

From Pre-Qin to Late Tang Dynasty: A Study on “Social Behaviour” in Chinese Traditional Poetry Culture*

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Banquet poems have achieved great success in the development of Chinese literature, in which people usually express their observations and feelings at banquets through poetic forms. The social behaviours reflected in banquet poems have different characteristics in different times. In the Pre-Qin period, banquets were aimed at promoting “rituals” as social purposes, emphasising moral education. During the Wei and Jin dynasties, banquets were divided into two types: public banquets and private banquets. Public banquets were important social occasions but had a tendency towards extravagance and waste, while private banquets were more casual and had rich and interesting content. In the Tang Dynasty, with the development of the imperial examination system, the Jinshi banquet gradually became popular, and the themes of banquet poems further expanded. Banquet poems from different periods can indirectly reflect the changes and development of traditional Chinese social behaviours.

Keywords: traditional culture, banquet poems, social behaviours

Social Behaviour in Banquet Poems of Pre-Qin Period

Banquet poems in the Pre-Qin period were mostly impromptu works created at banquets, serving as both a means for poets to express emotions and an essential part of social life at that time. By analysing banquet scenes in Pre-Qin poetry, we can see the most authentic aspects of society at that time.

The poem *Lu Ming from The Book of Songs—Lesser Court Hymns* (p. 168.) depicts the scene of a Pre-Qin banquet. The opening line “With pleased sounds the deer call to one another, Eating the celery of the fields” portrays a beautiful scene of natural harmony at the banquet. The entire poem is filled with a sense of harmony, expressing the concept of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature through descriptions of the natural environment and animals, and also reflecting the aesthetic tastes of the Pre-Qin people.

Although this poem is a banquet poem, the content is mainly focused on praising the virtues of guests, indicating that the main social purpose of banquets at that time was to educate people on morals, as discussed in *The Book of Rites—The Record of Music* (p. 155): “To offer, to entertain, to scold, and to intoxicate—this is to

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make each person according to their position, to show the order of respect and hierarchy to future generations.” In the Pre-Qin period, banquets were aimed at creating a harmonious atmosphere under the hierarchical system of the clan law.

Social Behavior in Banquet Poetry During the Wei and Jin Dynasties

The Wei and Jin dynasties were a period of flourishing development for banquet poetry. During this time, banquets were divided into two types: public banquets and private banquets held by literati.

In *Public Banquet* (Cao Zhi, 220 AD, p. 2), Cao Zhi depicted the scene of a public banquet during the Eastern Jin period. This poem was written in the 16th year of Jian'an when the political situation was relatively stable. The whole poem is full of strong vitality and emotional color, giving people a clear and light feeling. The poem begins with a visit to the west garden on a clear night, where literati enjoyed singing and drinking, and the poet was intoxicated by the scenery. The poem vividly describes the scenery and portrays a serene and peaceful night. Finally, the line “My free spirit soars with the wind, eternal as time itself” expresses the author's attachment to this beautiful moment.

The depiction in this poem makes people yearn for the banquets of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, but the public banquets of that time also had some negative aspects. People in the Wei and Jin Dynasties loved to drink, and banquets emphasized extravagance and ostentation, costing a huge amount of money. A large quantity of delicacies and various luxury goods were easily discarded by the hosts, wasting a great deal of wealth and resources. Banquets were also important social occasions for people at that time, and some officials would use public banquets to accept gifts and bribes, which led to the intensification of corruption. Some people also developed a sense of comparison at banquets, spending a lot of money and energy on clothing and accessories to showcase their noble status and cultural cultivation.

Zhang Hua's poem “Song of the Jin Banquet” (Zhang Hua, 232-300 AD, p. 135) reflects these phenomena. The poem was written in the fifth year of the Taishi period and was a banquet song commissioned by Emperor Sima Yan at the New Year's Day banquet. The protagonist of the banquet was “our emperor”. The beginning of the poem describes the hardworking of the emperor and then the grand scene of the banquet with the phrase “crowns and robes gathered, wine vessels and food arranged like stars”, and “various dishes, several delicacies constantly changing” indicates the abundant and unique variety of food. “Countless feathers and ranks, joy reaches the highest point” expresses the enthusiasm of the banquet, where people enjoy food and wine without counting the number of times. “Singers sing and dancers sway their sleeves” shows the dancers and singers entertaining the guests. “With joy in abundance and no lack of courtesy” describes the emotional climax of the participants during the banquet, where people indulge in entertainment without forgetting their manners. The last sentence “Great joy without waste, orderly and well-regulated” reveals the success of the banquet. Although the work is filled with joy, it also reveals the extravagance of the banquet and the obsession of the people with drinking and revelry. It is not only a literary work but also a social report that showcases the extravagance of banquets during the Wei and Jin periods.

In addition to public banquets, private gatherings among literati were also very popular during the Wei and Jin dynasties. At that time, the political situation was turbulent, and literati had no way to serve their country, so they retreated to the mountains and forests. In addition, the beautiful climate and scenery of Jiangnan provided great convenience for literati to go on outings, and more and more poets became obsessed with landscapes, using the natural environment as their venue to host various private gatherings.

Private banquets among literati and poets were also popular in the Wei and Jin dynasties. At that time, with the turmoil in the country, many literati withdrew from the world and sought solace in the mountains and forests. The beautiful climate and scenery of the Jiangnan region provided them with great convenience for outings, and more and more poets became immersed in the landscape. They held various kinds of private banquets in natural settings, where cultural activities such as poetry, music, calligraphy, and painting were the main theme. They also had a deep understanding of the wine and cuisine served at the banquets, with a variety of wines to choose from.

Unlike public banquets that placed great emphasis on “etiquette”, these private gatherings were more focused on enjoyment and pleasure. Activities such as appreciating flowers, long whistling, playing the zither, and composing poetry were common, but drinking was always the most important activity. The literati often drank heartily and composed several poems when in high spirits, and then lay down among the bamboo groves in a drunken state, using nature as their bed. The famous “Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection” (Lanting Jixu) describes the scene of private gatherings among literati.

The poems written by the literati during these banquets reflect the cultural atmosphere and lifestyle of the Wei and Jin dynasties. Unlike their predecessors, who pursued external success, the literati of the Wei and Jin dynasties sought spiritual satisfaction and internal harmony. They regarded landscape as an independent aesthetic object and in their poems, not only described the beauty of the natural scenery, but also expressed their deep sorrow for the impermanence of life, thereby integrating their aesthetic appreciation of nature with their understanding of life.

Social Behaviors in Banquet Poems of the Tang Dynasty

The Tang emperors were fond of banquet activities and openly advocated for their officials and subjects to indulge in feasts and pleasure. According to the *Anecdotes of the Kaiyuan and Tianbao Era*, “In the spring of Chang’an, leisure and pleasure reached its peak, with no idle land left in gardens and parks.”

As rulers began to place more value on talent, a new type of banquet emerged in the Tang Dynasty—the banquet for newly appointed scholars. Through these banquets, the newly appointed scholars expressed their joy in passing the imperial examination, while also having the opportunity to meet and network with other successful exam takers and officials. In Tang society, the scale and luxury of private banquets, particularly the banquets for newly appointed scholars, were related to the rank of the scholars. If they achieved excellent results, the banquet would be more grandiose and elaborate. Furthermore, these banquets were also a medium for interpersonal communication and emotional exchange. Eating and chatting together provided a platform for sharing information and communicating feelings. The philosophy behind the banquet for newly appointed scholars in the Tang Dynasty was to pursue a culture of striving for excellence and promoting harmony among people.

The Wenxi Banquet was a banquet held by the Tang imperial court for newly appointed scholars, and was often held on a grand scale at the Qujiang Pavilion. It was one of the most important social activities of ancient times, closely related to the development of the imperial examination system. In these banquets, newly appointed scholars often showcased their talents and made connections with famous scholars, in order to gain recognition and opportunities for advancement. Many poems depicting the Wenxi Banquet were written during the Tang Dynasty, such as Xue Neng’s “Drunk in the Qujiang Pavilion” and Liu Cang’s “Watching the List of Successful Candidates”.

Conclusion

From the pre-Qin period to the height of the Tang dynasty, the scale and form of banquet poetry continued to evolve and enrich, and the social behaviors depicted within underwent constant changes while their meaning became more nuanced. The beauty of social interaction depicted in banquet poetry is not only due to its inherent “beauty of etiquette”, but also the combined effect of the development of poetry itself and the social behavior it represents. This unique aesthetic value endows banquet poetry with a special significance.

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