Article

The Early Development of Tz'u Poetry in the Late T'Ang Dynasty: Through the Perspectives of Three Remarkable Tz'u Poets

Xiao Huang [1,*]

[1] Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications, Chongqing, China
* Correspondence: Xiao Huang, Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications, Chongqing, China

Abstract: Song tz'u, as a genre of treasurable Chinese literary work, is regarded as an important milestone in Chinese literary development. Evolving in the late T'ang dynasty, tz'u gradually shifted from fixed-length lines in shi to varied-length patterns, which were first regarded as a more entertaining but not serious form of informal literature. However, tz'u gradually gained high status as it continued to develop. Renowned tz'u poets such as Wen T'ing-yun and Wei Chuang made significant contributions to the early development of tz'u by exploring different stylistic approaches and enriching its expressive range. Wen T'ing-yun's works are known for their implicit meanings, rich imagery, and delicate emotional undertones, while Wei Chuang introduced more explicit expressions and logical narrative sequences. Later, Li Yu further advanced the genre by incorporating deep personal emotions and broadening the thematic scope of tz'u, further turning tz'u into a form of serious literature. This paper examines the contributions of these three early tz'u masters and their roles in establishing tz'u as a distinctive and enduring form in Chinese literary history.

Keywords: Song tz'u; tz'u poetry; Wen T'ing-yun; Wei Chuang; Li Yu

Published: 08 June 2025

1. Introduction

Song tz'u, along with T'ang poetry, Yuan drama, and Ming-Qing fiction, are the four cultural treasures in Chinese literary history. Tz'u, first emerged in the High T'ang Dynasty (ca. 713–755) as a new form of lyrics for songs to sing, was not considered a distinguished genre of Chinese poetry at that time; instead, tz'u was considered a new form of yueh-fu songs, which was a type of entertainment music but not serious literature. Tz'u was sung by courtesans and musicians at entertainment quarters for a long period before people took it seriously. Tz'u gradually started to develop out of popular songs into valuable literati poetry with the presence of Hua-chien chi, that is, "Anthology of Five Hundred Tz'u Poems" [1].

It is the revolutionary sentence pattern and use of tune patterns that distinguish tz'u from shi for the first time. T'ang poetry was written in same-length patterns, which means every line of a sentence should be of equal length. For example, one popular style of T'ang poetry named lv-shih (regulated verse) was regulated to be written in five-character lines or seven-character lines. But tz'u, in contrast, was written in lines of unequal length. It does not mean that poets could randomly choose the length of each sentence when composing tz'u. Although tz'u is composed in unequal lengths, there are still tz'u-p'ai, that is, tune patterns that poets choose and follow when composing. For example, in the Chinese lyric tradition, Lang t'ao sha employs a syllabic pattern of 3-3/7/7/7, meaning that the first two lines contain three syllables each, followed by three lines of seven syllables. A different tune pattern called I chiang-nan adopts a 3-5/7/7/5 arrangement, with lines containing three, five, seven, seven, and five syllables respectively. Researchers have concluded that these fixed line-length patterns reflect the distinct rhythmic and aesthetic conventions of the tz'u form [1,2]. The poems — or in Chinese, hsiang-ling — written in this style are

called tan-tiao because they are single-stanza poetry. Shuang-tiao, which means double-stanza hsiang-ling, also exists, but became popular later than tan-tiao [1].

Tz'u is not only distinguished from shi for its structure and format, but also for the sensation and aesthetic value it conveys [1]. It is not any individual poet who achieved the development of tz'u into a distinct literary genre which can compete with T'ang poetry. Over the course of history, many poets have made individual yet remarkable contributions to the development of tz'u in their unique ways [2,3]. To better understand the historical development of tz'u, it is essential to examine several key figures. This paper analyzes the evolution of early tz'u development through the works of three renowned tz'u poets: Wen T'ing-yun, Wei Chuang, and Li Yu.

2. Wen T'ing-yun and Wei Chuang

Wen T'ing-yun and Wei Chuang are two of the earliest pioneers in tz'u composing. Although they lived during roughly the same period in the late T'ang dynasty, Wen (812? –866) and Wei (836? –910) developed markedly different, even opposing, writing styles [4]. Wen T'ing-yun, compared with Wei Chuang, lived a peaceful life because he did not go through the turbulent period of the Huang Ch'ao Rebellion in which many people lost homes, families, and even lives [1,4]. The two different styles of early tz'u poetry Wen and Wei used in their poetry set the foundation for the further development of tz'u [1].

Wen's two-stanza Hsiang lings are always considered implicit and ambiguous [5]. According to Chang, unlike narrating what happened, Wen usually gave a "dense texture of image" in his tz'u [1]. His two stanzas are never connected with each other as a sequence, but appear as two separate scenes that require readers' imagination and self-interpretation. It is even hard to tell who is speaking in his tz'u. Sometimes, because Wen did not convey personal thoughts through his tz'u, different readers could have different interpretations of one scene he wrote. The ambiguity in Wen's tz'u is widely admired and valued by both scholars and readers as one of his distinctive stylistic features. However, this does not imply that Wen's tz'u can be interpreted or perceived arbitrarily according to the reader's personal preferences. Readers must piece together the fragmented meanings embedded within the images Wen presents in order to grasp the subtlety of his tz'u [1].

According to Chang, although Wen did not use conjunctive phrases or other kinds of "referential pronouns" to express the feeling and sensation behind the tz'u itself, the images he placed in his tz'u always have "assigned meanings" [1]. For example, when he wrote "lighting candles", he did not mean the candle itself, but rather that the "tearing candle" possessed human feelings of sadness. Wen used these "sensory images" to convey the mood he set in his tz'u. He always wrote about beautiful female images, women's elaborate makeup and accoutrements in an embellished and refined style, which somehow conveys his goal, as well as the primary goal of early tz'u composing: to write something beautiful and aesthetic [1].

Born 20 years later than Wen T'ing-yun, Wei Chuang lived to see the end of the T'ang Dynasty. His different life experience somehow led to the different writing style and subjects chosen compared with Wen's. While Wen's poems are famous for their implicit meanings, Wei's poems or tz'u are famous for their explicit meanings. Wei always chose to ignore the boundary between the two stanzas he wrote. He liked to make an "unbroken sequence" in his writing. His tz'u are more connected when compared to Wen's "a list of images" [1]. Unlike Wen, Wei's tz'u are considered straightforward and logical. He used connective words like "because" and "since" to make his lines of sentence sequential and continuous. That is to say, if changing the order of the lines, the whole poem would be irrational to read. Wei's tz'u, unlike Wen's, contain many of his own thoughts and emotions, and are more explicit in meaning and interpretation. This is one of the most prominent features that distinguishes Wei Chuang's tz'u style from Wen T'ing-yun's tz'u style [1].

Wei's poetry is also different from Wen's in sensational values [1,6]. Since Wei employed a stand-in voice in his tz'u, he naturally infused his lyrics with his own feelings and emotions. His tz'u consistently led readers through the progression of his emotions and thoughts. Unlike Wen's poetry which has no clear hint of who is speaking, Wei's tz'u always looked like someone speaking in his own voice. Whereas Wen's tz'u primarily depicted the images of others, often women, Wei's tz'u often incorporated the poet's own emotional experiences into his portrayal of female figures. However, this does not turn Wei's tz'u into reflective essays; he still preserves the "beauty of subtlety" that characterizes poetry. His flow of emotions and use of imperatives are not mere commands; behind these expressions, Wei consistently reveals something of himself. He frequently masks both his unfulfilled desires and disappointments beneath these commands, indirectly revealing his discontent with his own life. These feelings can somehow be tracked back to his bitter life experience. As mentioned above, Wei lived through the turbulent years of the Huang Chao Rebellion and the end of the late T'ang dynasty. He lived in a period less peaceful than Wen's, and through this experience, he found a way to channel his disappointment by infusing his poetry with personal emotions [1].

Wen T'ing-yun and Wei Chuang are two pioneer poets in the early development of tz'u. They set foundations for the further development of tz'u poetry. Although Wen and Wei are considered two different stylers in tz'u composing, their poems are alike when looking from a broader perspective. Both of their poems are highly refined, embellished, and rich in "ideal and scape", but confine emotions to women's love and hate [1]. Although there are feelings which convey bigger ambitions and hopes, those feelings are implicit and hidden behind. Poets composing tz'u in this style are generally called the "Hua-chien school". Wen and Wei are considered the founders of the "Hua-chien school". It requires later poets' innovations and refinement to develop tz'u into a more vigorous and significant genre of Chinese literary genre [1].

3. Li Yu

Li Yu (937–978), one of the most renowned and influential tz'u poets in the entire history of the genre, is often regarded as the earliest figure to broaden the thematic scope and deepen the emotional expression of tz'u poetry [1]. Many scholars argue that it was not until Li Yu that tz'u definitively separated from its musical origins and evolved into a form of scholarly literature. [1,7]. But it is not by accident that Li Yu planned himself to take the step out. It is his miraculous life experience, combined with his personal characteristics, that led to this huge step out of tz'u evolution [1].

Li Yu's tz'u may be categorized into two phases corresponding to different periods of his life. Not only did he live as a poet, but Li Yu was also the last emperor of the southern T'ang dynasty. His poetry composed before and after the loss of his kingdom and his captivity in the Northern Song reflects entirely different thoughts and sentiments. His early poetry, written in times before he was executed, is generally about happiness in his court life. He wrote about his romantic stories with women a lot. His tz'u at that time are always narrative and descriptive. Unlike Wen and Wei who liked to focus on stationary images, Li Yu started to form the story-telling function of tz'u. His tz'u in this time period were more developing towards dramas and fictions. This "narrative interest" of tz'u first introduced by Li Yu, was considered as his early poetry's biggest contribution to tz'u development. Although many of Li Yu's narrative poems likewise focus on female characters, the women he depicts — often his empresses, imperial consorts, and palace maids — are portrayed in ways distinct from the female figures in Wen's and Wei's tz'u. Before Li Yu, poets only wrote about specific parts (e.g., hair) or movements (e.g., putting on makeup) of female characters. It was Li Yu who first began to "signify the whole by the part". Unlike earlier poets, who often portrayed female figures through a collection of specific attributes, Li Yu skillfully suggested the entire figure through depictions of the "small chamber". As a result, the women in his tz'u are considered more vivid and unconventional [1].

However, Li Yu's contributions to the development of tz'u extend far beyond characterization. His poetry written after he lost his country is what truly became the turning point of tz'u evolution. Before Li Yu, shih was what poets generally used to express personal feelings, while tz'u was still considered by many people as mostly entertainment works. Li Yu was the first to convey his most personal and direct emotions through tz'u, marking a significant shift in the genre's expressive depth. Since he lost his country and was arrested by enemies, his themes and writing styles changed. He no longer wrote about romantic and happy moments spent with female figures surrounding him, and his subjects expanded to far larger dimensions. His works reflect his sorrow over the loss of his kingdom, nostalgic recollections of the past, and the deep bitterness he experienced in life. Prior to Li Yu, tz'u poets generally employed a feminized voice, and the emotions conveyed were largely implicit and limited in scope. It was Li Yu who first expressed his own genuine emotions directly through tz'u and viewed the world and humanity from his personal perspective. His tz'u explores lyrical sensitivity. His poems are both explicit and imagistic. He used simile and personification a lot in his poems, which makes his poems expressional but not overbold. His emotions are emphasized everywhere in his poems, but these feelings flow spontaneously with the tz'u itself [1].

Li Yu's contribution to tz'u development was immeasurable. The fact is, the poet himself even died for composing tz'u. Li Yu composed a tz'u titled Yu Mei-ren, which was interpreted by the Song emperor — who had conquered his kingdom and imprisoned him — as expressing Li Yu's hope for the restoration of his former state. The Song emperor compelled him to take his own life by offering him a cup of poisoned wine. It is both his unique life experience and his inherently sincere nature that contributed to the significant advancement of tz'u composition. Even in the danger of facing personal tragedy — such as being forced to drink poisoned wine by the Song emperor — Li Yu maintained a profound honesty in his writing. His tz'u reflects not only his deep personal sorrows but also his undisguised emotional openness, which broke away from the more restrained and conventional expressions of earlier poets. Through this rare sincerity, he elevated tz'u to a new level of emotional depth and artistic expression. Li Yu is regarded as the "immortal emperor of tz'u" by later generations [1,8-10].

4. Conclusion

The development of tz'u did not cease after the late T'ang dynasty. Following Wen T'ing-yun, Wei Chuang, and Li Yu, North Sung poets like Liu Yong, Sushih, and Xin Qiji continued to push the limits of tz'u development. Tz'u is an important and cherished genre of Chinese literature which influences Chinese people in many ways. Tz'u suggests many ancient stories and human sensations from its times and is regarded as a valuable historical record sometimes. It is not only a literary treasure, but also an important window into the history and culture of ancient China. As such, Tz'u stands as a literary treasure not only for China, but for the world as a whole.

References

1. A. C. Yu, "The Evolution of Chinese Tz'u Poetry from Late T'ang to Northern Sung, by Kang-i Sun Chang," The Journal of Asian Studies, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 315–318, 1982, doi: 10.2307/2054954.
2. J. E. von Kowallis, "Takeuchi's Lu Xun / China's Takeuchi," J. Orient. Soc. Aust., vol. 49, pp. 1–25, 2017.
3. G. W. Baxter, "Metrical Origins of the Tz'u," *Harv. J. Asiat. Stud.*, vol. 16, no. 1/2, pp. 108–145, 1953, doi: 10.2307/2718112.
4. L. Ning, "Literature in the Late Years of the Tang Dynasty and the Five Dynasties," in *Concise Reader of Chinese Literature History*, Y. Liu, Ed. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, doi: 10.1007/978-981-99-5814-6_18.
5. L. Bech, "Flowers in the Mirror, Moonlight on the Water: Images of a Deluded Mind," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, vol. 24, pp. 99–128, 2002, doi: 10.2307/823478.
6. C. Y. Chao, "Wu Wen-ying's Tz'u: A Modern View," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 29, pp. 53–92, 1969, doi: 10.2307/2718828.
7. F. Ding, "The Development of Ci Poetry Criticism in Song Literary Miscellanies: an Evaluation of Li Yu, Liu Yong, and Su Shi," *Journal of Chinese Humanities*, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 318-343, 2025, doi: 10.1163/23521341-12340186.

8. Johannes L. Kurz, "On the Unification Plans of the Southern Tang Dynasty," *Journal of Asian History*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 23–45, 2016, doi: 10.13173/jasiahist.50.1.0023.
9. Hongsheng, C., *Sino-Foreign Cultural Exchange: A Historical Perspective*, 1st ed., Routledge, 2023. ISBN: 9781032616353.
10. Chia-Ying Yeh, F., *Seven Lectures on Wang Guowei's Renjian Cihua*, 1st ed., Routledge, 2018. ISBN: 9781315108803.