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Oleksandra Hul*

Uniwersytet im. Borysa Hrinchenki w Kijowie, Ukraina

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0170-8150>

Transformational peculiarities within Chinese lyrical genres (from the early “赋” to varieties of “新诗”)

Abstract: The article reveals the historical transformations of Chinese poetry, namely the changes in lyrical genres from the Archaic period of “Fu” (“赋”) invariants and early poetry to the genre varieties of contemporary (modern) poetry “新诗” of the 20th–21st centuries. In the review we briefly name the key oriental researchers who made a great contribution to the studies of oriental literature based on authentic texts. The article tells how the key archaic genres, such as “Fu” (“赋”), “Shi” (“诗”), “Qi” (“词”) and “Qu” (“曲”) were the grass roots of differentiating lyrical genres. In this context we name the pristine origins of early lyrical genres, returning the reader back to 《诗经》. We give the names of the founding fathers and representatives of each genre, providing examples of the most brilliant poetry, written within the early and classical literary periods. In the article we try to systematize the knowledge available on the topic, comparing the Eastern and

* Oleksandra Grygorivna Hul – dr; pracuje w Narodowej Akademii Służby Bezpieczeństwa Ukrainy; naukowo związana z Uniwersytetem Borysa Hrinchenki w Kijowie (Ukraina); autorka m.in. artykułu *Chinese avant-garde poetry in times of mind, mayhem and money through the interpretation of Maghiel van Crevel* (2019).

Western tradition of lyrical writing. We aim to show how archaic Chinese poetry came out of prose, transformed in time over more than 2000 years, and lost its primeval classical and traditional Chinese style, but preserved the unique code of the nation and almost returned to prose in the 20th–21st centuries.

Keywords: genres, Chinese poetry, varieties of lyrical genres, “Fu”, “Shi”, “Qi”.

Introduction. Chinese literature belongs to one of the key elements of the The Heavenly Empire culture. It made its way through changes and transformations in its shape and inner structure depending on external influences and inward factors, depending on wars, changes of dynasties, and ideology. Though the long history made literature adapt to modern literary trends, it still preserves the old Chinese traditions, the code of the nation and archetypes. The cradle of the Chinese cultural code is hidden in *Ancient (or Archaic) Chinese lyrics, philosophy and mythology*, which due to intertextual means interknit and fuse with pictorial art, music and architecture, and in such a way form a general picture of Chinese society.

The study object of the Article concentrates on *Chinese poetry genres* and their transformation in the *diachronic view*.

In the context of intertext and intermedial studies the genres of Chinese poetry come close to music. Here we can observe two features: on the one hand, we can see the *musicalness* of Chinese lyrics, and on the other, the poetry can be read as it is and no musicalness is observed, so background music is required.

Statement of the basic material. If talking about the historical transformation of Chinese lyrical genres, we should mention that it does not fall under the classical division into periods and types, as is typical for Western literature. In the Western literary tradition we have a distinct division: *Ancient lyrics, Middle Ages lyrics, Renaissance lyrics, lyrics of the Romantic Period, Classical lyrics*, and *Modern or Contemporary lyrics*. In Chinese literature we can observe its own system and tradition of periods in literature, including unique genres varieties.

In his time, the famous philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin said: “The life of the genre lies in its constant revivals and renewals within the original works. The essence of each genre... is revealed... in its variations, ... during the historical development of this genre...”¹. The variations (*or varieties*) of Chinese lyrical genres are the focus of this research. Genre variations get a new shape and content within a long period of oriental history.

The greatest contribution to the research and studies of Chinese poetry has been made by Russian orientalists² due to the physical proximity of China to Russia. Their researches are based not solely on lyric writing, but deal with the peculiarities of poetic genres, considering the unique style of Chinese literary genre transformations. We can name **Illia Smirnov**³ “Chinese poetry: in researches, notes, translations, interpretations” (2014), **Artemyi Karapetyants**⁴ “The beginning and establishment of poetic tradition in China” (1979), the world-class orientalist **Maryna Kravtsova**⁵, whose surname has an official Chinese variant: 克拉夫佐娃 *Kè lā fū zuǒ wá* due to her contribution and works on literature, such as “The Poetry of Ancient China: The experience of cultural analysis. An anthology of literary translation” (1994), “Poetry of immortal brightening. Chinese lyrics of the second half of the V century to the beginning of the VI century” (2001), “Author’s “yuefu. To the history of development” (1983), Ihor Lisevych⁶, **Yevgen Serebriakov**⁷ “Chinese poetry of the X–XI centuries. (*shi and qi genres*)” (1979), “*Shi genre* in the poetry of the III–VI centuries” (2008), “The role of personal names in the classical Chinese poem” (1987), “Poetry of Song Dynasty // The twelve poets of Song. Grief and joyance” (2000).

¹ **Mikhail Bakhtin**. Problems of Dostoevsky’s poetics. M., 1972. p. 241. **Mikhail Bakhtin** (1895–1975) – a world-class philosopher, literary critic.

² The names of the books, presented in the article, translated into English by O. Hul.

³ **Illia Smirnov** (4.04.1948) – Candidate of Philological Sciences. Famous orientalist, author of more than 100 publications.

⁴ **Artemyi Karapetyants** (27.05.1943) – a famous philologist, orientalist (Chinese studies). Candidate of Philological Sciences. Studied the history of China and Chinese philosophy, culture and life of ancient China. Interpreted old Chinese texts.

⁵ **Maryna Kravtsova** (19.06.1953) – a famous orientalist, scientist, literary critic. A specialist in the literature and culture of China. D.Litt, professor.

⁶ **Ihor Lisevych** (26.05.1932 – 27.01.2000) – famous orientalist, D.Litt.

⁷ **Yevgen Serebriakov** (06.10.1928) – famous orientalist, D.Litt.

Contemporary Ukrainian poetic oriental studies are known and represented firstly by the name of **Yaroslava Shekera** (1982–2019), who devoted her short but productive life to Chinese literature. Using her own manner and revealing her inner world, she translated a variety of classical Chinese poetry. Among her works on lyrical genres we can name “Chinese romance of the Song period (X–XIII ст.): genesis and image creation. A modern view” (*original name* «Китайський романс доби Сун (X–XIII ст.): генеза та образотворення. Сучасний погляд» (2009)), “Methodological framework of artistic analysis of Song poetry in the Qi genre” (*original name* «Методологічні засади художнього аналізу сунської поезії в жанрі **ци**» (2009)), “The artistic imagery of Song poetry in the Qi genre: to the problem of methodology of genre research” (*original title* «Художня образність сунської поезії в жанрі **ци**: до проблеми методології дослідження **жанру**» (2010)). Another contemporary Ukrainian orientalist who researches Chinese poetry is **Natalia Kolomiets**, a well-known scientist and lecturer at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kiev. Natalia Kolomiets and Yaroslava Shekera even tried to systemize their oriental studies in the form of chrestomathies on Chinese literature.

A great contribution to research on Chinese poetry has also been made by **Maghiel van Crevel**. His monumental masterpiece about Modern Chinese poetry saw the light of the day in his book “Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money” (2008).

The research rationale lies in the systematization of the theoretical foundation on the topic of genres in Chinese lyrics. Within our article we are going to make an analytical survey of genre differentiation and genre invariants, covering the period from **Qu Yuan’s “Fu”** to the modern poetry (avant-garde Misty poetry) of Chinese dissidents of the 20th century and the most contemporary lyrics of the early 21st century.

Division into periods and genre differentiation. Firstly, we should name the key grass root genres of Chinese poetry. They include:

1. “Fu” (“**賦**”);
2. “Shi” (“**詩**”);
3. “Qi” (“**詞**”);
4. “Qu” (“**曲**”).

Step by step, we are going to reveal their varieties and invariants. The official start of Chinese lyrics belongs to the Han Dynasty, 汉朝 (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.). The period was named **Early (other names Archaic, Ancient or Old) Chinese poetry/lyrics**. The key genre of Early Chinese poetry, called “**赋**” **fù** (“**Fu**”), was written in the style of **rhythmical prose** with poetic elements. It also contained an *introduction, the dialogue with the lord (the emperor)*, and contained *the core unit and the conclusion*). Thus, “**赋**” **fù** combined prose and poetry in itself.



Qu Yuan, 屈原 Qū Yuán (340–278 B.C.E.) is one of the greatest poets of the “**赋**” genre. He was a poet of the Chu Kingdom, who was acknowledged to be the first poet in the history of The Heavenly Empire.



(Qu Yuan, 屈原)

Most of his poems apply to earthly Deities, which demonstrates the mythological basis of the early “**Fu**” lyrics. In that context we can name Qu Yuan’s poems as 《云中君》 “To the Lord of Clouds”, *the full title* 《九歌云中君》, 《河伯》 “Devoted to Hebo” or “To the Lord of Huanhe”, *the full title* 《九歌河伯》. Besides, there are a number of poems about nature and travelling, among them: 《远游》 “The far journey”, 《天问》 and “Questions of the Sky”. But the most important poems of Qu Yuan were applied to the King (Lord) or emperor, such as: 《大司命》 “To the Great Lord of Life” or “The star of Life and Death”, *from the full title* 《九歌大司命》, 《少司命》 “Shaosiming” or “To the Small Lord of Life”, *from the full title* 《九歌少司命》.



(“To the Lord of Clouds” 《九歌云中君》)

We should bring into view that in the title of Qu Yuan’s lyrics the poet often used the word combination “九歌”, which, in addition to the direct meaning “**nine songs**”, is also translated as “**nine odes**”.

In fact, these are odes to the nine achievements or noble accomplishments of the Lords (rulers) of China. In Chinese practice there is a special term, “**九功**” *jiǔ gōng* (control of the forces of nature such as: *water, fire, metal, wood, earth and flora, government control*)⁸.

Consequently, we can say that the lyrical dedications of Qu Yuan starting with the words “九歌” are **odes** within the “**Fu**” genre varieties.

Based on “**Fu**”, Qu Yuan created the style or genre invariant “**Sao**” (骚 *Sāo*), having written a Chinese narrative poem 《离骚》 “**Lisao**” (*Lí Sāo*). 《离骚》 – is one of the longest narrative poems of that time. “**Fu**” and “**Sao**” gave birth to the genre variation called “**Sao elegy**”.

The Early “**Fu**” were aimed at praising the The Heavenly Empire and the ruling lords. Later, the topics of the lyrics also covered descriptions of nature, human relationships, and the feelings of the narrator.

Tracing such differentiation in the form of genre invariants, we can mention Tsvetan Todorov, who emphasizes that some genres originated or transformed from other genres⁹.

⁸ <https://bkrs.info/slovo.php?ch=九功>

⁹ V. Budnyi, M. Ilnytskyi, *Comparative literary studies*, Kiev: Kiev Mohyla Academy, 2008.

As compared with Western poetry, the Archaic Chinese lyrics could not show the personal feelings of the narrator, and the key aim of the poetry centered on praising the Heavenly Empire and the lord, but with no personality in poetic lines available.

After the early “Fu” poetry, there appeared 《楚辞》 (*the so-called “poetic lines of Chu”*) – an anthology containing mostly Qu Yuan’s poetry, and that of Song Yu, who was also one of the most popular “Fu” genre followers of the Archaic period.

The renewed varieties of “Fu” were very popular among the oriental poets till the end of the 19th century. Qu Yuan and Song Yu were not the only poets of “Fu”; among the genre’s representatives we can name Syma Sianzhu and Van Qian.

The period of Classical and Late Classical Chinese poetry is characterized by the popularization of the “Shi” genre – “诗” shī. The time frame of “Shi” covers the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (南北朝 *Nán Běi Cháo*, 420–589, AD). If talking about the historical and literary background, we should state that the “诗” genre originated from the Confucian book “Shi Jing” or “The Book of Songs” (《诗经》¹⁰ Shī Jīng), which is regarded as one of the fundamental works of Chinese literature, literacy and the cultural code. During the reign of Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇帝¹¹), the texts of 《经》 were almost wiped out in accordance with his orders.

The structure of “诗” – is represented by lines of 4, 5, 6 or 7 characters, where the major role belongs to tone changes and tone melody. As a rule, “Shi” were written in the form of four lines with five words in each line.

Based on 《诗经》 as the authentic source or the archetype, we can say that the following genres and thematic variations of “Feng sao” poetry (“风骚” fēng sāo) also belong to “Shi” variants:

- government morals (国风 guó fēng);

¹⁰ 《诗经》 – the fundamental work of Chinese literature. It covers Chinese philosophy, culture and government, and belongs to one of the Confucian books, under the “Wu Jing” or “Five Books” Collection (《五经》 Wǔ Jīng).

¹¹ 秦始皇帝 (259/260 B.C.E–210 B.C.E) – the emperor, who founded the Chinese empire, created the Qin Dynasty, joining a lot of territories. He is regarded as a despot and tyrant. A part of the Great Wall of China 长城 was built within his reign on the bodies of Chinese people who were told to build the wall.

- Small odes (小雅 xiǎo yǎ);
- Large odes (大雅 dà yǎ);
- Hymns (颂歌 sòng gē);
- narrative poems (长诗 cháng shī).

“Shi” odes were represented by aristocratic songs, which in their turn originated from folk songs.

The Classical period is also represented by the “Qi” (or “Ci”) genre – “词” cí (each tone has its own musicalness and rhythm). “Qi” appears within the reign of the Tang Dynasty (唐朝, 618–907).

One of the most prominent and outstanding poets is **Li Bo** (known also as Li Bai (Chinese name 李白 or 李太白), who lived in about 701–762/763, AD). Here, it is needless to say that in Old China poor people could not become well known poets. Among the names we know today are the names of government servants, officers, and emperors and their friends or relatives. So, the only topics available in poetry were: the country, the emperor, friendship, nature, and slight hints at love and feelings, which were forbidden topics till the end of the 19th century.

The poem 《静夜思》, (“Quiet Night Thoughts”) is regarded as one of the most beloved poems of Li Bo among Chinese people:



《静夜思》

床前明月光，
疑是地上霜。
举头望明月，
低头思故乡。

“Quiet night Thoughts”

The Moonlight makes its path before the bed,
So, the ground seems to be covered with crystal ice.
I glance up at the Moonlight,
I lower my head and think of the Motherland.

(translated by O. Hul)



This poem is a vivid example of the Classical Chinese tradition. Firstly, the structure of the poem shows the classical 4 lines with 5 Chinese characters in each line. In its turn, each Chinese character is not just a syllable, but a word with its meaning. Secondly, the poem preserves its melody and musicalness. This is an example of combining the medium of music and the medium of lyrics, where the poem “seems to be sung”, maintaining the rhyme at the end of the 1st and 2nd lines. And there is one more thing we need to emphasize – the topic of the poem is centered around the Motherland, the beauty of the Moon and the native land. The pictures help us to feel the emotions and thoughts of the poet, who, being a government officer, a friend of the emperor, acts like a captive bird, restricted in words, emotions and deeds.

We should name one more well-known Chinese poet, **Du Fu** (杜甫), who never restricted himself to writing only in the “词” genre. He loved to compose narrative poems. Among the “词” genre followers we can name Bai Xiangshan (白香山), Wen Tingyun (温庭筠) and others.

Li Yu (李煜), a poet and an emperor, started the tradition of writing romances in the “词” genre.

The following variations of genres became very popular among poets in the bosom of early (or ancient) poetry:

“**Lu shi**” (律诗 *lǜ shī*) – 5-word (or 7-word) poems, which were strictly regulated by construction and melodies. The poems consist of 8 lines, each of which contain 5 or 7 words with a certain tonal melody and a paired structure of lines;

“**Yuefu**” (乐府 *yuè fǔ*) – is a genre of Chinese poetry or Chinese style of lyric poetry which appeared under the rules and demands of the “Music

Bureau” – called “**乐府**” in Chinese (*it was a special House or Institution which did research on folk art, lyrics and songs on the basis of 《诗经》*). The structure of 乐府 is 5 words (syllables) in a line.

“**Gu ti shi**” (**古诗** *gǔ tǐ shī* or **古诗** *gǔ shī* “**Gu shi**”) – a poetry of archaic style containing 4, 5 or 7 words in each line, without tone regulation. “**古诗**” appeared on the grounds of “**Yuefu**” and were very popular within the Tang – Song Dynasties (618 – 1234).

“**Yuefu**” illustrates the melodiousness of Chinese poetry and its multifacetedness. Here, music is not the background for the poem, but the poem appears like a lyrical song, being presented in accordance with the Chinese tradition of creating a continuous syllable singing – like what we can hear in a classical Beijing opera. Meanwhile, the poems still contain the rules of music, such as:

- *temporal development (or evolution in time);*
- *historical comprehension;*
- *highly aesthetic outlook on life;*
- *social character.*

Late classical poetry, which appeared on the literary stage after the Song Dynasty, 宋朝 (after 1250), lost the poetic genre “**词**”. On the other hand, the literature obtained a new form of genre called **散曲** *sǎn qǔ* (sounds like “San Tsyi”) – the lyrics, free from distinct rules and shapes, using folk motifs and topics, was frequently read with folk music. So, that is how **arias** appeared.

In the light of such events, the early “**Qu**” genre appeared (“**曲**” *qū* – “the song”). But oriental scholars also think that “**Qu**” may belong to the Early period, so we should leave it as a disputable issue. In fact, “**曲**” is a sort of Chinese poetry performed with background music. The peak of popularity for the new genre is considered to have been within the reign of the **Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368, AD)**. Here comes the name “**元曲**” *yuán qǔ* (“The Song of Yuan” or “Yuan drama” or “Yuan tragedy”).

During the reign of the **Ming Dynasty (1368–1644, AD)**, the poetry of the **very late classical period** becomes secondary, and early and classical lyrical genres are mostly used. But Chinese prose comes to the stage.

The Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), within the long period of its rule, made a great contribution to the development of Chinese culture, and literature, in particular. The poetry was written in the spirit of Confucianism. Emperors were among the most skilled masters of poetry. It was during the Qing period

that a Dictionary of Rhyme was created (1711). If the early and classical poetry was written by men, the poets of the Qing Dynasty included a number of women writers. Educating the nation in the traditions of Confucianism, the poetry contained the notes of transparency, using everyday colloquial language. During the Qing period, a collection of Tang poetry was published under the title *《全唐诗》* (1705) – a unique anthology of Chinese poetry in the “*Shi*” (诗) genre, which covered the lyrics of more than 2,200 poets and contained about 49 thousand poems. By order of the Manchuria Dynasty lords, a titanic work was carried out to create an anthology of poems, and to decode and unify the manuscripts of the classical poets of the Tang Dynasty. In the 18th century there also appeared an anthology named *《唐诗三百首》* “Three hundred Tan dynasty poems” (1763).

In the 17th–19th centuries narrative poems written in the “*Yuefu*” (乐府yue fǔ – poetic songs) genre became very popular. Most notably was the creation of “*Yuefu*” by womenfolk: consorts and daughters of emperors, and by the ruling clique itself.

Modern (Contemporary) Chinese poetry “*新诗*” appeared with the events of the 4th of May 1919 in China. The political and revolutionary events caused social transformations in all spheres of life. Within this period the genres of literature passed through a diffusion and contamination process.

The aim and motto of the revolutionary poets of the beginning of 20th century was centered around the rejection of classical Chinese lyrics, classical style and genre. The first half of the 20th century had two histories of lyrical transformation: the first way returned the poets to using 文言 (wén yán) language, old topics and ideas. These poets represented the traditional poetic school, focusing mainly on Communist Party ideology, whereas young revolutionary poets centered their attention on writing poems using 白话bái huà. Some of them continued writing in accordance with Communist Party needs and demands, but most young poets became dissidents. They worked out the idea of the new Chinese poetry with Western topics and motives, and refused to write on the demand. Personality and love, the beauty of nature, and the topic of the Motherland in the view of young poets-dissidents were the most popular topics of the new generation of poets. Even in exile, far away from China, they continued to write about China, using the Chinese language, and creating a mixture of native Eastern and Western styles.

Among the brightest representatives of the “新诗” poets we can name the literary group of Misty poets “朦胧诗人” méng lóng shī rén (avant-garde dissident poets). They were among those poets who started their art as poets writing on the demand of the Communist Party but changed their opinion and aims after the cultural revolution. They focused their manner of writing on genre diffusion and intertext, mixing the cultures of the West and of the East. The Misty or unclear poetry (朦胧诗 méng lóng shī) brought to life the needs of common Chinese people.

The archetype of the early Misty poetry was taken from the Small odes (小雅 xiǎo yǎ) and Large odes (大雅 dà yǎ). While the last two were aimed to glorify the Ruler or the emperor, the Misty poetry was aimed at praising the Chinese Communist Party, the leaders, the country, and the whole policy of the 1920s-80s. Here, the category within the archetype was the “on a by-order basis poetry”. The other category belongs to the archetype of “revolutionary poetry” of the 1960s-90s. Here became popular poetry in the so-called genre of a **diary**, where the poet reveals almost all of his thoughts and deeds within a certain period. That was a very productive manner of writing among the new generation of dissident poets. A vivid example of the **diary** is represented in 《乡音》 “Local Dialect” or “Native sounds” – a poem devoted to China, written with love to the Motherland by a real son of China, the well-known Chinese poet-dissident Bei Dao (北岛).

Dissident avant-garde poets often used the lyrical **verse epistle** genre. The most popular form was **poems-letters**. *Secret writing* became popular in times of the prosecution and exile of dissidents. The 1980s-90s saw **odes, sonnets and epigrams** become quite popular.

As the topics of love, feelings and sensuality gained a large readership in China and abroad at the end of 1990s to the beginning of the 21st century, the intimate lyrics grew in dimensions and vulgarity. Here we can name Yin Lichuan (尹丽川), one of the most outstanding poets, whose “lower body poetry” (“下半身”) gave the reader a vivid picture of modern attitudes to love, where no feelings exist, and merely physical wants got their place¹².

¹² O. Hul, *Avant-garde lower body poetry in the context of creative art of Yin Lichuan*, Odesa 2019.

We should also mention the Chinese romance or Chinese romantic song of the 20th century, represented by Liu Song's "The birds sing with the wind", Lo Zhongrong's "Crossing the river for lotus", and Sui Jingxing's "The three poems of Zhimo"¹³.

Chinese literature before the 20th century represents the reflection of the whole of China's needs and demands, with a slight hint of personality. But the Chinese literature of the 20th–21st centuries represents the inner world of the poet, the co-relation between the poet and the country, between the poet and the society, and it reveals the feelings of a man.

Poetry of the 20th century, acquiring a new shape under the influence of Western ideas and motives, continued to apply to semiotics, using language codes (symbols, language clichés) understood only by the Chinese. Here we can observe that "dissolution" or adaptation of Chinese realities and codes takes place in the modern urban hypertext.

Conclusions. Analyzing the diachronic transformation of Chinese poetry, we can talk about the role of genre expression, and we can distinguish the special plasticity of Chinese lyrical genres. Like music, they move in time, thus reproducing a general picture of the life of Chinese society, with its instructions, experiences and philosophical teaching, glorifying the ruling lords, and the beauty of the native land. We made the review of lyrical transformations from 《诗经》 to the Misty poetry ("朦胧诗") and "lower body poetry" ("下半身") to illustrate that the Chinese lyrical genres arose from prose and through centuries of transformation, and have partially returned to blank verse in the form of "letters" and "diaries", transforming into prose with rhyme, and sometimes into prose itself. This process of transformation: prose into lyrics and the reverse process: from lyrics to prose, is a wavelike and permanent phenomenon in Chinese literature.

¹³ Han Ying, *Romance as a new genre in the musical culture of China of the 20th century*, #.3 2008.

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