

Aesthetic Pursuit of Simplicity and Popularity in the Mid-Tang Dynasty

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Abstract: On both the material and spiritual fronts, the concepts of elegance and vulgarity often emerge as contrasting concepts. Traditionally, culture meticulously crafted with exquisite beauty, involving the nobility and rulers, is termed as "Ya (elegant)" culture, while that which aligns with the basic life of common people is referred to as "Su (popular)" culture. In the realm of literature and art, what is known as popular or vernacular art aligns with secular values, catering to public aesthetic preferences, and enjoys widespread popularity due to its ease of comprehension. The Mid-Tang Dynasty in Chinese literary and artistic history marked a crucial period of transition from refined to folk culture. It also represented a turning point in aesthetic trends from the elegance to the commonplace. However, it's essential to note that while "elegance" and "vulgarity" exhibit differences in aesthetic styles, they do not imply a hierarchical distinction in aesthetic taste. "Ya (Elegance)" is not necessarily lofty and divine, and "Su (popularity)" is not inherently crude or base. Whether in the literary domain with movements like the "Gu Wen Yun Dong (Sport of Ancient Chinese Prose)" and the "Xin Yuefu Yun Dong (New Yuefu Movement)," or in the realm of music with the pop music, these aspects reflect the societal shift in aesthetic preferences from "Ya (elegance)" to "Su (popular)" during the Mid-Tang era.

1. The Ancient Prose Movement Opened up “Su(Popular)” Culture

The Ancient Prose Movement played a pioneering role in steering literary trends towards popular tastes during the Mid-Tang Dynasty. Led by influential figures such as Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan, the movement aimed to advocate “Gu Wen (ancient Chinese Prose)” and resist “Pian Wen(rhythmic prose)”, driving a transformation in literary style. The term "Gu Wen" was first proposed by Han Yu and referred to prose as opposed to rhythmic prose. The prose of the Qin and Han dynasties was characterized by its freedom and simplicity, primarily focused on revealing reality and expressing thoughts.

On the other hand, "Pian Wen (rhythmic prose)" referred to the prevalent literary style since the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, emphasizing parallelism and the use of allusions, with a focus on balanced and well-structured sentences. However, with the transition of times, "Pian Wen" lost its practical significance as a representation of aristocratic aesthetics. Many intellectuals

criticized its ornate form and lack of substance. Chen Zi'ang, as a pioneer of literary innovation, advocated for a return to ancient forms, laying the groundwork for the Ancient Prose Movement.

After the Zhenguan period, Han Yu, under the slogan "Wen Yi ming Dao(Writings Are for Conveying Truth)" ,put forth two requirements. First, he emphasized the need for good articles to eliminate outdated elements, strive for creativity and innovation, and not simply copy the language of predecessors. This philosophy was evident in Han Yu's peculiar poetic style. Second, he urged articles to be plain, smooth, concise, and easily understandable. These principles, integral to the aesthetic shift towards the "Su (popularity)" in the literary world of the Mid-Tang Dynasty, laid a crucial theoretical foundation.

Han Yu actively put his theoretical principles into practice through his prose, decisively discarding the gorgeous poetic style of previous dynasties. He drew from the essence of ancient language, avoiding the use of allusions in narratives, logic, and expressions of emotion. Instead, he employed colloquial language in his creations, crafting new words that were concise, expressive, and many of which are still present in modern everyday Chinese. His work "Letter to Meng Dongye" is a clear example, straightforward in its expression compared to the ornate language often found in rhythmic prose.

Another supporter of the Ancient Prose Movement, Liu Zongyuan, demonstrated his talent through fable-like prose, characterized by clear, accessible language. By personifying animals commonly found in daily life to convey philosophical ideas, he stood from the perspective of the common people, satirizing the soul's ugliness of feudal rulers, as seen in "The Donkey of Qian." Some of his fables have become classics, with the idiomatic expression "be at one's wit's end" widely recognized.

The essence of the "Su (popular)" aesthetic taste pursued by the Ancient Prose Movement is deeply rooted in the daily lives of the common people. Therefore, when discussing the aesthetic qualities of "Su (popular)" culture's simplicity and ease of understanding, it is essential to go beyond the artistic works themselves and delve into understanding the real lives of ordinary people to capture the true manifestation of "Su(popular)" in daily life. Liu Zongyuan, who was aware of the hardships faced by the common people, further infused this spirit into his writings, laying the groundwork for the subsequent "New Yuefu Movement."

Liu Zongyuan often utilized literary biographies and prose to reveal reality, drawing from the plight of the oppressed lower-class individuals in society. Through specific descriptions of their experiences and situations, he reflected the miserable living conditions of the common people during the Mid-Tang period, revealing sharp class contradictions. It is evident that both Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan, not only shifted from the ornate rhythmic prose to a plain and accessible literary form, but also committed themselves to broadening their perspectives and focusing on the laborious lower-class people, reflecting the social reality and the hardships of the people's lives.

2. The New Yuefu Movement Leading "Su(Popular)" Trends

In resonance with the literary realm and the Classical Prose Movement, there unfolded the initiation of the New Yuefu Movement, championed by Bai Juyi.

In ancient times, "Yuefu" referred to the official music institution, initially established during the Qin Dynasty. During the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, this institution extensively collected folk songs from the common people. Over time, the term "Yuefu" transitioned from denoting a music institution to becoming a poetic genre. The poems collected and composed by Yuefu were known for their simplicity, accessibility, and reflection of reality. During the Tang Dynasty, the New Yuefu Movement, influenced by Confucian pragmatism, further amplified the spirit of popular and realistic folk songs, contributing to Bai Juyi's use of poetry as a tool for

examining and addressing contemporary social issues. Additionally, poets of the Mid-Tang period absorbed the creative habits of portraying local customs and habits from the Wei, Jin, and Six Dynasties periods, expanding the thematic scope and expressive techniques of Yuefu poetry.

The "New Yuefu," consciously promoted and expanded by poets such as Bai Juyi, embodied aesthetic characteristics that were popular, accessible, and close to the realities of life. As a central figure in the Yuefu Movement, Bai Juyi's poetic style resonated with the ethos of his predecessors, prioritizing practical matters and the everyday. Influenced by Confucianism, Bai Juyi dedicated himself to the principle of creating poetry for rulers, subjects, and the common people. His creation of the "Fifty New Yuefu Poems" focused on praising rulers and offering satirical commentary. With a compassionate tone, he depicted the hardships of life for the masses, criticizing the political and social issues of the time and establishing a unique poetic style that was straightforward and easy to understand. For instance, poems like "The Charcoal-Seller" vividly portray the hardships of a charcoal vendor, elevating the Confucian idea of "valuing the people, placing the state next, and the ruler being the least important" ^[1] to a new level.

Therefore, it is evident that in the aesthetic realm of Mid-Tang poetry, Bai Juyi truly achieved the ideal of "finding beauty in the commonplace." Within Bai Juyi's verses, one scarcely finds the youthful exuberance, heroism, and lofty ideals prevalent in the flourishing Tang poetry. Instead, what emerges is a representation of middle-aged pragmatism and a realistic mindset, born from the bitterness of life's experiences. Such a poetic realm is often challenging to attain. Liu Xizai, in his "Yi Gai (General Survey of Art)," lavishly praised Bai Juyi's poetry, stating, "It is easy to write ordinary sentences but difficult to compose extraordinary ones – that is the first hurdle in poetry. Writing extraordinary sentences is easy, but crafting plain, profound sentences is difficult – that is the second hurdle in poetry. Bai Juyi effortlessly combines plain and extraordinary expressions, achieving a profound and natural quality. This kind of poetic mastery is not easily acquired."^[2]

Unlike Han Yu's peculiar poetic style, Bai Juyi's verses are straightforward, simple, devoid of embellishments, and carry no hidden meanings. He strives to express profound truths using plain and understandable language. His poem titles are clear and concise, particularly evident in his collection of "Fifty New Yuefu Poems," where each poem has a distinct theme that is immediately apparent. The poems skillfully echo their themes from beginning to end. For instance, in "The Red Carpet," the main theme revolves around the cost of silkworms and mulberry trees, vividly portraying the intricacies of manufacturing the red carpet offered as tribute. Through this depiction, Bai Juyi unveils the rulers' extravagance and greed, exposing their lavish spending and increased taxation.

Similarly, in his poem "The towering palace on Mount Li," he directly points out the tyrannical acts of the emperor, who indulges in excesses at the expense of his people's labor and resources. Each poem is characterized by plain and common language, hitting the core of the matter. Readers may grasp the main idea without delving deep into the author's intentions, as the purpose is clearly stated at the beginning or end of each poem.

The shallow and common realm of Bai Juyi's poetry is indeed profound, challenging for later generations to comprehend. It has often been criticized from the aesthetic perspective that emphasizes implicit traits in Chinese poetry. However, what cannot be denied is Bai Juyi's influential role in shaping the aesthetic trends in both the literary world and society at large. If we consider the poetic landscape of Mid-Tang, where the verses of Li Bai and Du Fu, as well as the Classical Prose Movement led by Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan, remained within the intellectual elite, then the poetry of Bai Juyi and others, characterized by simplicity, accessibility, and an appreciation for the common, marked an unprecedented popularization of poetry. This movement had a wide-reaching impact among the common people, forming an unparalleled aesthetic trend.

3. The Pop Music Respond To “Su(Popular)” Trends

The aesthetic trend of appreciating the common was also evident in the realm of music and dance during the Mid-Tang period. In the Tang Dynasty, “Ya Yue(the court music)”, traditionally used for grand ceremonies and ancestral worship, which had been favored by Confucian scholars and emperors throughout history, gradually waned. Conversely, “Su Yue(the pop music)”, closely connected to everyday life, drawing inspiration from the common people and unrestricted by formalities, experienced an unprecedented boom and vibrancy.

The distinction between refined “Ya Yue(the court music)” and “Su Yue(the pop music)” in the realm of music has a long-standing history. Since the Western Zhou Dynasty, influenced by Confucian culture, music and dance have been regarded as products associated with ritualistic and hierarchical classes, serving as tools for the ruling class to govern the world. This form of music, known as “Ya Yue(court music)”, features solemn and harmonious melodies, elegant and pure lyrics, and well-structured compositions, considered by Confucianists as the pinnacle of artistic expression. However, with the progression of time, this elevated form of music, distanced from everyday life and characterized as instructional, has gradually waned. In its place, “Su Yue(the pop music)”, intimately connected to local customs and traditions, has thrived, quietly emerging as a prominent force.

During the Mid-Tang period, emperors displayed a preference and fascination for the pop music. Emperor Dezong held lavish banquets at the Fish and Algae Palace, allowing the delightful tunes of the pop music to fill the air, creating an atmosphere of joy and celebration. In the Zhenyuan era, a traditional Han dance was presented to Emperor Dezong, and the emperor, enamored by this pop music piece, personally directed musicians to transcribe and rehearse its most significant parts. Emperor Yizong was also enthusiastic about musical feasts, regularly hosting banquets with up to five hundred musicians. Monthly festivities numbered no less than a dozen, highlighting the emperor's unwavering passion for “Su Yue(the pop music)”.

“Su Yue (the pop music)” transcended the confines of the imperial palace, integrating into various facets of Mid-Tang society. During banquets, people gathered together, and the air was filled with the sounds of songs and the graceful movements of dances. The joyous atmosphere, accompanied by “Su Yue (the pop music)”, became the soul of festive gatherings. Bai Juyi's poem "After a Night Banquet, I Stayed Behind and Offered This Poem to Minister Pei," with lines like "Graceful sleeves dance like fluttering butterflies, melodious songs echo like precious pearls," vividly depicts the flourishing scene of popular folk music during the Mid-Tang period. What was once considered a tool for state governance and stability in earlier dynasties had transformed into a form of entertainment during Mid-Tang, becoming a shared artistic expression pursued and enjoyed by the people. This shift reflects an inherent societal pursuit of the common and the popular.

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In conclusion, whether it be the poetic ideology and creative practices of appreciating "Su

(popular)" culture, or the lively expressions of popular dance and pop music among the common people, both reflect the profound understanding and acceptance of the aesthetic views held by the literati of Mid-Tang towards the general populace. This integration of art into the mundane aspects of life demonstrates a genuine pursuit of the beauty found in simplicity and comprehensibility, shaping a society where aesthetics are intimately intertwined with the human experience.

References

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- [2] [Qing] Liu Xizai: "Yi Gai Jian Shi", *Yuan Jinhua Jian Shi*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2019, p. 332.