

From Political Uncertainty to Poetic Mastery: A Study of the Imperial Poems Composed by the Scholars of the Jinglong Literary Academy

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Abstract

The group of scholars at the Jinglong Literary Academy were active in the period following the Wu Zhou era and during Emperor Zhongzong's restoration to the throne; their imperial commission poetry marked a pivotal transition from the court literature of the early Tang to the poetic style of the High Tang. Whilst existing research has largely emphasised the praise-of-the-sovereign function and courtly nature of such poetry, the imperial commission poetry of the Jinglong era—within its highly institutionalised stylistic conventions—also reveals a complex interplay between political expression, emotional regulation and poetic craftsmanship. On the one hand, Jinglong poets were required to adhere to the fundamental demands of composing poetry on command to extol the sovereign and embellish the imperial legacy; on the other hand, they found themselves in a state of political ambivalence and uncertainty due to the complex power dynamics arising from the restoration of the Li Tang dynasty, the lingering legacy of the Wu Zhou era, and Empress Wei's interference in state affairs. This sense of unease prompted the poets to shift the focus of their expression towards imagery, syntax and linguistic craftsmanship, endowing imperial commission poetry with richer layers of meaning beyond the conventional formulaic praise of the sovereign. The significance of the Jinglong Literary Academy scholars lies not merely in their documentation of court poetic exchanges, but also in the fact that their works demonstrate a deepening of meaning and aesthetic self-awareness within the institutionalised poetic form; they represent an indispensable transitional phase in the evolution of early Tang poetry towards the High Tang period.

Keywords

Scholars of the Jinglong Literary Academy; imperial commission poetry; institutionalised poetic forms; political ambivalence; enrichment of meaning; imagery.

1. Introduction

Imperial commission poetry was a significant form of Tang dynasty court literature; whilst its development was deeply constrained by imperial activities, court rituals and the hierarchy between sovereign and subjects, it also contributed to the maturation of the art of near-verse poetry. Existing research has largely traced the developmental trajectory of imperial commission poetry from the Zhenguan period to the Wu Zhou era—from its celebratory tone and ornate style to the refinement of its metrical structure—from the perspectives of court poetic styles, the Literary Academy system, and the evolution of metrical rules, thereby laying the groundwork for understanding early Tang poetry. However, the distinctive nature of the Jinglong Literary Academy scholars can be further examined through the relationship between the political landscape and textual mechanisms. During the reigns of Emperor Zhongzong and Emperor Ruizong, although the Li Tang dynasty had been restored, the legacy of the Wu Zhou era had not yet been fully eradicated, and figures such as Empress Wei and Princess Taiping

had intervened in court affairs; consequently, the scholars of the Literary Bureau developed a complex mindset, caught between their allegiance to the court and political uncertainty. Whilst their imperial-commissioned poetry appeared, on the surface, to conform to the conventions of 'paying homage', 'praising the sovereign' and 'recording court banquets', internally it revealed the poets' emotional distance and aesthetic craftsmanship through garden imagery, Buddhist symbols, natural motifs, dynamic syntax and refined word-crafting. This paper examines, from the perspectives of political transition, the subject's ambivalence, and the refinement of poetic artistry, how the Jinglong court-commissioned poetry achieved a deepening of meaning within institutionalised expression, and re-evaluates its historical significance as a transitional phase between the court poetry of the Early Tang and the poetic style of the High Tang.

2. Political Transition and the Emergence of the Jinglong Literary Academy Scholars

The Jinglong Literary Academy scholars were active during the reigns of Emperor Zhongzong and Emperor Ruizong. Their imperial commission poetry built upon the tradition of court poetic exchanges dating back to the Zhenguan era, whilst being profoundly influenced by the political legacy of the Wu Zhou dynasty and the context of the Li Tang restoration. Imperial commission poetry of the Zhenguan period was closely linked to the consciousness of the dynasty's founding achievements. The group of court literati centred on Li Shimin was, for the most part, closely associated with the establishment of the new dynasty's political order; their poetry often infused the theme of praising the sovereign with the spirit of the founding era. By the reign of Emperor Gaozong, the style of court poetry had shifted towards opulence and refinement. The ornate and graceful style epitomised by figures such as Shangguan Yi led to a greater emphasis on formal structure in imperial commission poetry, whilst the poets' individual spirit was increasingly constrained by the norms of praise, courtly service and embellishment of the imperial legacy. As Yang Jiong noted in his 'Preface to the Collected Works of Wang Bo': 'All vigour and spirit have vanished; no trace of strength or vigour remains' [1]. The Wu Zhou period constituted a crucial transitional phase prior to the formation of the Jinglong Literary Academy. Empress Wu Zetian recruited a large number of literati into the political centre through the imperial examinations and literary selection processes. For instance, in the third year of the Changshou era, when Empress Wu ordered a widespread collection of copper and iron from across the realm to cast the Tian Shu, "the number of court officials submitting poems was beyond count" [2], and the social background and creative practices of court literati consequently underwent changes. Poets such as the 'Four Friends of Literature', Shen Quanqi and Song Zhiwen were active during this period, whilst the metrical conventions of five- and seven-character regulated verse gradually matured. Literary talent thus became not only a means of entering official service but also a method by which the imperial court consolidated power over the literati. After Emperor Zhongzong's restoration to the throne, court banquets, imperial tours and poetry-composition activities took place with great frequency; 'whenever the Emperor was moved by some emotion, he would compose a poem, and the scholars would all respond in kind' [3]. The Literary Bureau system brought together a large number of civil officials and scholars around the emperor's activities; at this time, the frequency of court poetry recitals reached its peak in the early Tang period. Imperial-commissioned poetry was no longer merely a solemn text for court ceremonies, but also became an impromptu form of composition during the emperor's and his ministers' banquets, seasonal outings and garden visits. This expansion of creative contexts meant that Jinglong-period imperial-commissioned poetry was more receptive to natural scenery, personal feelings and on-the-spot experiences than in previous dynasties.

However, the distinctiveness of the Jinglong Literary Academy's scholars lay even more in the complexity of its political structure. Some members carried on the traditions of the old aristocracy, whilst others were emerging literati who had come of age during the Wu Zhou period. Although the Li Tang dynasty had been restored, the legacy of Wu Zhou had not yet completely faded; and although Emperor Zhongzong occupied the imperial throne, Empress Wei and Princess Taiping continued to exert significant influence over court affairs. The scholars of the Literary Bureau, whilst relying on the court system for their political standing, found it difficult to establish a stable sense of belonging. Consequently, their political attitudes, emotional detachment and personal sentiments were increasingly channelled into the selection of imagery, the arrangement of allusions and the crafting of syntax. Consequently, the Jinglong Imperial Commissioned Poetry served as a crucial intermediary in the transition from early Tang court poetry to the poetic style of the High Tang period. Whilst it had not yet developed the expansive and uplifting spirit characteristic of Kaiyuan poetry, it had already cultivated, within the framework of institutionalised writing, the capacity to perceive the world, syntactic awareness and aesthetic consciousness necessary for the maturation of regulated verse. It is thus evident that the significance of the Jinglong Literary Academy scholars should not be understood merely from the perspective of courtly or praise-the-sovereign literature, but rather within the context of the transformation of early Tang poetry from institutional expression to aesthetic craftsmanship.

3. The Subjective Interstices within Institutionalised Expression

The fundamental function of imperial commission poetry lies in composing verses upon command to embellish the sovereign's great achievements; its creation is constrained by the subject matter, occasion, ritual protocol and the hierarchical order between sovereign and subject. However, institutionalisation does not imply the complete disappearance of subjectivity; precisely because the space for expression is limited, poets are all the more compelled to compress their personal judgements and emotional experiences into seemingly compliant texts through the selection and omission of imagery, the arrangement of allusions and shifts in tone. The complexity of Jinglong court poetry lies precisely in the fact that, whilst superficially conforming to the norms of praising the sovereign and responding to imperial verses, it reveals, at its core, subtle variations in political stance and the poet's inner state of mind.

(1) The Distance of the Subject in the Depiction of Gardens

During the Jinglong period, court banquets and excursions were frequent, and the residences of the emperor, princesses and court officials often served as the settings for imperial-commissioned poetry. Garden spaces were inherently venues for the display of power, and poets were typically required to employ sumptuous imagery to extol the imperial grandeur; yet, when faced with the same subject matter, different poets handled imagery in varying ways, and these differences reveal the distance between them and the reality of power.

Shen Quanqi's 'In Response to the Imperial Commission: A Visit to Princess Taiping's Southern Estate in Early Spring' [4] and Li Yi's 'In Response to the Imperial Commission: A Visit to Princess Taiping's Southern Estate in Early Spring' [5] both celebrate Princess Taiping's Southern Estate and thus offer valuable points of comparison. Shen's poem directly references status markers such as 'the Princess's household' and 'the imperial carriage', whilst employing allusions such as 'paving with gold to form borders' and 'using stones to prop up looms' to vividly depict the garden's opulence, transforming the Southern Estate into a royal space imbued with the aura of a fairyland. Li Yi's composition, however, does not directly address the Princess, but instead uses allusions such as 'Pingyang' and 'Qinshui' to refer to her. Furthermore, the poem emphasises not gold, stone, carriages and imperial splendour, but rather serene

imagery such as 'breezes and springs', 'bamboo groves' and 'rain and sleet', thereby transforming Princess Taiping's South Villa from a sumptuous residence into a subtle, literati-style landscape.

This contrast illustrates that the sense of agency in the Jinglong Imperial Commemorative Poems does not manifest as direct commentary or fierce resistance, but rather as subtle shifts within the institutionalised textual framework. Shen's poem reinforces the space of power through opulent imagery, whilst Li's poem reconfigures the same space using serene and tranquil imagery. Although both belong to the category of poems composed in response to Princess Taiping's Nan Zhuang, they respectively present different attitudes: one aligning closely with power, the other maintaining a distance from it. Li Yi was a man of integrity; history records that 'there were no paths beneath the plum trees' (referring to his refusal to accept bribes). The serene treatment of garden spaces in his poetry may also be seen as a subtle reflection of his political character.

Ma Huaisu's 'In Response to the Imperial Order: A Spring Outing to the Garden to Welcome Spring' [6] presents yet another kind of subjective fissure. Images such as 'the first rays of the sun', 'still hidden amidst the green' and 'the yellow not yet unfurled' repeatedly depict the stirrings of life in early spring, whilst the final couplet likens the poet to an ageing figure, as if to suggest that he is unfit to accompany the emperor on his spring outing. On the surface, this appears to be the humble and reserved language of a subject in the presence of the sovereign; yet, when considered in conjunction with the spring imagery throughout the poem, this portrayal of ageing also contains a hidden hope for the continuation of both life and political standing. The so-called 'subjective fissure' is precisely the limited space for expression that the poet reserves for his own political stance and personal experiences, whilst remaining within the constraints of imperial poetry conventions. The emotions expressed in the Jinglong court poems cannot therefore be simply categorised as genuine or insincere; they differ from the direct lyricism found in private poetry, yet are not entirely equivalent to hollow, formulaic praise of the sovereign, but rather form a compromise between the ritual order and individual experience.

(2) Political Positioning through Buddhist Imagery

Religious imagery in court poems on the same theme offers a clearer indication of the political positioning of individual Jinglong scholars. Empress Wu Zetian had once drawn upon Buddhist resources to construct her political legitimacy, and the continued support for Buddhism during the reign of Emperor Zhongzong also endowed Buddhist symbols with special significance in court literature. The poem 'In Response to the Imperial Commission: Ascending the Pagoda at Ci'en Temple on the Ninth Day of the Ninth Month' [7] is a key text for examining this issue. As Ci'en Temple possessed strong Buddhist associations, whilst the Double Ninth Festival's tradition of ascending heights carried ritual significance, the manner in which the scholars of the Jinglong Literary Academy handled Buddhist imagery was closely tied to how they positioned themselves within the complex political landscape following the restoration of the Li Tang dynasty.

Ma Huaisu adopted a more cautious approach; his poem does not make extensive use of Buddhist terminology, merely alluding to the site of the ascent with relatively ambiguous terms such as 'immortal pagoda', whilst devoting most of his attention to the atmosphere of peace and prosperity and the monarch's achievements. In contrast, the poems of Cui Riyong, Li Jiongxiu and others feature a greater number of Buddhist terms such as 'indigo-coloured hall', 'fragrant Buddhist chant', 'world of sand', 'golden rope' and 'Buddha-Emperor', incorporating Buddhist spaces, rituals and sacredness into their expressions of praise for the sovereign. Meanwhile, the concentrated use of terms such as 'precious gatha' and 'prophecy of enlightenment' in Zhao Yanzhao's poetry lends a certain religious hue to his celebrations of contemporary politics. The Buddhist imagery here represents not so much a simple expression of religious faith as a means

by which the Jinglong literati employed public political symbols within a complex political landscape.

It is thus evident that imperial commission poems on a common theme did not serve solely the uniform function of praising the sovereign. Whilst ostensibly unified by a single theme and occasion, they exhibited subtle internal variations due to differences in the poets' official careers, value systems and political allegiances. The very fact of sharing a common theme thus provides a point of entry for observing the political differences among the poets: some poets deliberately exercised restraint in their use of Buddhist vocabulary to avoid being too closely associated with the political legacy of the Wu Zhou era; others, by contrast, made full use of Buddhist sacredness to provide symbolic support for the ruling power. From garden imagery to Buddhist symbols, the Jinglong imperial commission poems are not merely literary embellishments of the power structure, but rather a textual arena in which literati adapted, positioned themselves and cultivated their aesthetic sensibilities amidst an unstable political landscape.

4. Enrichment of Meaning and Refinement of Poetic Artistry

The unique value of Jinglong imperial commission poetry lies not only in the complex political sentiments it implies, but also in the poets' ability to refine poetic form within the constraints of institutionalised expression. As such poetry was bound by prescribed themes, occasions and the imperial hierarchy—preventing poets from directly expressing political judgements—imagery, syntax and linguistic innovation became crucial means of conveying nuanced meanings. The refinement of poetic art achieved by the Jinglong poets was not merely a pursuit of ornate language, but rather an enhancement of the semantic density of verses within a concise framework. In other words, political uncertainty did not lead to a decline in creativity; on the contrary, it prompted poets to channel unspoken judgements into the interplay of scenery, syntax and phrasing, thereby shifting court poetry from external elaboration to internal connotation.

(1) The Symbolic Representation of Natural Phenomena

Traditional imperial poetry often emphasised grand spectacles and the display of auspicious omens, frequently employing imagery such as light, clouds, mushroom-shaped canopies and banners to depict the majesty of the emperor, yet it was prone to falling into formulaic patterns. The development of Jinglong imperial poetry was first manifested in the transformation of natural phenomena into symbolic imagery; the scenery was no longer merely a decorative element within the context of praising the sovereign, but began to simultaneously convey a sense of the passage of time, the experience of the moment and political significance.

The middle couplet of Ma Huaisu's poem 'In Response to the Imperial Poem: A Spring Visit to Wangchun Palace' reads: 'Delicate willows sway in the breeze along the imperial avenue; light blossoms emerge from the imperial groves, bathed in sunlight.' [8] This couplet continues to depict the spring scenery of the imperial gardens, yet its focus lies not in grand auspicious symbols, but in subtle, concrete imagery. 'Delicate willows' and 'light blossoms' extract these spring elements from the general ambience of the season, whilst 'swaying in the breeze' and 'glowing in the sunlight' further define the scene through the dual perspectives of movement and light and shadow, transforming the willows and blossoms into living phenomena within the flow of the seasons. At the same time, 'the imperial avenue' and 'the imperial groves' retain the institutional attributes of the courtly space. The three layers of meaning—the vitality of nature, the changing of the seasons, and the emperor's leisurely excursions—are superimposed within a single couplet, endowing the verse with a richer depth than mere landscape description or praise of the sovereign. This imagery-based approach transforms the atmosphere of peace and prosperity into a visible, tangible springtime experience, whilst also

allowing court poetry to generate more nuanced aesthetic content within the framework of institutionalised expression.

(2) The Dynamisation of Syntactic Organisation

The refinement of poetic artistry in Jinglong-era imperial poetry is also evident in the dynamism of its syntactic organisation. Court poetry of earlier dynasties often relied on the enumeration of names and objects and static displays to create a sumptuous effect, which could easily appear stilted and stagnant; poets such as Ma Huaisu, however, established intrinsic connections between elements of the landscape through the meticulous arrangement of verbs and function words.

In the poem 'In Response to the Imperial Commission: A Spring Outing in the Imperial Gardens to Welcome Spring', the couplet "As warmth approaches, the scenery is particularly evident in the willows; as cold recedes, the snow's shadow is half-hidden among the plum blossoms" [9] employs four consecutive verbs—"approach", "evident", "recedes" and "hidden"—to organise elements such as the scenery, willows, snow's shadow and plum blossoms into a dynamic process. 'Seeking warmth' depicts the gradual approach of spring, whilst 'bidding farewell to the cold' depicts the retreating chill; 'manifesting on the willows' depicts spring's light first appearing upon the willows, whilst 'concealing the plum blossoms' depicts the lingering snow still half-hidden amongst the plum branches. The function words '偏' and '半' further convey the transitional state between the successive arrival of spring and the lingering remnants of winter snow. This couplet was later included in the 'Tang Dynasty Sentence Structures' section of the **Poets' Jade Shavings** [10], indicating that later generations recognised the exemplary significance of Ma Huaisu's imperial commission poem in terms of syntactic craftsmanship.

The key to this couplet lies in the fact that the syntax itself forms a mechanism for advancing meaning. Spring light, cold snow, willows and plum blossoms could originally have been merely juxtaposed images; yet, through the organisation of verbs, they are transformed into a temporal sequence moving from cold to warmth, from concealment to revelation. Consequently, a flow of life emerges between the scenes, and the static exposition inherent in imperial commission poetry is transformed into a dynamic evocation of emotion. The significance lies not merely in the artistry of word choice, but in the poem's ability to present the progression of the seasons and the emotional resonance evoked by nature within an extremely concise form, demonstrating the gradually increasing aesthetic self-awareness of court poetry in the late Early Tang period.

(3) Conciseness in the Formulation of Antithetical Pairs

Constrained by their themes, occasions and formal requirements, imperial commission poems placed particular emphasis on concise phrasing. Within a limited scope, they had to depict the scenery, conform to court etiquette, and retain their function of praising the sovereign or offering blessings; consequently, the language had to be highly condensed.

Ma Huaisu's couplet from 'In Response to the Imperial Commission: A Poem to Send Princess Jincheng to the Western Barbarians'—"Gazing at the willows in the garden, my sorrow is entwined with the mulberry trees by the roadside" [11]—exemplifies this high degree of conciseness. 'Willows in the garden' readily evokes the literary traditions of gardens, the colour of willows and parting found in elegant literature, whilst 'mulberry trees by the roadside' relates to mulberry-picking, roads and folk sentiments as depicted in the **Book of Songs** and Han-era Yuefu poetry. By pairing five-character lines with five-character lines, the poet condenses a courtly farewell, garden scenery and folk sentiments of parting into a single couplet, thereby lending a more human touch to the political event of Princess Jincheng's marriage abroad.

The words '绝' and '缠' are particularly well-crafted. '望绝' depicts not only the end of the line of sight but also the helplessness of those seeing her off, unable to continue following her; '悲

缠’, meanwhile, transforms abstract sorrow into something tangible. The character ‘绝’ (jue) establishes spatial distance, whilst ‘缠’ (chan) intensifies the emotional bond, endowing the entire couplet with both the sense of a distant journey and the reluctance to part. Such linguistic craftsmanship not only adheres to the solemn and refined propriety expected of court poetry but also allows personal sorrow to emerge within a concise framework, demonstrating a simultaneous enhancement of both linguistic and emotional density.

It is thus evident that the refinement of poetic artistry among the scholars of the Jinglong Literary Academy was primarily manifested on three levels: the replacement of abstract auspicious symbols with the imagery of natural phenomena; the replacement of static arrangement with dynamic syntactic organisation; and the replacement of the accumulation of ornate language with the refinement of phrasing in antithesis. Although political uncertainty restricted the poets’ direct expression, it spurred them to seek a higher density of poetic expression through imagery, syntax and phrasing. The historical significance of Jinglong court poetry lies not in its having already established the spirit of the High Tang period, but in its demonstration of the process by which the artistic capabilities of near-verse poetry had accumulated within the institutionalised court writing tradition prior to the High Tang.

5. Conclusion

It is thus evident that the refinement of poetic artistry achieved by the scholars of the Jinglong Literary Academy was primarily manifested in three aspects: the replacement of abstract auspicious imagery with the poetic transformation of natural phenomena; the replacement of static presentation with dynamic syntactic organisation; and the replacement of ornate embellishment with the conciseness of parallelism. Whilst political uncertainty restricted the poets’ ability to express themselves directly, it also spurred them to seek a more concentrated form of poetic expression through imagery, syntax and word choice. The significance of the Jinglong imperial poems in the history of poetry lies not in their having attained the spirit of the High Tang period, but in demonstrating how, prior to the flourishing of the High Tang, the artistic capabilities of near-verse poetry were gradually accumulated through the institutionalised practice of courtly composition.

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