

# *On Ouyang Xiu's Reception of Han Yu's Classical Poetry*

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the Ouyang Xiu's evaluation and reception of Han Yu's classical poetry and intend to reveal the influence of Ouyang's reception. Both Ouyang Xiu and Han Yu were influential poets, and it seems that by following Han Yu's poetry creation Ouyang Xiu promoted the innovation of poetry. In summary, Ouyang's reception of Han Yu's classical poetry can be divided into three main aspects: directly borrowing Han Yu's poetic phrases, imitating Han Yu in terms of theme and subject matter, and inheriting and promoting Han Yu's method of "using prose as poetry." Ouyang had a great influence on poets of Song dynasty through his creations, which changed the content and enriched the theme of Song poetry. Ouyang Xiu's emulation of Han Yu not only highlighted the exemplary nature of Han Yu's poetry but also promoted its widespread acceptance. Ouyang Xiu's study of Han Yu marked a critical point in the transformation of early Song poetic style.

**Keywords:** Ouyang Xiu, Han Yu, literary reception, classical poetry.

## 1. Introduction

As a renowned poet of the Song dynasty, Ouyang Xiu has left behind nearly 900 extant poems, of which approximately 40% are ancient-style poetry. Research on his work is relatively extensive. In terms of subject matter, studies have made progress on topics such as poetic exchanges, travel accounts, landscapes, and object poems[1-4]. In terms of chronology, there has been research specifically focused on his poetry written during his periods of exile[5]. From a geographical perspective, attention has been given to his poetry composed in various places such as Chuzhou, Bozhou, Yingzhou, and Yangzhou[6]. Ouyang's poetry deliberately imitates Han Yu's style. In the Houcun Shihua (Poetry Talks of the Back Village), Liu Kezhuang of the Southern Song dynasty noted that "Ouyang Gong's poetry is like Han Changli's and should not be evaluated solely as poetry." In Yan Yu's Canglang Shihua (Poetry Talks of Canglang), there is also a discussion stating that "Ouyang Gong learned from Han Tuizhi's ancient poetry."

This issue has also attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years. Wang Shouguo was among the earliest to explore Han Yu's profound influence on Northern Song poetry, arguing that Ouyang Xiu primarily inherited the heroic spirit and prosaic tendencies of Han Yu's poetry[7]. Subsequently, scholars such as Cui Jiyin, Li Xiuli, A Zheng, Li Fangmin, Gu Shuguang, and Bian Xueyan, while affirming Ouyang Xiu's deep admiration for Han Yu, have respectively examined the influence of Han Yu's prose theories, literary creation, and poetic composition on Ouyang Xiu[8-13]. Among them, Bian Xueyan, guided by the "balance of the unconventional and the conventional" (奇正) theory, delved into the different models and poetic theories from Ouyang Xiu to Huang Tingjian,

analyzing how they innovated theories while adhering to the ancient traditions. Based on the overall findings of the academic community, it is widely believed that Ouyang Xiu's literary creation went through three stages: learning from Han, resembling Han, and transforming Han. Most of his literary theories are derived from Han Yu, such as the concepts of "Dao precedes literature, and literature shines from inner truth" (道圣文至, 中实文辉). Through his literary works and administrative measures, Ouyang Xiu promoted the poetic and literary reforms of the Song dynasty. Ouyang Xiu's study of Han Yu's poetry focused primarily on creative techniques and subject matter, accepting and developing Han Yu's idea of "writing poetry with prose," thus paving the way for figures like Wang Anshi and Su Shi.

In summary, while Ouyang Xiu's reception of Han Yu has garnered significant scholarly attention, there remains room for further exploration. In *Ji Jiuben Hanwen Hou* (Record After the Old Edition of Han Yu's Collected Works), Ouyang Xiu writes: "I obtained six volumes of the Collected Writings of Master Han of Changli... I found his words profound and grand, yet at that time I was still young and could not fully grasp their meaning. I merely saw their vastness and found them admirable." This demonstrates that Ouyang Xiu was exposed to Han Yu's writings in his youth and held them in high regard. His acceptance of Han Yu's poetry came later than his acceptance of Han's prose, with the former perhaps influenced by the latter. This article will, therefore, focus more on the context of Ouyang Xiu's reception of Han Yu's poetry, examining the poetic texts of both Ouyang and Han, and investigating Ouyang Xiu's reception of Han Yu's classical poetry from a more comprehensive perspective.

## 2. Ouyang Xiu's Evaluation of Han Yu's Classical Poetry

In the early Northern Song period, the dominant poetic styles were the Bai Style, Late Tang Style, and Xikun Style, most of which were poetic exchanges. These styles pursued ornate diction and harmonious rhythms in form, but their content was often hollow. Dissatisfaction with this trend had already emerged among poets. Ming dynasty scholar Song Lian once remarked: "The early Song inherited the defects of the Late Tang and Five Dynasties. Since the Tian Sheng era, Yan Tongshu, Qian Xisheng, Liu Ziyi, and Yang Danian sought to reform it... Ouyang Yongshu made a bold correction to the Xikun style, using Han Yu as his model." Song Lian believed that Ouyang Xiu's adoption of Han Yu's poetry as his model was crucial in reforming the poetic style. Han Yu's poetry, especially his ancient-style poems, was characterized by straightforward language, eccentric style, and diverse subject matter, perfectly aligning with the need to combat the superficial poetic trends of the time.

Beyond literature, political factors were also important. Ouyang Xiu's efforts to reform the poetic style coincided with Fan Zhongyan's implementation of the Qingli New Policies, during which Confucianism's emphasis on practicality rose to prominence. In the realm of literary creation, this practical approach meant reflecting reality in poetry. Han Yu's poetry, such as *Returning to Pengcheng* and *Advice to Zhang Ji*, deeply portrayed the social landscape, meeting this need.

Under the dual impetus of literary development and political demands, Ouyang Xiu naturally embraced Han Yu's classical poetry, particularly his ancient-style poems, and held them in high esteem. This is reflected in his adoption of Han Yu's poetry as an aesthetic ideal. For instance, in *Liu Yi's Poetic Discourses*, Ouyang Xiu praised Su Shunqin's poetry, stating: "Brother Shunqin... when he composed linked verses with Du Fu at the Zige Temple, his poetry was on par with that of Han and Meng. It is unfortunate I could not see it all." Ouyang Xiu's description of Su's poetry as "on par with Han and Meng" not only affirmed Su's work but also reflected his high regard for Han Yu's poetry. Additionally, Ouyang Xiu described the mutual exchange of poems between Mei Yaochen and himself as having "the playful spirit of Han and Meng"[14], and Mei Yaochen himself remarked that he aimed to "become the Han Yu of our time"[15]. From Ouyang Xiu's self-narratives and the

descriptions of others, it is evident that Ouyang's poetry was heavily influenced by Han Yu. This recognition is also reflected in his high regard for Han Yu's poetry. In Liu Yi's Poetic Discourses, Ouyang Xiu directly praised Han's poetry: "His words aid in conversation, contribute to humor, depict human emotions, and describe objects, all expressed through poetry; and he achieves this with extraordinary skill." In Ouyang's view, Han's poetry serves various purposes: it assists in conversation, facilitates banter, portrays human life, and depicts objects, all while offering precise descriptions of diverse subjects. In terms of rhyme, Ouyang commented: "I particularly admire his mastery of rhyme. When his rhyme is broad, the waves overflow, flowing into nearby rhymes, at times returning and at times diverging, entering and exiting in harmony, without being constrained by conventional rules, as seen in poems like *This Day Is Pitying*. When his rhyme is narrow, it does not flow outward, but the difficulty brings out ingenuity—the more challenging, the more exceptional, as in *A Gift to Zhang Shiba During Illness*." Whether in form or content, Ouyang highly valued Han Yu's work. This admiration also extends to his reverence for Han Yu as a person. In *Record After the Old Edition of Han Yu's Collected Works*, Ouyang Xiu remarked: "Thus, Confucius and Mencius were only revered for a time, but they are revered as models for all eternity. The works of the Han clan went unnoticed for 200 years, but later they greatly influenced the present. This is not merely due to personal preferences, but because, over time, their brilliance becomes clearer and indestructible. Though temporarily obscured, they ultimately shine forever—this is the inevitable truth of their way." Ouyang Xiu equated Han Yu with Confucius and Mencius, giving him a lofty historical status. The saying "Tuizhi (Han Yu) once remarked, 'Fame is fleeting like a fragrant aroma'" reflects how Ouyang Xiu took Han Yu as his daily role model.

### 3. Main Aspects of Ouyang Xiu's Reception of Han Yu's Classical Poetry

Ouyang Xiu's reception of Han Yu's classical poetry can be divided into three main aspects: directly borrowing Han Yu's poetic phrases, imitating Han Yu in terms of theme and subject matter, and inheriting and promoting Han Yu's method of "using prose as poetry."

Ouyang Xiu was highly familiar with Han Yu's poetry and often directly borrowed his language. In *Reply to the Monk Weiwu*, the Poet, the line "Han Zi also once said, 'Gather oneself and put on one's cap and sash'" is a direct borrowing from Han Yu's *Seeing Off the Monk Chengguan*: "I sighed toward the wind, unable to see, I wished to gather myself and put on my cap and sash." In *Two Poems for Li the Taoist of Wuwei*, the line "Master Li plucks the phoenix's note, and in the empty mountains, a hundred birds stop their chirping" borrows from Han Yu's ancient-style poem *Listening to the Qin Played by Master Ying*: "The flock of a hundred birds chattered, then suddenly a solitary phoenix appeared." In *Two Beautiful Trees in the Courtyard*, the line "Two beautiful trees in the courtyard, facing each other with joy day and night" borrows from Han Yu's *Autumn Longings*: "Two beautiful trees before the window, their leaves shining splendidly." These and many other examples demonstrate Ouyang Xiu's direct appropriation of Han Yu's poetic language.

Ouyang Xiu also learned from Han Yu in terms of theme, structure, and subject matter. Chen Shan of the Southern Song dynasty pointed out that Ouyang Xiu's four poems, *Ode to the Great Stone of Lingxi*, *Ode to the Stone Seal*, *Ode to the Purple Stone Screen*, and *Ode to Scholar Wu's Stone Screen*, were all modeled after Han Yu's *Ode to the Red Vine Cane*. Chen Shan commented that this poem "exhausts the physical properties of the object," while Fang Dongshu remarked: "Its strangeness, transformations, and daring were remarkable. It employed strange phrasing as its primary technique, with each description ending after just a few sentences, displaying the natural strength of his pen." This poem combines narrative with discussion, interspersed with mythological elements that add a fantastical quality.

Ouyang Xiu's *Ode to the Great Stone of Lingxi* follows a similar pattern. The poem begins by describing the appearance of the great stone, introduces its background and historical legends, and

concludes with references to the anecdotes of Han Yu and Lu Tong, ultimately conveying a deep reflection on the value of rare stones. Ouyang asserts that all things in heaven and earth possess their own beauty, and one should not overly focus on external appearances. Similar to Ouyang's poem, Han Yu's Ode to the Red Vine Cane begins with a depiction of the object's physical form, then introduces mythological references, and finally expresses personal emotions. The other three poems by Ouyang Xiu follow this same structure.

Some of Han Yu's classical poems focus on relatively obscure subjects, and Ouyang Xiu successfully imitated this approach. For example, Ouyang's poem *Guiche* imitates Han Yu's *Moon Eclipse Poem in the Style of Yuchuanzi*, both of which describe the night moon. Han Yu's poem uses the moon eclipse as a pretext to express awe at mysterious phenomena in the universe, linking the eclipse with ancient legends to criticize the oppression of the weak. Ouyang's poem, in contrast, evokes reflection by describing mysterious sounds in an autumn night. Both poems start with strange and obscure night scenes, with similar themes; they both use natural phenomena to provoke the poet's reflections, and their structure is quite similar. Han Yu's classical poetry also embodies an aesthetic tendency to find beauty in ugliness, a feature Ouyang Xiu learned from him. For instance, Ouyang wrote poems like *In Response to Shengyu on Mosquitoes* and *Hating Mosquitoes*, which focused on seemingly repulsive subjects like mosquitoes.

In terms of rhyme, Ouyang Xiu's use of rhyme was also influenced by Han Yu's poetry. For example, Ouyang's *Lu Shan Gao: A Farewell to Liu Zhongyun of the Same Year* follows Han Yu's *A Gift to Zhang Shiba During Illness* in using a difficult and unusual "Jiang" rhyme, featuring bold and risky character choices.

Ouyang Xiu not only imitated Han Yu's poetry but also followed Han's practice of "using prose as poetry." Chen Shidao, in *Hou Shan Shihua*, remarked that "Han used prose as poetry," and Fang Dongshu, in *Zhaomei Zhanyan*, noted: "Ouyang Xiu's poetry is entirely based on the principles of ancient prose." Han Yu's practice of "using prose as poetry" is mainly reflected in his use of classical prose structures and syntax in poetry, incorporating the layout and structure of prose and using some rare sound combinations. Ouyang Xiu's poetry is quite similar in this respect.

Moreover, Ouyang Xiu proposed the idea of "perfection through adversity" in his Preface to the *Collected Poems of Mei Shengyu*: "Most of the poetry passed down through the ages consists of the words of people who have suffered... The greater the adversity, the greater the artistry. It is not that poetry brings misfortune, but that misfortune produces great poetry." The concept of "perfection through adversity" suggests that poets create higher-quality poetry when they are in difficult circumstances. This is clearly related to Han Yu's idea of "Injustice leads to expression" and "Words of hardship are easier to excel at." In The Preface to the *Poems Sung in Response at Jing and Tan*, Han Yu argued: "The music of peace is bland, while the sound of sorrow is often profound; the words of joy are hard to perfect, while words of hardship are easier to excel at." In Han Yu's view, expressing sorrow and hardship results in better poetry than peaceful or joyous compositions, which aligns with the saying "one sings of their own misfortune" and "injustice leads to expression"[16].

#### **4. Ouyang Xiu's Achievements and Influence in Learning from Han Yu's Classical Poetry**

In his reception of Han Yu's classical poetry, Ouyang Xiu advanced the technique of "using prose as poetry," which led to the development of a poetic style characterized by prose-like and discursive features. As previously mentioned, the best example of this can be seen in his method of structuring poems, particularly in his seven-character ancient-style poems such as *First Seeing the Yellow River at Gong County*, *The Thousand-Petaled Red Pear Blossom*, and *Reply to Xie Jingshan's Gift of an Ancient Tile Inkstone Ode*. Most of these poems demonstrate smooth transitions and clear structures, with Wang Shizhen remarking that "his seven-character long lines, at their best, directly approach the level of Han Yu (Changli)." His five-character ancient-style poem *Expressing My Feelings in Writing*

and Sending It to Mei Shengyu also displays obvious characteristics of prose. The poem is rich in emotion, expressing both deep nostalgia for his youth and profound reflections on the vicissitudes of life, as well as cherishing friendships and lamenting the passage of time. The poem is highly structured: it begins with "We parted only a year ago," identifying the time and reason for writing; it transitions to reminiscing about youth with the line "I always recall the days of youth," painting scenes of gathering with friends; it introduces assessments of figures like Xie Jiang, Yin Shu, and Yin Mo with the line "The literary men of the court"; it shifts to descriptions of the landscape of Luoyang with "The ancient capital of Luoyang"; and then returns to the farewell scene with "I saw him off at the head of the Yi River." The poem concludes with "When I said those words at the time, the listener still remains," fully expressing Ouyang Xiu's emotions and reflections. The boundaries between narration, description, and commentary in this poem are clearly defined, creating a coherent and fluid expression of meaning. This structure reflects the prose-like quality of "free in form but unified in spirit."

Ouyang Xiu's seven-character ancient-style poem First Seeing the Yellow River at Gong County also clearly demonstrates his prose-like style. The poem focuses on the Yellow River, blending elements of natural landscapes, historical legends, and human emotions. It expresses admiration for the power of nature, reverence for the ancient heroes who tamed the river, and praise for the wise rulers who governed the country. The poem contains many prose-like expressions, such as "said" (曰) and "inevitably" (不得不): "Emperor Yao worried that the people were thin and emaciated as in winter, and the ministers recommended Gun, and the emperor said, 'Try him'"; "The fierce torrents surged and spilled over, and inevitably the momentum could not be stopped." The poem is powerful, straightforward, and well-structured, and is regarded as a prime example of Ouyang Xiu's imitation of Han Yu's poetry[12].

Ouyang Xiu's classical poetry frequently includes commentary, which is another manifestation of its prose-like quality. For instance, in Another Response to the Song of Lady Mingfei, the lines "A beautiful woman's life is often ill-fated, do not blame the spring breeze, but lament yourself" contain a reflective commentary that enriches the poem without overwhelming its other elements. Furthermore, Ouyang's use of commentary reflects his motivation for poetry writing, which closely aligns with his approach to prose writing. For example, in the poem Border Dwellers, he addresses the hardships faced by frontier people after the Treaty of Chanyuan, where they endured double taxation and restrictions on hunting. By using the phrase "forming joyous connections," he sarcastically critiques the illusion of peace. The first half of the poem portrays the fierce and combative spirit of the border people, while the second half highlights their cautious and constrained lives, creating a sharp contrast and expressing dissatisfaction with the peace agreement.

In Ouyang Xiu's classical poetry, modal particles such as "之" (zhi), "哉" (zai), "也" (ye), and "而" (er) frequently appear, significantly enhancing the prose-like nature of his poetry. For example:

"Yonghui had a previous statement, it can be written down as a warning." (Fourteen Rhymes on the Golden Rooster in Five-Character Verse)

"How high is Mount Lu, several thousand feet! Its roots span hundreds of miles, towering mightily over the Yangtze River." (Mount Lu)

"Though dead, his radiance still endures like the sun and stars." (Yan and Zhi)

"At that time, the desolation was already lamentable, let alone how future generations mourn the past dynasty." (Reply to Xie Jingshan's Gift of an Ancient Tile Inkstone Ode)

"The sand grinds, and the water strikes and wears away the hole, so there are no flaws in the carved stone." (The Great Stone of Lingxi)

In addition, many lines in Ouyang Xiu's poetry do not follow the traditional approach of having matching syllabic patterns between the upper and lower lines. Instead, he adjusts the arrangement of the lines based on their meaning. This practice breaks away from traditional reading habits of poetry.



For example, in the poem *A Letter in Place of Writing Sent to Brother Yin Eleven, Yang Sixteen, and Wang Three*, the line "In my whole life, I have lived in the south, only hearing of the vastness of the river," the upper line should be divided into "I" and "have lived in the south my whole life," while the lower line should be divided into "only hearing of" and "the river's vastness." The upper line does not follow the common two-three rhythm of five-character poems.

Ouyang Xiu's emulation of Han Yu not only highlighted the exemplary nature of Han Yu's poetry but also promoted its widespread acceptance. By inheriting and developing Han Yu's idea and method of "using prose as poetry," Ouyang Xiu helped to change the emptiness in the content of poetry that had been prevalent since the rise of the Xikun Style in the early Song dynasty, enriching the subject matter of Song poetry and refining its character and tone. Ouyang Xiu's admiration and study of Han Yu's poetry were also recognized by literati such as Mei Yaochen and Su Shi. Liang Kun, in *A Discussion on the Schools of Song Poetry*, identified Ouyang Xiu as the leader of the "Changli School" of poetry.

## 5. Conclusion

Ouyang Xiu's reception of Han Yu's classical poetry was influenced by multiple factors, including Han Yu's creation of ancient-style poetry, Ouyang Xiu's views on Han Yu's writings and character, the shifting intellectual trends of Northern Song society, and changes in the poetic climate of the early Song dynasty. These influences are ultimately reflected in Ouyang Xiu's use of allusions, his prose-like style, and his tendency toward discursive commentary in his classical poetry. Whether in terms of the breadth of subject matter or the depth of intention, Ouyang's classical poetry aligns with the functions of Han Yu's poetry: "facilitating conversation, adding humor, expressing human emotions, and describing objects." The prose-like and discursive features of his ancient-style poetry reflect his inheritance and development of Han Yu's concept of "using prose as poetry." It can be said that Ouyang's poetry represents both a continuation and an innovation of Han Yu's work. Qing dynasty scholar Wang Shizhen, in the *General Principles of Ancient Poetry Selections*, remarked: "After the decline of the late Tang, it was not until Ouyang Wenzhong Gong (Ouyang Xiu) that vulgarity was swept away. His seven-character long lines, at their highest, directly rival those of Han Yu (Changli)." Liu Xizai agreed with this view, pointing out that "Ouyang Yongshu came from the tradition of Changli." Looking back at the history of poetry between the Tang and Song dynasties, Ouyang Xiu's study of Han Yu marked a critical point in the transformation of early Song poetic style. It played a key role in cleansing the prevailing poetic atmosphere and set the stage for Han Yu's enduring legacy in later generations. From this perspective, Ouyang Xiu was not only a student of Han Yu but could also be considered a kindred spirit across time.

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