

Review on Frontier Poetry Research

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Abstract—This Essay reviews the research on the concept of Frontier Poetry since 1980s, and the researches on the origin development, poet writings, and aesthetic characteristics of Frontier Poetry. Three propositions are put forward based on these reviews: firstly, frontier poetry needs to be defined scientifically and accurately so that further researches can be carried out. Secondly, the origin of frontier poetry needs to be differentiated scientifically. Lastly, more attention needs to be put on the research on frontier poetry as a unique style of poetry. Poetry researches should not be restricted to Tang Dynasty. Fore and aft, transverse researches and interdisciplinary researches on frontier poetry need to be carried out.

Index Terms—frontier poetry, origin development, poet writings, aesthetic characteristics

I. INTRODUCTION

There are many styles of Chinese ancient poetry. For example, pastoral poetry, love poetry, praise poetry, and frontier poetry. Frontier poetry has a long history, and becomes an important component of Chinese ancient poetry. Different from other poetry styles, frontier poetry expresses the political life of the individuals, the political relations and actions of the countries and political groups. In addition, frontier poetry has an obvious frontier region characteristic as it takes frontier as the main object. Xu Zong writes in *The History of Tang Poems: Frontier Poetry is the outcome of the culture of a special region. (The History of Tang Poems, 1994, P496)*. As a result, from the perspective of reflecting lives, frontier poetry is an irreplaceable poetry style. On the other hand, frontier poetry has rich national culture elements. It shows how nomadism culture conflicts and mixes with farming culture while expressing the civilization process of different nationalities and different times. Hence, frontier poetry bears strong national feelings, foreign customs, and grand aesthetical pictures. These illustrate that frontier poetry is a unique poetry style and hence occupies important position in Chinese ancient poems and has a significant value. For a long time, frontier poetry is frequently mentioned in the poetry research articles. Nevertheless, there is no unified definition for frontier poetry. A specific definition for frontier poetry is needed if accurate and further assessment should be pursued. Therefore, it is significant to make research in the areas of the definition, scope, and history of frontier poetry.

II. DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF FRONTIER POETRY

What is frontier poetry? What are the requirements on content, format, and style of frontier poetry? There are many arguments on these questions, but frontier poetry is still an ambiguous poetry concept until now. The arguments on frontier poetry can be divided into two groups. One group is narrow sense and another is broad sense. Scholars support narrow sense believe that the geographic range is limited in the frontiers, which is along the Great Wall, and reaches the Four An Xi Towns¹ in the northwest. And the time is limited in the prosperous and middle Tang Dynasty. (*Selected Articles on Tang Dynasty Frontier Poetry Research, 1988, P357*) This group of scholars think that frontier poetry are the poems written by Gao Shi 高适 and Cen Shen 岑参, and focus on departures. They believe this definition is generally agreed since Ming and Qing Dynasty and cannot be expanded boundlessly. Another group of scholars think the content of frontier poetry is quite broad. Those poems concerning the life of frontier region, and those have direct or indirect connections with frontier life, can be part of frontier poetry. In addition, the time is not limited in prosperous and middle Tang Dynasty, but can be expanded boundlessly. This group supports the broad sense.

Now how can we define Frontier Poetry? We believe neither the broad sense group nor the narrow sense group give a clear definition to frontier poetry. Both groups have not located frontier poetry clearly in Chinese ancient poetry system. Therefore further scientific research on frontier poetry cannot be carried out smoothly.

In 1990s, Yan Fuling gives a definition to frontier poetry, which is quite typical. Yan believes that frontier poetry has its own content and aesthetical style and is different from scenery poetry, love poetry, pastoral poetry, and meditation poetry. He gives examples on how the word frontier is defined in Chinese documents. The word Frontier in Chinese can be divided into two parts. One part refers to the border area, and another part refers to the fortress. The word frontier represents the border area and the area where the force reside. Hence, Yan Fuling gives the following definition to Frontier Poetry: “Frontier Poetry takes Frontier and defense as its background, and its content is focused on the different topics of frontier. (Yan Fuling, 1999). This article agrees and supports this definition.

Firstly, it is not reasonable to support the narrow sense group to define the “frontier” as the region along the Great Wall. Take the poems of Tang Dynasty as an example, it is not right if only those concerning northwestern Great Wall

¹ The Four An Xi Towns refer to the four military towns set up by Tang Dynasty in the north west.

wars are included in the frontier poetry definition, and those concerning Tubo² 吐蕃 and Nanzhao³ 南诏 wars are all excluded. Therefore, frontier poetry includes all the poems concerning the war in the east, south, west, and north frontiers, and the time should not be limited in Tang Dynasty. In fact, where there are countries, there are wars, and every dynasty has its own frontier poems. Secondly, Yan Fuling puts forwards the idea that frontier poetry takes frontier and defense as the background, and this is a necessary set point. The broad sense group supports the definition that all poems that have direct or indirect connections with frontier life are frontier poetry, and this definition is not rigorous enough. This article supports the idea that any frontier poem that writes about frontier scenery, vegetation, products, and customs, should have connections with frontier and defense if it should be defined as frontier poetry. If it has no such connection, it cannot be defined as frontier poetry but border area poetry.

Thus, frontier poetry should have the following characteristics: firstly it has a frontier characteristic and always writes about the frontier region. The frontier region is different from the inner region in the senses that its weather is more adverse, its location is dangerously steep and desolate, and its foreign customs are more peculiar. The frontier poems usually write about the great, dangerous, hard and cold environment of the frontier region, and show a great scenery which is totally different from the scenes in inner part of China. Secondly, frontier poetry has political characteristic. Comparing with other poetries such as scenery poetry, love poetry and history poetry, frontier poetry has a political characteristic because it reflects the true political life in writing about the fights between the different countries and political groups. Thirdly, frontier poetry has a temporal spirit. Different times have different boundaries and different social customs. Therefore frontier poetry shows about different geographic sceneries and spiritual features in different times.

III. REVIEW ON FRONTIER POETRY RESEARCH HISTORY

A. *Research on Origins of Frontier Poetry*

The process of making researches on the origin of frontier poetry is a breeding and accumulating process to study its nature and essential characteristic. Most scholars take Tang Dynasty as the basic point when making research on its origin, and also put much importance on Tang Dynasty.

Previous researches on Origin of Frontier Poetry focus on the following three aspects: one aspect is on the origin of frontier poetry. Most scholars believe frontier poetry is originated from Shi Jing.⁴ Some scholars even puts forward that the poems writing about wars in Shi Jing have significant influence on frontier poetry (Wei Lingna, 1998). The present academic circle has reached an agreement on the origin of frontier poetry. It is believed that the writings in Shi Jing on wars are the origin of Chinese ancient frontier poetry, and these writings have settled foundation for the later frontier poetry in the areas of themes, artistic expressions, and aesthetical styles.

The other aspect concerns the research on the fastigium of frontier poetry development—researches on Tang dynasty frontier poetry. There are many achievements in this aspect, and these researches are comparatively more thorough. Before 1980s, these researches focused more on the poets and their writings during the prosperous Tang Dynasty. After 1980s, the academic circle began to notice those poets and writing in early and late Tang Dynasty. For example, Jin Taoshen (1985) proposes that “Four Outstanding Poets in Early Tang Dynasty”⁵ “初唐四杰” and Chen Ziang directed the poems to Cold Frontier, expanded the styles of poetry, and led a vigorous and fresh artistic style. On the other hand, Zhou Xiaoli (1988) puts forward that the Middle Tang Dynasty frontier poetry surpasses the Prosperous Tang Dynasty frontier poetry in the perspective of the numbers of poets and poems. The Middle Tang Dynasty frontier poetry recorded the important historical changes in the content, inherited and developed the styles of Prosperous Tang Dynasty frontier poetry, and deepened the realistic spirit.

The third aspect refers to the academic circle’s interest in researches on the changes of frontier poetry in the Dynasties of Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing. Zeng Xiansen (1997) systematically analyzes the achievements of minority frontier poetry in Yuan Dynasty in the four aspects of the frontier poetry prosperity reasons, themes, artistic styles and unique achievement. Starting from the origins of themes, Yan Fuling (1998) discusses the characteristics of Yuan Dynasty frontier poetry in the three areas of themes, styles and forms. The academic circle has noticed the unique characteristics of frontier poetry of Yuan Dynasty. As to Ming Dynasty Frontier Poetry, Yang Fuxue (1995) expounds its historic position in the three aspects of fantastic west border scenery, colorful customs, and solemn and stirring patriotic poems. With regard to Qing Dynasty frontier poetry, Huang Gang gives discussion in *On Characteristics of West Border Frontier Poetry in Qing Dynasty* (1996). In addition, Xue Zongzheng makes detailed comment the poets represented by Ji Yun. Until now, the academic circle focuses research in the areas of themes and artistic styles when discussing frontier poetry after Tang Dynasty.

In the recent 30 years, the academic circle has made outstanding achievement on the research of origins of frontier

² Tubo dynasty (618AD—842AD) is the first have a clear historical records in Tibetan history.

³ Nanzhao dynasty (738AD—902AD) is the ancient kingdom of rise of the eighth century in Yungui plateau.

⁴ Shi Jing 诗经, Shi Jing is the first collection of poems in China. It recorded a total of 305 poems created over a period of 500 years or so, from the early Western Zhou Dynasty 西周 to the middle of the Spring and Autumn Period 春秋时期.

⁵ “Four Outstanding Poets in Early Tang Dynasty”, “初唐四杰”, refer to the four famous poets in the Early Tang Dynasty. They are Wang Bo 王勃 (650AD—676AD), Yang Jiong 杨炯 (650AD—693AD), Lu Zhaolin 卢照邻 (637AD—689AD), Luo Binwang 骆宾王 (640AD—684AD).

poetry. Researches on Frontier poetry not only focuses on Tang Dynasty poetry, but also on the ancient frontier poetry history. Although views of the researchers have been broadened, there are some aspects that can be improved. The first aspect is the research on the origin of frontier poetry. It is not appropriate for some scholars to deem that the research can trace back to Shi Jing, and it is also not appropriate for another group of scholars to include those writing about wars in Shi Jing directly in frontier poetry. In the previous pages we define frontier poetry as the poems which write obviously about border area. Most poems in Shi Jing writing about wars have no such characteristic. The second aspect is the focus of research. Most researches focus on Tang Dynasty. The researches on the periods before and after Tang Dynasty need to be advanced. The third aspect is the discussion on the frontier poetry. Most discussions are on individual poems, and few give systematic and profound discussions on the whole frontier poetry. As researches on frontier poetry is developing, the researches on the periods before and after Tang Dynasty need to be strengthened

B. *Researches on Poets and Poems*

In 1980s researches on frontier poetry were deepened. Main achievements on research were in the areas of documentation, analyzing on poets and poem from many dimensions. Some researches even brought new meteorology to frontier poetry research by discussing the creation personalities of the poets and the poem styles from the perspectives of aesthetics and art.

Researches on individual poets of Tang Dynasty Frontier poets focus mainly on these poets such as Cen Shen 岑参 (715AD—770AD), Gao Shi 高适 (704AD—765AD), Wang Changling 王昌龄 (698AD—756AD) and Cui Hao 崔颢 (704AD—754AD). At the same time, researches on the poets such as Luo Bingwang 骆宾王 (619AD—?), Chen Zianguang 陈子昂 (661AD—702AD), Li Bai 李白 (701AD—762AD) and Du Fu 杜甫 (712AD—770AD) have also carried out. Researches on the poets before Tang Dynasty focus on Cao Zhi 曹植⁶ (192AD—232AD), Bao Zhao 鲍照⁷ (415AD—466AD), and Xiao Gang 萧纲⁸ (503AD—551AD), and on the poets after Tang Dynasty focus on Mei Yaochen 梅尧臣(1002AD—1060AD), Su Shunqin 苏舜钦 (1008AD—1048AD) of Song Dynasty, Ye Lvzhu 耶律铸 (1221AD—1285AD) of Yuan Dynasty, and Weng Wanda 翁万达 (1498AD—1552AD), Chen Cheng 陈诚 (1365AD—1457AD) of Ming Dynasty.

Secondly, researches on the poets and the comparison of their writings have been carried out. Examples can be seen in the researches on the comparison of the writings of Gao Shi 高适 (704AD—765AD) and Cen Shen 岑参 (715AD—770AD) in Tang Dynasty. These two poets can fully represent the prosperous Tang Dynasty frontier poets. Wang Weikang (1995) puts forward that rooting from different life experiences, living areas and writing psychologies, the writings of these two poets are totally different. Gao Shi's 高适 (704AD—765AD) writings are full of deep realistic flavor, and Cen Shen's 岑参 (715AD—770AD) writings are rich of bold and unconstrained romantic color.

Thirdly, researches on the inheriting relationships of frontier poets have been carried out. Frontier Poetry development has its origins, and its development will not stop abruptly. Therefore, many scholars now devote in the research of the inheriting relationships. Some scholars think the optimistic spirit of Jian An Poems contributes to the active and enterprising features of Tang Dynasty frontier poetry (Zheng Hongni, 2000). Wang Zhiqing (1994) discusses the relationships between Bao Zhao 鲍照 (415AD—466AD) and Wang Wei 王维 (701AD—761AD) from the perspectives of inheriting and development. He puts forward that Wang Wei 王维 (701AD—761AD) inherits Bao Zhao 鲍照 (415AD—466AD) in the senses of style and writing skills.

We agree that researches on frontier poetry are much less than the researches on other poetries such as scenery poetry. Transverse research has just started, and interdisciplinary research is almost a blank space. We need to carry out concrete and indepth research in the areas of its unique image induction, the poets' modes of thinking, and summarization on the art styles of the writings.

C. *Research on Aesthetic Characteristics of Frontier Poetry*

After 1980s, influenced by academic ideological trend of the time, social critiques on frontier poetry began to decline, and researches on aesthetics began to prosper. Researchers started from the poems, reviewed the aesthetic character of frontier poetry, and summarized its artistic achievements. On one hand, most researches on aesthetic characteristics of frontier poetry focus on Tang Dynasty. For example, Cao Libo (1991) analyzes the poetry images full of northwestern border characteristics, and explains its cultural aesthetics. Li Binghai (1998(1)) considers that the writings of frontier poets on the sceneries of the war places reflect the cultural accumulation of national fusion in different aspects.

Wang Kaiyuan, Xue Songhua (2000(5)) discuss the influence of western border music and dances on frontier poetry of Tang Dynasty from the aspects of themes and forms. Cui Yue (1999(3)) takes the ancient Pi Pa Art development in the poems of Tang and Song Dynasty as the clue, and makes comments on the musical factor of frontier poetry in prosperous Tang Dynasty period. Liu Zhenlun (1992(4)) analyzes the constituting factors of geology, society, and time from the perspective of literature and sociology, and attaches importance to the geological characteristics of frontier

⁶ Cao Zhi 曹植 (192—232) is a famous poet in the Three Kingdoms of China.

⁷ Bao Zhao 鲍照(415—466) is a famous poet in Wei Jin Southern and Northern Dynasties of China.

⁸ Xiao Gang 萧纲(503—551) is a famous poet in Liang Dynasty of China.

poetry. On the other hand, other researchers also explore the aesthetic characteristics of other Dynasties. For example, Huang Gang publishes Discussion on Characteristics of Western Border Frontier Poetry of Qing Dynasty, Yan Fu publishes Discussion on Writings and Characteristics of Yuan Dynasty Frontier Poetry (1996(1)). These two essays are important in the discussion of artistic characteristics of Frontier Poetry in Yuan and Qing Dynasties.

From these researches we can see that generally, researches on frontier poetry focus on Tang Dynasty. Frontier poetry has not been considered as a unique poetry. Systematic researches on frontier poetry under the broad view of poetry history have not been carried out. Therefore, discussions on its aesthetic characteristics are based on individual dynasties, and focus mainly on Tang Dynasty.

IV. CONCLUSION

The reviews on the definition and history of frontier poetry concern mainly the following aspects: origin, writings and aesthetic characteristics, and these reviews summarize the present research situations of frontier poetry. Generally speaking, researches on frontier poetry have achieved much achievement in recent 30 years. First and foremost, frontier poetry needs to be cognized and defined scientifically. In the process of making research on frontier poetry, many scholars have realized that the definition of frontier poetry is ambiguous. This reflects the weakness of the research. In order to deepen research on frontier poetry, we need to define its connotation and extension scientifically and strictly. At the same time, as further researches on frontier poetry is carrying out, the academic circle has realized that frontier poetry has its own unique taste and artistic value, and it should not be restricted as one group of Tang Dynasty poetries. Thus, scholars represented by Yan Fuling give a more scientific definition to frontier poetry. It could be argued that the scientific cognition and strict definition on frontier poetry have contributed to the scientific, regulatory, and prosperous development of its research. In addition, more and more articles and books argue the content and artistic presentation of frontier poetry, either before Tang Dynasty or after Tang Dynasty. These articles and books give a picture of the frontier poetry development in the context of Chinese ancient poetry. The lengthways perspective on frontier poetry is not only taken in the poetry history research, but also in inheriting relationship research. Finally, before 1980s, the academic circle focused the research on social critics, and deviated from the literature appreciation direction. The deviation slowed the research development to some extent. In recent 30 years, affected by academic trends, many scholars start to discuss the aesthetic characteristics of frontier poetry and summarize its unique artistic achievements on the basis of the western literature and aesthetic theory and the nature of the poems.

Although there is no argument on the definition of frontier poetry in narrow or broad senses. Nevertheless, there are still some incomplete aspects: firstly, the definition of frontier poetry is much ambiguous in perspectives of connotation and extension, and this brings difficulties to the further researchers. Secondly, the research on the origin of frontier poetry is still not clear. Some researchers believe frontier poetry originates from Shi Jing, and others point out that there are frontier poetry in Shi Jing. Thirdly, research on frontier poetry is limited in Tang Dynasty for a long time. Compared with other poetry styles such as scenery poetry, frontier poetry is not considered as a unique poetry style. Hence, research on frontier poetry is still insufficient. To sum up, we suggest: firstly, a scientific and accurate definition needs to be given to frontier poetry. This is the most important matter in deepening research on frontier poetry. Secondly, the origin of frontier poetry needs to be discriminated on the basis of accurate definition. Thirdly, much importance needs to be attached to the research of frontier poetry as a unique poetry style. Researches should not be limited in Tang Dynasty. However, longitudinal, transverse, and interdisciplinary researches on frontier poetry need to be strengthened.

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