, such writing can never be true literature.³

The dichotomy between content and form is one that goes back to the

roots of the critical tradition.⁴ Here it is Chou Ang's contention that contemporary poets, under the influence of Huang T'ing-chien's literary precepts, do violence to true literature by paying undue attention to literary form.

It is clear from Wang Jo-hsü's own writing that he agreed with this assessment:

Poems of antiquity, although differing from one another in aim and manner of composition, were all products of poets' own attainment. Whenever words were appropriate and thought followed accordingly, it was sufficient to make one a creative poet. Never were there any rules of composition to hamstring one.

Huang T'ing-chien pronounced his method of versification. In this it is evident that he does not measure up to the ancients. And his disciples and relatives pass on his 'apostolic succession.'⁵ Can this be the true essence of poetry?⁶

Elsewhere, Wang Jo-hsü is even more critical of Huang T'ing-chien and his school:

The poetry of Huang T'ing-chien is striking but not exquisite. It is narrowly disciplined, lacking freedom of movement. He considers a display of scholarship as enrichment, and a transmutation of the stale and spoiled as freshness. But complete naturalness, like that flowing from the innermost part of a man, is deficient in him. This explains why he pursues but never overtakes Su Shih 蘇軾 [1037-1101].

Some argue, 'In prose, the choice is Su Shih; in poetry, Huang T'ing-chien.' Such a partisan view, coming from Huang's camp, has become common talk among literary men. Those who agree simply follow in Huang's steps without knowing they are going astray. Those who disagree, being cowed by his name, do not dare to criticize him.

How excellent is the argument of my uncle, Chou Ang, who said, 'When Sung writing reached Huang, it was already askew; after Ch'en Shih-tao 陳師道 [1053-1101], it is hopelessly bad.'⁷

Wang Jo-hsü's critique, moreover, is clearly of Huang himself and not just of his school:

If Huang T'ing-chien achieves a good line when writing poetry,

he usually ends without a good match for it. If he should manage a couplet, he simply cannot make a stanza. If by chance he gets all of it right, he doesn't know whom to send it to. Did you ever see a writer from the past like this?⁸

It is instructive to compare these views with those of the foremost critic of the age, Yüan Hao-wen 元好問 (1190-1257). Yüan shared the opinion of Chou Ang and Wang Jo-hsü that the Chiang-hsi school's influence on poetic writing was pernicious. This is clear from his well-known series in verse, "Thirty Poems on Poetry" 論詩三十首, specifically Poem 28 about the poetry of Huang T'ing-chien and his Chiang-hsi school of followers:

In classic elegance, hardly comparable to Tu Fu 杜甫 [712-770],
And in refined purity, completely missing Li Shang-yin's 李商隱
[812-858] trueness—
Yet in poetry, better to bow to Huang T'ing-chien,
Without joining the ranks of his Chiang-hsi followers.⁹

And the indictment of Ch'en Shih-tao noted above, ascribed to Chou Ang by Wang Jo-hsü, finds its complement in Yüan Hao-wen's criticism of the poet in Poem 29:

'Spring grasses on the bank'—the Hsieh family springtime;
How eternally fresh this single line!
Proofreader Ch'en behind his locked gate should be told,
'Too bad there's nothing gained, wasting so much effort
versifying.'¹⁰

It is not so clear, however, to what extent Yüan Hao-wen shared Wang Jo-hsü's negative view of Huang T'ing-chien's poetry. Huang is paired with Su Shih in Poem 22, in what is surely a double-edged statement about the two poets' verse:

From the singular beyond compare comes still more singularity;
'one wave no sooner stirs than countless lesser ones follow.'
With Su Shih and Huang T'ing-chien poetry reaches an end;
In the face of the present 'inundation,' who is there [but me to
revive it]?¹¹

And Poem 28, cited above, remains ambiguous as to whether Huang is as much under attack as are his followers.

Further, Wang Jo-hsü's wholehearted endorsement of Su Shih's poetry (quoted above, to which one might add the view attributed to Wang by Liu Ch'i 劉祁 [1203-1250]: "Wang Jo-hsü put Su Shih at the head of all writers since antiquity."¹²) is an opinion not fully shared by Yüan Hao-wen. The ambivalence Yüan feels toward Su Shih emerges clearly in Poems 21 through 25 in his thirty-poem series, as well as in his prose critique of the writer.¹³

Suffice it to say that the influence of Huang T'ing-chien and his school was an issue during the Chin dynasty. Yet, Huang was not without his advocates. Liu Ch'i describes Lei Yüan as follows:

Lei Yüan preferred unadorned ancient style. He modeled himself completely on Han Yü 韓愈 [768-824], even in poetry; and he also liked the innovative skill of Huang T'ing-chien. Whenever he wrote either poetry or prose, he liked to discuss it with friends. If there was something which was not just right, they would point it out to him and he would immediately change it. This is something difficult for most people.¹⁴

Li Ch'un-fu was also in the camp that Kuo Shao-yü describes as advocating strange and unusual diction. Liu Ch'i relates the following about Li:

Li Ch'un-fu told his disciples to create their own style when writing. He would always tell them, 'Turn to a new path. Do not follow upon the heels of others.' So he was very fond of the strange and unusual. But his prose did not depart from that of *Chuang-tzu* 莊子, the *Tso chuan* 左傳, Liu Tsung-yüan 柳宗元 [773-819], or Su Shih; and his poetry did not depart from that of Lu T'ung 盧仝 [d. 835] or Li Ho 李賀 [791-817]. In later life he especially loved the poetry of Yang Wan-li 楊萬里 [1127-1206], regarding its splashing liveliness as hard to equal.¹⁵

Yang Wan-li, who started out as a Chiang-hsi adherent, is not specifically discussed by Yüan Hao-wen, but Lu T'ung and Li Ho are. In Poems 13 and 16 he displays apparent acceptance of their idiosyncratic verse, while expressing dismay at its influence on later imitators. The former reads:

Always has literature had its broad, level path;
But for going every which way, none can compare with Lu T'ung.
Simple standard-script does not appeal to people nowadays,
So children end up drawing exorcists' strange signs.¹⁶

Liu Ch'i contrasts the styles of Wang Jo-hsü and Li Ch'un-fu as follows:

Wang Jo-hsü prefers that discussional writings have a defined style; he dislikes startling diction in writing. He wished to employ the kind of language one hears at home, and he went to particular pains with particles of speech. He was very different from the school of Li Ch'un-fu. He once said, 'Although Li Ch'un-fu's talent is great, he likes creating daring sentences and startling phrases; these are lacking in meaning and taste.'¹⁷

The picture of Li Ch'un-fu given in Liu Ch'i's account is partially contradicted by a preface written by the former to the work of a contemporary writer by the name of Liu Chi 劉汲. Li's preface, which is cited by Yüan Hao-wen in his *Choung-chou chi* biography of Liu Chi, contains discussion of the inadequacies of principles of composition of the Chiang-hsi school:

Men's minds differ, as do their faces.¹⁸ The 'sounds of the mind,'¹⁹ when expressed, become language. When one's language is commensurate with reason, it is termed letters. And letters having rhythmic measures are poetry. Yet poetry is a transformation of letters; how can it have a set style!

After all, in the three hundred *Odes*, a poem has not set stanzas; a stanza has no set lines; a line no set words; and a word no set tone. In matters of size, length, texture, or weightiness, so long as expression conveys intent, even the embittered or the grateful utterance of a corvée laborer or a maid may stand alongside that of a saint or sage. Each merely expresses feeling; that is all.

How unjust have been later generations' critical discussions of poetry! Since Ch'i and Liang times, such discussion has been afflicted with [Shen Yüeh's 沈約 (441-513)] rules of tonality,²⁰ they savor of a vaudeville show. Since the time of Shen Ch'üan-ch'i 沈佺期 [d. 729] and Sung Chih-wen 宋之間 [d. 712], natural grammatical syntax has been cut up; this is vulgarity in the extreme. Critics claim they hold a

secret unknown since the time of Ch'ü Yüan 屈原 [343-277 B.C.]. This is one absurdity.

Li Shang-yin enjoyed using obscure allusions and unusual diction. Late-T'ang poets mostly imitated him in what is known as 'Hsi-k'un style' poetry. They were completely lacking in the spirit of classic elegance and in broadminded generosity. Instead, they mocked Tu Fu, calling him a village pedant. This is a second absurdity.

Huang T'ing-chien was outstandingly gifted. Dismissing literary guidelines, he made the ordinary elegant and the old new. So long as orthodoxy was not violated, he resembled a *dhyanā* concentrating on a final line for insight. The various Chiang-hsi poets were at one in promoting Huang's method and have formed a separate school of verse. The better ones chisel and carve, while lesser ones imitate and steal. They commonly say, 'The poetry of Han Yü is really prose.' This is just as false as when an actor like [the famous artiste] Ambassador Thunder is on the stage dancing. They also say, 'Falling short of success in imitating Han Yü, one will become a mere Po Chü-i 白居易 [772-846].'²¹ This is a third absurdity.

Alas, after such talk gains currency, how can poetry survive!²²

Yüan Hao-wen largely agrees with Li Ch'un-fu's contentions. The first absurdity Li enumerates finds its complement in Yüan's Poem 17, where excessive attention to rules of prosody is frowned upon:

In the observance of level and oblique tones, expressive cleverness may be profound,
But for what purpose, the laborious polishing of poetic lines?
Dear Yüan Chieh's 元結 [719-772] water music ignored tones
of the musical scale;
It was simply 'divine sound 'mid mountains and clouds.'²³

Yüan Hao-wen expresses complete agreement with Li Ch'un-fu's assessment that Hsi-k'un verse is a second absurdity, as illustrated by the opening couplet from Poem 27: "Only with a century's passing does one sense the return of ancient style; / Yüan-yü period [1084-1094] poets, one after the other, come to the fore."²⁴ And in Poem 28, already cited, Yüan shares the view of Chiang-hsi poetry outlined as Li's third absurdity.

Yüan Hao-wen was not only in agreement with Li Ch'un-fu's critical views, he also had high regard for the man. The following poem, the first of "Two Funeral Songs for Li Ch'un-fu," was composed by Yüan Hao-wen in 1231:

Worldly laws constrain men, like lice in one's trousers;²⁵
 Yet you were a startling dragon, jumping over the heavenly gate.
 Your writing reveals the expansiveness of Tu Mu 杜牧 [803-852]
 And your drinking cups the style of Li Po 李白 [699-762].
 Long have we known you to stand alone, not compromising for
 easy sociability;
 Great you stand, because basically you are immortal.
 [But now that you are gone,] Who can we look to as a hero of the
 Central Plain?
 I'd like to summon a shaman to wake your bacchant soul.²⁶

In view of these citations and the discussion above, Kuo Shao-yü's placement of Li Ch'un-fu in the camp of those advocating unusual poetic diction, and hence ultimately in opposition to Wang Jo-hsü, Chao Ping-wen, and Yüan Hao-wen, seems an overly pat simplification.

No assessment of the period would be complete without reference to Chao Ping-wen, the literary lion of the time. He was the first to remark Yüan Hao-wen's talent,²⁷ and he was in charge of the imperial examinations the year Yüan passed. His own aphoristic advice concerning writing was as follows:

In writing one should not keep to a single style—at times be unusual and archaic; at times ordinary and flat. Why confine oneself?²⁸

Chao Ping-wen's approach to poetry met with the approval of Liu Ch'i, who was acquainted with the main literary figures of the period and who recorded their views on literature in his *Kuei-ch'ien chih*:

In the Hsing-ting and Yüan-kung reign periods [1217-1224], while in the southern capital, I associated with Chao Ping-wen, Li Ch'un-fu, Wang Jo-hsü, and Lei Yüan. The writing of prose and the composition of poetry were often discussed.

Chao was most meticulous in regard to the composition of poetry; he esteemed pregnant statement and craftsmanship. But he was rather inattentive to prose composition, paying heed only to general atmosphere.

Li Ch'un-fu was very meticulous in regard to prose composition; he analyzed primary and secondary members, the mechanisms that brought them together, and rhythm. But he was rather inattentive to poetry writing, discoursing only on diction and skill.

So I have adopted Chao's method of composing poetry and Li's method of writing verse.²⁹

The fact that Chao Ping-wen greatly admired young Yüan Hao-wen's poetry might be partly owing to the compatibility of their views concerning correct poetic composition.

Yüan Hao-wen's series, "Thirty Poems on Poetry," was written in 1217, so it is not clear which of the above-cited opinions were in fact known to him by that time. Regardless of whether or not specific views were known to him, they illustrate topics of current literary discussion. To the extent that poets like Lei Yüan were supportive of Chiang-hsi poetry and writers like Li Ch'un-fu were in practice (though not in theory) followers of the late-T'ang style of Li Ho and Lu T'ung, Yüan's remarks on these subjects in his thirty-poem series may be partially motivated as a critique of such current views or practice.

Notes

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For background discussion of the issues presented here, see the following three publications by this author: "Sung-Dynasty and Western Poems on Poetry," *Renditions* 21-22 (Spring & Autumn 1984), pp. 351-59; *Poems on Poetry: Literary Criticism by Yuan Hao-wen (1190-1257)* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1982; rpt. Taipei, 1985. Calligraphy by Eugenia Y. Tu 杜麗珍); and "A Finding List for Chinese, Japanese, and Western-Language Annotation to and Translation of Poetry by Yüan Hao-wen," *Bulletin of Sung-Yüan Studies* 17 (1981), pp. 140-85.

References to Yüan Hao-wen poems in this article follow the system used in the lattermost work. For example, "Yüan Hao-wen poem #793, p. 533" refers first to the consecutive poem number in the poet's corpus (#793), among a total of

1,366 *shih* 詩 poems listed in tabular form (together with references to all available secondary material) in "A Finding List . . ."; it also refers to the page number (p. 533) on which the poem appears in the best edition of Yüan Hao-wen's poetry: Mai Ch'ao-shu 麥朝綱, ed., *Yüan I-shan shih-chi chien-chu* 元遺山詩集箋注 (Peking, 1958; rpt. Taipei, 1982).

Note also the discussion of Chin dynasty poetry in Yoshikawa Kōjirō, *Five Hundred Years of Chinese Poetry: The Chin, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties*, John Timothy Wixted, tr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), Chapter 2, pp. 15-43.

2. Kuo Shao-yü 郭紹虞, *Chung-kuo wen-hsüeh p'i-p'ing shih* 中國文學批評史 (Shanghai, 1947; rpt. Tainan, 1974), vol. 2, pp. 90-100.
3. *Chin shih* 金史 (Chung-hua shu-chü 中華書局 ed.), ch. 126, p. 934. Unpublished translations by Donald A. Gibbs, with modifications.
4. The distinction between *chih* 質 and *wen* 文 is made in the *Tso chuan* 左傳, *Analects* 論語, and *Mencius* 孟子, and between *shih* 質 and *hua* 華 in the *Tao-te ching* 道德經 and *Wen hsüan* 文選.
5. At least five Chiang-hsi poets were relatives of Huang T'ing-chien.
6. Wang Jo-hsi 王若虛, *Hu-nan shih-hua* 滄南詩話 (Li-tai shih-hua hsü-pien 歷代詩話續編 ed.) 3.2a-b.
7. *Ibid.* 2.5a. Tr. by Stephen West, "Studies in Chin Dynasty (1115-1234) Literature," Unpublished Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Michigan, 1972, p. 27, with modifications.
8. *Ibid.* 3.2b. Tr. by S. West, p. 27, with slight modifications.
9. Yüan Hao-wen poem #793, p. 533. For discussion, see J.T. Wixted, *Poems on Poetry*, pp. 208-15.
10. Yüan Hao-wen poem #794, p. 534. For discussion, see J.T. Wixted, *Poems on Poetry*, pp. 216-21. The opening quotation is from a line by Hsieh Ling-yün 謝靈運 (385-433), whose poetic freshness is meant by Yüan Hao-wen to contrast with the studied ploddingness of Ch'en Shih-tao's compositions. The final line is taken verbatim from a poem by Wang An-shih 王安石 (1021-1086) critical of Han Yü—a line Ch'en in turn used to criticize Wang. So Yüan Hao-wen's use of the line is clearly witty and ironic: what Ch'en Shih-tao criticizes Wang An-shih for criticizing Han Yü for, is precisely what Ch'en Shih-tao himself should be criticized for.
11. Yüan Hao-wen poem #787, p. 531. For discussion, see J.T. Wixted, *Poems on Poetry*, pp. 168-76. Line Two is a famous poetic line by the monk, Hui-hung 惠洪 (1071-1128).
12. Liu Ch'i 劉祁, *Kuei-ch'ien chih* 歸潛志 (Chih-pu-tsu-chai ts'ung-shu 知不足齋叢書 ed.) 8.11b.
13. See J.T. Wixted, *Poems on Poetry*, pp. 162-94, including p. 173.
14. Liu Ch'i, *Kuei-ch'ien chih* 8.11b-12a.
15. *Ibid.* 8.10a. Tr. by S. West, p. 19, with modifications.
16. Yüan Hao-wen poem #778, p. 528. For discussion, see J.T. Wixted, *Poems on Poetry*, pp. 108-13. For Poem 16, see *Ibid.*, pp. 128-33.
17. Liu Ch'i, *Kuei-ch'ien chih* 8.11a. Tr. by S. West, p. 21, with modifications.
18. This opening line paraphrases a passage in *Tso chuan*, Duke Hsiang 31; cf. James Legge, *The Chinese Classics* (rev. ed. Oxford, 1895; rpt. Hong Kong, 1960), vol. 5, p. 566.
19. The phrase comes from Yang Hsiung 揚雄 (53 B.C.-A.D. 18): *Fa yen* 法言 (SPPY

- ed.) 5.3b. See J.T. Wixted, *Poems on Poetry*, p. 273, n. 1, for references to Western-language translations.
20. For references concerning Shen Yüeh's "Eight Defects" of poetry, see J.T. Wixted, *Poems on Poetry*, p. 276, n. 5.
21. See *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64, for other Sung-period discussion highly critical of Po Chü-i.
22. Yüan Hao-wen 元好問, comp., *Chung-chou chi* 中州集 (Shanghai, 1959; rpt. Taipei, 1973), ch. 2, pp. 77-78.
23. Yüan Hao-wen poem #782, p. 529. For discussion, see J.T. Wixted, *Poems on Poetry*, pp. 134-39. The quotation, which more literally reads "the strains of Shao and Huo (sacred music) 'mid mountains and clouds,'" comes from a poem by Yüan Chieh.
24. Yüan Hao-wen poem #792, p. 533. For discussion, see J.T. Wixted, *Poems on Poetry*, pp. 203-7.
25. The allusion is to the biography of Juan Chi 阮籍 (210-263): *Chin shu* 晉書 (Chung-hua shu-chü ed.), ch. 49, p. 1362.
26. Yüan Hao-wen poem #438, p. 365. The shaman referred to in the final line is the famous Wu Yang 巫陽, who appears in the *Ch'u tz'u* 楚辭 (SPTK ed.) 9.1b-2a; cf. David Hawkes, *The Songs of the South: An Anthology of Ancient Chinese Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 224.
27. See J.T. Wixted, *Poems on Poetry*, pp. 7-9.
28. Liu Ch'i, *Kuei-ch'ien chih* 8.10a.
29. *Ibid.* 8.11a.