

Literature and Time: On Jiao Xun's Concept of Literary Transformation

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Jiao Xun's concept of the succession of literary genres according to each generation's strengths clearly establishes the interrelationship between historical time and literary genres. Jiao Xun's idea of the transformation of literary styles differs from the prevailing notion at that time, which advocated prioritizing poetry and prose that conveyed aspirations and ideals while considering other literary genres such as ci (a form of lyric poetry), qu (drama), and novels as inferior. Instead, Jiao Xun advocated using the "nature" and "events" of objects as criteria and awakened a more traditional "poetic teaching tradition" characterized by metaphorical expression and emotional resonance, which aligned with the concept of literature conveying aspirations and ideals. This enabled the standard of "nature" to transcend the boundaries of literary genres, establishing new criteria for the hierarchy of genres and encapsulating Jiao Xun's intention to summon emerging literary genres that were in harmony with the "present".

Keywords: Jiao Xun, literary transformation, literary genres

Introduction

In his "Preface to the History of Song and Yuan Drama", Wang Guowei proposed, Every generation has its own literature: the Songs of Chu, the Fu of Han, the parallel prose of the Six Dynasties, the poetry of Tang, the ci of Song, and the qu of Yuan. These are all examples of literature specific to their respective eras that later generations have been unable to replicate (WANG, 1996, p. 1). This viewpoint has had a lasting impact on the conception of classical Chinese literature and represents an interpretation of the relationship between literary genres and historical time. When scholars trace the origins of Wang Guowei's ideas, they often refer to Jiao Xun's concept of "each generation having its own strengths" in literature. Some scholars believe that Wang Guowei's statement inherited Jiao Xun's perspective on literary periods proposed during the Qing Dynasty. Jiao Xun once suggested, "Each generation has its own strengths, but when they abandon their strengths and pursue what they are not good at, they are living under the shadow of others." (JIAO, 2016, p. 627). Wang Qizhou believes that although Wang Guowei appears to have been influenced by Jiao Xun and other scholars since the Yuan and Ming Dynasties who proposed the theory of succession of literary genres, fundamentally, Wang Guowei's approach has a modern significance that the former lacked. The concept of the succession of literary styles proposed by Jiao Xun and others was largely influenced by the notion of "transformation" found in the *Book of Changes* (*Yi Jing*). However, the ideas put forth by Wang Guowei and others were influenced by Western evolutionary thinking, where literature reflects the natural state of humanity and emphasizes the independence of literature, deliberately discarding literary forms that impose moral concepts (Wang, 2002). This viewpoint

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introduces a dimension of temporal awareness, regarding the theories of the succession of literary styles proposed since the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties as still within the realm of “conveying aspirations and ideals”. On the other hand, the literary concepts presented by Wang Guowei, Hu Shi, and others have a more modern significance. They connect literature with the natural state of humanity, transcend metaphysical moral restrictions, and are clearly influenced by Western literary thought.

We cannot overlook the benefits of dissecting the internal logic of these seemingly similar literary concepts. It reminds us to pay attention to the potential differences in the underlying texture of literary concepts, even when their forms appear consistent on the surface. It also makes us aware that Wang Guowei's perspective on the succession of literary genres since Jiao Xun and the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties is not a simple continuation but reflects the intellectual trends and literary value orientations of that period. However, it is worth questioning whether we can simply categorize pre-modern and modern ideas based on a temporal distinction and whether morality and nature become completely opposing poles within the internal factors of literature, representing distinct differences between the pre-modern and modern eras. Therefore, this article attempts to explore the multiple implications of Jiao Xun's theory of the succession of literary styles, unravel the underlying logical thinking and Jiao Xun's own attitudes towards morality, nature, and art, and examine their significant position within the context of the concept of literary genre succession. This approach may be more beneficial in addressing this issue.

“Nature and Temperament”—Literary Standards That Transcend Time

The concept of “each generation having its own strengths” indicates that different literary genres flourish to varying degrees during a specific era, and there are certain criteria for a genre to be recognized as prevailing in its time. According to the prevailing notion during the mid-Qing Dynasty, poetry and prose were evidently more valued than genres such as *ci* (a form of lyric poetry) and *qu* (drama). *Ci* and *qu* were considered as the “surplus” or “subsidiary” of poetry and prose, representing a less refined literary form that lacked elegance. The distinction between poetry and prose and *ci* and *qu* primarily revolved around the presence of the quality of “elegance”. However, there were also defenders who advocated for the value of *ci*, *qu*, and other genres. Jiao Xun's concept of “each generation having its own strengths” vigorously defended the artistic value of emerging genres and sought to inject new vitality into the prevailing refined spirit of that time.

Jiao Xun first acknowledged the importance of drama from the perspective of the historical development of literary genres. He regarded the Yuan Dynasty as the pinnacle of drama, elevating it to the same status as Tang poetry. At the same time, he proposed his famous assertion that different genres have their own strengths in different eras. Since each era has its unique spirit, the literary forms that embody the spirit of the times vary. So, what determines the “prevailing” position of a certain genre within a dynasty? When discussing the transformation of literary genres throughout dynasties, Jiao Xun mentioned that “nature and temperament” (性情) is an indispensable and fundamental element in literature since the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*). The common characteristic of drama and poetry lies in possessing “nature and temperament”. If a genre loses its “nature and temperament”, it will become lifeless and withered, leading to its eventual demise (JIAO, 2018, p. 419).

So why is “nature and temperament” so important in the development of poetry and various literary genres? Jiao Xun explained the interrelationship between “nature and temperament” and “inspiration”. It is through the inspiration that arises from “enthusiasm” (兴) and the connection with one's own “nature and temperament” that the expression of emotions towards objects occurs (JIAO, 2015, p. 114). In poetry, this is reflected in the creative

approach of “enthusiasm”. Therefore, “enthusiasm” is both a creative impulse and a mode of expression. Only when one truly achieves “enthusiasm” can the desired effect of captivating readers be achieved. This not only reflects the relationship between the author and the work but also the relationship with the readers. As a result, the creation and regulations of poetry are not solely based on the work itself but emphasize the interactive relationship between the author and the readers.

Jiao Xun reiterated the importance of “nature and temperament” (性情), which serves two purposes. On one hand, it is meant to avoid an excessive focus on rhetorical expression in poetry. On the other hand, it is a response to the excessive emphasis on righteousness and principles in Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism. Jiao Xun pointed out that “nature and temperament” should be considered in contrast to “upholding principles and self-restraint” (以理自持) (JIAO, 2016, p. 97). The reiteration of “gentleness and sincerity” as poetic teaching is a rejection of the rigid adherence to principles in Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism. It is evident that this notion of “nature and temperament” does not encompass the entirety of human nature as an objective and natural phenomenon, nor does it include both positive and negative attitudes. Instead, it signifies the restrained and harmonious “nature and temperament” that emerges naturally in poetic creation. This “nature and temperament” should be distinguished from the expression of “righteousness and principles” in literature. Thus, poetry is not merely a tool for conveying aspirations and ideals, nor is there an inherent separation between “depicting emotions and situations” and “nature and temperament”. Both “nature and temperament” and “righteousness and principles” are integral to literary creation.

Jiao Xun's proposition to emphasize the “political and educational spirit” of poetry not only expands the perspective of poetry itself but also broadens the literary perspective that encompasses various genre traits. These traits are not limited to poetry alone but also are manifested in other literary forms such as ci, qu, and essays. Each era not only has representative genres as standards but also exhibits differences between different periods. Therefore, Jiao Xun's theory of “each generation having its own literary genres” indicates that he extends the literary standards imbued with the characteristic of “nature and temperament” and the spirit of “poetic teaching” to various genres. Simultaneously, it allows for transcending the constraints of historical time, playing a role as a standard in each period of literary history, and achieving its aesthetic requirements.

Summoning Literary Genres Aligned With the Present Time

The historical analysis of literary concepts represents an expansion of literary genres that embrace the spirit of poetic teaching. Furthermore, it highlights the potential for mutual transformation among different genres. The mutual transformation of literary genres is often based on their formal relevance, providing additional basis for the development and changes in the perspective of literary history.

In addition to the transformations between poetry, ci, and qu, Jiao Xun specifically emphasizes the inherent connection between the Eight-legged Essay (baguwen) and the dramatic performances of the Jin and Yuan Dynasties. This prompts us to examine the transformation of literary genres from two perspectives: the form of expression and the purpose of writing. By considering both the form and purpose of writing, we can gain insights into the process of genre transformation. It allows us to explore how literary genres adapt and evolve in response to cultural, social, and intellectual changes over time.

Firstly, Jiao Xun highlights the importance of the “format of Yuan drama” as a standard and also points out the historical relationship among various literary genres, particularly the transformation of form between the Eight-legged Essay (baguwen) and drama. The content shifted from the “strange and mysterious” to “logical

reasoning”, and the form changed from “musical accompaniment” to “parallelism”. The dramatic elements were incorporated into the Eight-legged Essay (JIAO, 2016, p. 655). Each section of the Eight-legged Essay is derived from various aspects of drama, which becomes crucial to re-examine the creative standards and methods of Yuan drama in order to create the Eight-legged Essay effectively.

The transformational relationship between the concept of “representing the words of sages” (代圣人立言) and the vocal style of drama (曲剧唱腔) in terms of literary history seems difficult to be conclusively confirmed by modern scholars. Jiao Xun's analogy between the Eight-legged Essay and the vocal style of drama is primarily intended to highlight the inherent political and educational purposes found in the Eight-legged Essay and Tang Dynasty fiction. The Eight-legged Essay itself represents the “representing the words of sages” concept, as it requires using phrases from Confucian classics as titles. Its form dictates the importance of adhering to established rules and standards, limiting the freedom of expression seen in classical prose.

The Eight-legged Essay has long been criticized in academic circles for its formalism and lack of personal expression. Lu Qian once summarized the shortcomings of the Eight-legged Essay from the perspectives of repetitive rhetoric, identical meanings, simplistic language, and formulaic topic selection. It is evident that the decline of the Eight-legged Essay is attributed to its rigid structure and repetitive content, which resulted in writers completely losing their subjectivity and reducing it to a tool for passing the imperial examinations. Therefore, Jiao Xun points out the similarity in tone between the Eight-legged Essay and vocal style of drama, suggesting that it adopts the vocal style of individuals who embody “virtue and moral principles” (厚德有道). In essence, it advocates for maintaining the “rules” while allowing for the freedom of expression of “nature and temperament” as seen in Yuan drama's vocal style.

The isomorphic relationship in form between Jin and Yuan drama and the Eight-legged Essay exemplifies the literary value orientation within the sequence of genre transitions in different literary eras. It signifies that they must represent the most vibrant and creative endeavors of their respective times in order to facilitate the transformation of expression and maintain the internal coherence of logic. Thus, even though the Eight-legged Essay is considered primarily formalistic and Jin and Yuan drama may not directly serve the function of “conveying aspirations and ideals”, they can still be included in the sequence of genre transitions that inherit the spirit of poetic teaching in terms of expressing “nature and temperament”. Therefore, Jiao Xun reorders the value of literary genres in the historical dimension of temporal change, reassessing the value sequence of genres.

We can see that Jiao Xun's literary concept of “each generation having its own strengths” reveals a broader vision that goes beyond the context of literary history. “Each generation having its own strengths” not only emphasizes the independence of literary genres but also highlights their pursuit of aesthetic excellence in different historical periods. Furthermore, literary genres are not mutually exclusive; they have certain structural inheritances. The core reason for their prosperity lies in the continuity of the “nature and temperament” tradition embodied in the poetic tradition of the *Book of Songs*. It is the authenticity of “nature and temperament” in creative works that has gained recognition from readers throughout the ages.

Therefore, the approach of focusing on the “nature and temperament” shifts Jiao Xun's exploration of literary history from universality to the pursuit of individuality. It establishes “nature and temperament” as a standard within literary genres that surpasses temporal limitations, while the pursuit of excellence aims to summon emerging literary genres that align with the present time. Jiao Xun's recognition of Jin and Yuan drama and the Eight-legged Essay is not only an acknowledgment of the intrinsic value of these genres but also a

proposition that there are other forms of expression beyond poetry and prose that deserve promotion, even those that have been historically overlooked or not considered to possess literary value.

The Dialectical Relationship Between Literary Standards and Historical Time

Jiao Xun's concept of the transformation of literary genres not only entails a reassessment of the value sequence among various genres but also encompasses a profound understanding of the relationship between literature and time beyond the boundaries of specific genres. Therefore, we also need to examine how this transformation based on "nature and temperament" occurs and how "nature and temperament" is transferred to new literary forms, which principles are involved in this process. To understand this, we need to grasp Jiao Xun's concept of "causality" in his thinking.

Firstly, Jiao Xun's concept of "causality" is to some extent influenced by Dai Zhen. Dai Zhen used the term "zhi shi" to represent scholars' learning ability and judgment, while "zhi shi" referred to the complex state of the real world that is available for learning. The integration of knowledge and "zhi shi" was the goal Dai Zhen pursued. In other words, Dai Zhen emphasized the dialectical relationship between existing knowledge and emerging ideas within the temporal spectrum of knowledge. Jiao Xun inherited Dai Zhen's perspective and attempted to demonstrate the importance of ancient classics by pointing out the reasons for valuing the past. He further developed Dai Zhen's concept of "causality" and highlighted the inheritance relationships between figures such as Fuxi, Shennong, Huangdi, Yao, and Shun, as well as between the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, all based on the concept of "causality". "Causality" does not merely involve a straightforward inheritance but rather includes adaptation and transformation, which result in the historical evolution through a process of gains and losses (JIAO, 1987, p. 474). All of this requires the effort of "learning" in order to be truly accomplished. "Learning" requires fully understanding the origins and development of the knowledge of the ancients and using one's own subjective knowledge and judgment to discern right from wrong. This is true learning in the field of ancient studies. This forms a literary concept that encompasses both the notion of "carrying the moral" and the concept of "naturalness".

This is the inherent logic of Jiao Xun's viewpoint of "literary superiority in each generation". In other words, the creativity of the past provides foresight for later generations, and the subsequent creations further develop and enhance the previous ones. The later works are not created out of thin air; they are variations of the various colors of the earlier creations. There is no distinction of superiority or inferiority among them; it is only due to the differences in the times that different literary forms can flourish and thrive in different contexts. In the context of that time, this implies Jiao Xun's call for new literary forms and exploration of new forms that possess the characteristic of "xingqing" (emotional expression) and hold significance in terms of "superiority". Although the concept of "literary superiority in each generation" expands the types of literary forms, it also suggests that as time progresses, the state of their "prosperity" and "decline" will alternate with each other. The changes in the rise and fall of various literary forms mentioned by Jiao Xun fundamentally reflect the alternating changes of various elements within the forms, such as style, rhythm, ideas, and language. In this process of change, there exists a close cause-and-effect relationship between the past and the present. This line of thinking is also reflected in the attitude towards ideas and knowledge. The rigidity and stagnation of ideas and knowledge are largely due to the disconnect with the actual social conditions, manifested as scholars losing the power to interpret classics, resulting in a rigid language that is either misunderstood or used as a tool. The rigidity of thought disregards the authenticity and specificity of each individual and each situation, causing the entire society to overlook the

attention to real situations and shared emotions, ultimately leading to the inability of knowledge and ideas to provide society with more reasonable interpretations and guidance, thus losing their original meaning.

Therefore, as mentioned earlier, the concept of literary transformation held by Jiao Xun and others since the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties still maintains a focus on the “carrying of meaning”. On the other hand, Wang Guowei’s ideas already exhibit signs of humanistic naturalism, and this judgment is generally valid. However, the significance of Jiao Xun’s literary concept is not solely confined to being categorized within a broad narrative of “ancient” literary history that emphasizes the “carrying of meaning”. While previous scholars discussed literary transformation and each chose different standard literary forms of their time, they all represented their efforts to find a literary position within their own “contemporary” context. For Jiao Xun, reconstructing the lineage of literary transformation was not only aimed at breaking the hierarchical view of literary forms prevalent at that time but also an attempt to call forth emerging literary forms that corresponded to the significance of the “contemporary” era, in order to meet the demand for expressing the voice of the time.

Therefore, in this concept of literary transformation, “nature and temperament” has acquired a meaning that transcends time and space. It not only serves as a call for adaptation to the “contemporary” in literary forms but also establishes a standard for all literary forms throughout history. Any literary form that meets the standard of “nature and temperament” can fulfill the demand for the moral and has the potential to be included in the realm of “elegance and refinement”. These standards do not exceed the scope of the traditional concept of the “carrying of meaning” in literature but provide new ideas for the hierarchical view of literary forms prevalent at that time. This is also the distinctive aspect of Jiao Xun’s literary concept as a Confucian scholar.

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