

The Serene and Harmonious Style of the Tea Poems by the Poet-Monk Qi Ji and Its Origins

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Abstract: In traditional Chinese culture, there are concepts of “Zen and Tea as One” and “Poetry and Tea as One.” The tea poems by the poet-monk Qi Ji integrate Zen, tea, and poetry, forming a unique style of “serenity and harmony”, also known as a style of “qinghe” in Chinese. This research paper focuses on the study of Qi Ji’s tea poems, exploring the “qinghe” style and its origins. Based on the analysis, conclusions can be drawn that his poem style of “qinghe” is reflected in both the choice of words and sentence structure, as well as the thematic content. In terms of the word choice and sentence structure, Qi Ji’s tea poems often employ gentle and plain language. In terms of the thematic content, they portray everyday tea-related activities with a calm and composed mindset. The emergence of the “qinghe” style can be attributed to two main factors. Firstly, it is related to Qi Ji’s identity as a monk, as Buddhist philosophy advocates for disengagement from worldly conflicts and inner tranquility. Secondly, it is connected to his pursuit of refined artistic views. Compared to the tea poems of other poet monks in the Tang Dynasty, Qi Ji’s tea poems tend to be more elegant.

Keywords: Qi Ji, tea poems, style, serenity and harmony

1. Introduction

Chinese tea culture has a long and rich history. Tea is not only known as a beverage but it is also integrated with Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, becoming an important cultural symbol in traditional Chinese society. “Chinese tea culture is influenced by philosophy and religion. Chinese literati and intellectuals often study Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism simultaneously. Taoists and Buddhists also have knowledge of Confucianism and Buddhism, and they integrate their own philosophies into tea-related activities. Therefore, the philosophical ideas of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism inevitably merge with the spirit of the tea culture [1].” The concept of “Zen and Tea as One” is an interpretation of this integration, which refers to the similarities between Buddhist monks meditating and attaining enlightenment and the practice of tea ceremony, both seeking a state of tranquility and emptiness, externally and internally. Furthermore, the combination of tea and literature has resulted in a vast body of tea literary works, and the Tang Dynasty a renowned poet-monk Qi Ji is an important contributor to this tradition. According to Qian Shilin’s *Compendium of Tea Poetry Throughout the Dynasties*, Qi Ji wrote twenty-four tea poems. The tea poems described in this paper not only include those explicitly titled *In Praise of Tea* but also those in which the word “tea” or tea-related themes appear. Qi Ji, as a tea enthusiast, monk, and poet,

skillfully integrated these identities into one, and with his unique perspective and sensitivity, he wrote tea poems that possess a distinctive and serene style.

This paper primarily investigates the style of Qi Ji's tea poetry during the Tang Dynasty and analyzes the factors contributing to its formation. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part explores the elegant and serene style of Qi Ji's tea poetry, while the second part examines the reasons for the formation of this style from the perspective of Qi Ji's background and artistic philosophy. Currently, there is limited research on Qi Ji and his tea poetry, making this paper a valuable contribution to the field and a reference for scholars studying Tang poetry, tea poetry, and Qi Ji. It also provides valuable information for enthusiasts of Chinese tea culture and aims to garner increased attention from the academic community toward tea poetry studies.

2. The Manifestation of “Qinghe” in Qi Ji's Tea Poetry

A style that embodies simplicity, elegance, harmony, and tranquility is described as the style of “qinghe” in Chinese. According to Duan Yucai's *Shuo Wen Jie Zi Zhu* (Origin of Chinese Characters), the definition of “qing” is stated as follows: “Anything that is clean is called ‘qing’, and when a person is noble and pure, she or he is also referred to as ‘qing’ [2].” The *Kangxi Dictionary* defines “he” as follows: “To be in accordance with, to be harmonious, neither rigid nor soft [3].” To conclude, “qing” represents a simple and elegant quality, while “he” signifies harmony and tranquility. Sun Guangxian, in the preface to the *Bailianji* (A Tang Dynasty poetry collection), praises Qi Ji's style as being “imbued with purity and solitude, with verses that are clear and smooth. It is plain yet carries profound meaning... [4]” Qi Ji's tea poetry embodies the “qinghe” style. This style is primarily reflected in the following two aspects.

2.1. The “Qinghe” Style in Word Choices and Sentence Structures

The “qinghe” style of Qi Ji's tea poetry largely derives from a sense of “qinghe” that conveyed in the word choice and sentence structure. The poem *Hearing Fallen Leaves* [5] can be taken as an example:

“Chu trees stand after the snow stops,
The evening wind rustles the falling leaves.
Lost in thoughts of the night of my old home,
By the water, there are several barren plants.
Boiling tea, the fire burns crisply,
Walking on moss, trampling over fading red.
Next year, without leaving this place,
I will still see the lush green abound.”

In traditional Chinese poetry, there are sayings “mourning in spring, lamenting in autumn” and “people sigh over loneliness and desolation every autumn since ancient times.” These sayings refer to the emotional changes brought about by the seasons for people. In Qi Ji's poem, he depicts a winter scene, but there is no mention of “desolation”, “grief” or “sadness”. Instead, he uses milder words such as “fading red”, and “lush green”, conveying a sense of warmth and harmony. The final line, “I will still see the lush green abound,” gives readers a harmonious hope. Another example is found in the poem *Thanking Zhong Shang Ren for Sending Tea*:

“On the spring mountains before Grain rain,
Plucking the tea leaves is like plucking fragrant smoke.
The verdant tenderness is difficult to contain,
Qinghe easily embraces the late sky.
Inviting guests from neighboring courtyards,

Let's try brewing the tea with the spring of fallen flowers.

Thanks for sending the tea leaves from a distant land,

Unable to visit each other and once more, years pass by.” [5]

This poem uses gentle and concise words. The mountains are described as “spring mountains”, and the word “spring” alone brings the freshness of spring to the forefront. The tea leaves are lush, resembling faint green smoke, hence referred to as “fragrant smoke”. These two words not only describe the appearance of tea but also the aroma. The words “verdant tenderness” and “qinghe” convey the author's gentle and harmonious writing style.

Overall, the “qinghe” style in Qi Ji's tea poetry is reflected in the selection of words and sentence structures that convey a sense of clarity, harmony, and gentleness.

The poetic verses, such as “Qiang qi ran ran lv cong yuan, gu yu chu qing jiao du jvan (The tea leaves gently sway amidst the verdant garden, as Grain rain announces the arrival of the cuckoo)” in the poem *Wen Dao Lin Zhu You Chang Cha Yin You Ji* [5], “Cha ying zhong can yue, song sheng li luo quan (In the tea's shadow, there is the waning moon; from the melody of the pine, there comes the falling spring)” in *Ji Jiang Xi Mu Zhong Sun Fang Yuan Wai* [5], and “Zhu ying xie qing xian, cha xiang zai bai ou (Bamboo shadows cast upon moss, tea fragrance within the white porcelain bowl)” in *Feng Xiang You* [5], collectively demonstrate the lexical choices and sentence constructions employed by Qi Ji. These particular terms, such as “verdant garden”, “pine's melody”, “round and immaculate”, and “white porcelain bowl”, inherently evoke a sense of gentleness.

In summary, Qi Ji's deliberate employment of terms and imagery, imbued with gentleness and freshness, is evident in the selected poetic verses. The green color of tea trees, the association with springtime, and the use of white vessels for serving tea water collectively contribute to the creation of a poetic ambiance that is imbued with the essence of nature, simplicity, and unpretentiousness. This artistic approach allows Qi Ji's tea poetry to epitomize a style that is understated, harmonious, elegant, and serene, commonly known as the “qinghe” style.

2.2. The “Qinghe” Style in the Thematic Content

The subject of tea poetry is the tea itself, and the philosophy of tea emphasizes tranquility, representing a state of transcendence and emptiness. In ancient times, it was believed that drinking tea could cleanse negative emotions from the heart, known as “qingxin” (clearing the heart). This belief has a significant impact on the style of poetry and, to some extent, determines the style of tea poetry.

In Song Dynasty, the poet Su Shi believed that tea was “lovely and cannot be underestimated”, and it was “pure in essence and balancing in flavor” [6]. Emperor Huizong of Song, in his work *Da Guan Cha Lun* (The Great View on Tea), stated that tea could “bring clarity and harmony” [7]. As a tea enthusiast, Qi Ji naturally understood the artistic conception inherent in tea, and his tea poetry emanated a sense of “qinghe”, in other words, a state of clarity and harmony.

For instance, in Qi Ji's poem *Shan Si Xi Dao Zhe Zhi* (Visitors Delighted to Arrive at the Mountain Temple), the poet describes the blossoming of flowers in the temple during the spring season. While brewing tea, an unexpected visitor arrives. The poet enjoys listening to the chirping of birds and savoring tea, finding delight in this simple moment of life. The poem adopts a relaxed tone, neither rushed nor slow, providing a pleasant and appealing experience.

Another example can be found in the poem *Ti Zhen Zhou Jing She* (Inscription for the Zhenzhou Meditation Hall), the poem further describes the presence of sea visitors during morning chants and the peacefulness of autumn waves in a stone cauldron. It purely describes the serene scenery of the Zen temple and the poet's own peaceful state of mind. This reflects the poet's personal experience, devoid of dramatic emotional fluctuations, grandeur like “the river flowing east,” or the profound

elegance of “spring water flowing eastward.” The Zen retreat is complemented by the presence of tea, emphasizing the tranquility and harmony within the meditative setting.

In these examples, Qi Ji’s tea poetry reflects the essence of “qinghe”, incorporating elements of clarity, tranquility, and balance. His poetic descriptions capture the subtle moments and experiences related to tea, presenting them in a leisurely and engaging manner, which is aesthetically pleasing. Through his skillful use of language, Qi Ji creates a harmonious blend of tea and poetic expression, inviting readers to immerse themselves in the serene world of tea.

Another example is found in the poem *You Ji Peng Ze Zhou Gong* (Again Sending to Zhou Gong in Pengze): “Hearing that you reside in Pengze, in a structure similar to Tao Gong’s. Our hearts are alike in growing chrysanthemums, yet the taste of tea differs. The lake’s radiance is on my autumn pillow, and the mountain’s emerald hues appear through the summer window. In the eighth month, I depart for the Eastern Grove, reciting poems scented by lotus and duckweed in the wind [5].”

This poem depicts the poet’s description of a friend’s secluded lifestyle, emphasizing their shared disposition of non-contention through an allusion to Tao Yuanming. Living amidst the tranquil beauty of lakes and mountains, one’s state of mind naturally becomes serene. The poem uses a simple and plain tone to narrate the experience of seclusion, imbued with a sense of harmony. In these examples, Qi Ji’s poetry conveys a sense of tranquility and peace. It depicts the serene ambiance of the Zen temple and the poet’s own state of mind. The language employed is understated and the tone is gentle, reflecting a harmonious temperament.

From the perspective of content and thought, Qi Ji’s tea poetry creates an atmosphere of leisure and tranquility reminiscent of Buddhist monastic life. In the poem *Yu Jie Gong Feng Da De You Jing Kou Si Liu Ti* (Leaving an Inscription at the Jingkou Temple During a Visit with Jie Gong Feng), describes the daily life of a poet-monk, brewing tea and enjoying the serenity of nature, embodying the essence of the “qinghe” style. Qi Ji writes, “Along the sunny willow bank, I have traveled ten miles; the secluded temple by the water is free from dust. Boiling tea, tasting and plucking leaves, I indulge in boundless joy, until the fading sun shows no intention of retreat [5].”

Similarly, in the poem *Ji Jiu Ju Lin You* (Sending to a Neighbor in My Old Residence), Qi Ji writes, “Under the shadows of layered mountains, amidst the snow-filled sounds of countless trees, the incense burner is used to brew green tea in the evening and the hearth burns red grains in the morning [5].” This poem portrays the poet’s daily life in the context of tea, with the act of brewing tea in the evening and the vibrant colors of the hearth in the morning. The poem captures the peaceful and harmonious essence of the “qinghe” style.

These poems depict the everyday lives of poet-monks, engaged in activities such as brewing and picking tea, exemplifying the “qinghe” style. They evoke a sense of tranquility and harmony, portraying a serene world filled with natural beauty and the simple pleasures of life.

3. The Factors Leading to the Formation of the Qinghe Style

3.1. Qi Ji’s Identity of Being a Buddhist Monk

In the Northern Song Dynasty, Wu Ke asserted that “When composing poetry, one must have the enlightenment of Zen [8].” Yan Yu, a poet of the Southern Song Dynasty, put forward the viewpoint of “Discussing poetry is like discussing Zen” in his work *Cang Lang Shi Hua*. He also believed that “The essence of Zen lies in marvelous enlightenment and the essence of poetry also lies in marvelous enlightenment [9].” Throughout the ages, poets and critics have often compared Zen and poetry, as they have long been intertwined and mutually beneficial. Just as the Heart Sutra states, “Poetry is no different from Zen, and Zen is no different from poetry; poetry is Zen, and Zen is poetry.”

Qi Ji, being both a poet and a Buddhist monk, incorporated the ideology of Zen into his tea poetry. In his poem *Ji Zheng Gu Lang Zhong*, he wrote, “Apart from these two paths, there is no other marvelousness. By the water’s edge, beneath the pine, I ponder alone [5].” Here, the “two paths” refer to poetry and Zen, and this Buddhist Zen sentiment precisely constitutes one of the reasons for the formation of Qi Ji’s “qinghe” style of tea poetry.

Taking the poem *Kuang Shan Yu Ju Qi Gong* as an example: “Wandering leisurely and feeling truly free while external matters are all external. Encountering the mountain during a passing summer and residing there without affairs through autumn. There are shadows of trees and the lingering sunset at the temple, as well as the fragrance of tea in the ancient stone tower. When there is a settled moment to discuss, I will return to live by the Tiger Creek [5].”

Kuang Shan refers to the present-day Mount Lu in Jiangxi, China, and Qi Gong refers to the reclusive monk named Qiyin. The poet-monk transcends worldly matters and freely roams within the human realm. Passing by a renowned mountain during the Vassa (the Buddha established the period from the fifteenth day of the fourth lunar month to the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month as the designated time for the “Vassa” or “Rainy Retreat,” during when monks would observe a period of settled dwelling), he decides to stay and engage in Zen meditation and enlightenment. The scenery there is remarkable, accompanied by the aroma of tea. This poem combines Zen and embodies the Buddhist ideals of tranquility and contentment, as well as the ability to adapt to the present moment without conflict.

“External matters are all external” implies that the poet-monk seeks very little from external things, and therefore, is not preoccupied with fame and fortune. Thus, the poet-monk does not write about the mundane world, but instead focuses on pure landscapes and the mind. “Encountering the mountain during a passing summer, and residing there without affairs through autumn” suggests that upon arriving at this place during the summer, it is opportune to reside here peacefully, reflecting the poet-monk’s attitude of adapting to circumstances.

It is precise that this state of non-contention with the world and the ability to adapt to circumstances create a unique style in the poetry, and in turn, cultivates Qi Ji’s “qinghe” style of tea poetry.

3.2. Qi Ji’s Artistic View of Pursing Elegance

During the Tang Dynasty, many poet monks wrote poems praising tea. However, Qi Ji’s tea poetry stands out because of its distinctive “qinghe” style, which is closely related to his artistic view. In his work *Feng Sao Zhi Ge*, which is about the theoretical Poetic, Qi Ji proposed the concept of “Ten Forms of Poetry”, with “gao gu” [9] (lofty antiquity) being the foremost. Additionally, Qi Ji devoted himself to the study of the traditional of “feng sao” (elegant and refined literary works). He wrote, “In art, I am unwilling to lose my aspirations; in style, I am unable to suppress my fierce spirit”. He also expressed “Memories of Moling, sharing in poetic reverie; Confucianism and Buddhism are elegant, and Taoism is on the path of the superior.” Moreover, he wrote, “A hundred-foot ancestral tomb follows in chaos and grief; a single family embodies elegance completely.” By studying the concepts of “feng” and “sao,” Qi Ji’s poetry tends toward refinement, thereby contributing to the formation of the “qinghe” style. This can be observed by comparing Qi Ji’s tea poetry with that of other poet monks during the Tang Dynasty.

In the Tang Dynasty, there was also a prominent monk named Cong Shi who composed poems praising tea. In his poem, he wrote: “A monk has not been eating any food or drinking any tea by noon, so he has to travel from the south of the village to the north to beg for some food. At last, a family in the north of the village does not refuse the monk. They treat the monk to lettuce fired with coarse salt, pickles soaked in barley vinegar, and rice made of sorghum. They said to the monk that this is the best they can provide, so he must be firm with a heart pursuing principles and truth [5].”

From these poems, it can be seen that Cong Shi's compositions have a more colloquial tone, depicting the image of a monk compelled by life's circumstances. Both the artistic style and the content differ from Qi Ji's.

Guan Xiu's poetry also differs from Qi Ji's in that the former possesses a more unadorned quality. For example, in Guan Xiu's poem, phrases like "three realms of Buddhism" are filled with subjective emotional colors, and expressions such as "fortunately" and "joyfully" carry quite a feeling of being Buddha Jih. If Guan Xiu's poetry is written about the secular world, then Qi Ji's poetry is composed amidst the serenity of lake and mountain landscapes. One is immersed in the world of mundane affairs, while the other adopts an observer's stance, viewing things with a detached mindset of "neither being pleased by external gains nor being saddened by personal losses."

4. Conclusions

From emperors and generals to scholars and literati, from philosophers to commoners, tea has been beloved by people from all walks of life. Tea gradually found its way into poetry and literature, acquiring philosophical and religious connotations and giving rise to traditional Chinese tea culture. Qi Ji integrated Zen, tea, and poetry, creating his unique "qinghe" style in tea poetry. This style is characterized by its simple and elegant language as well as its focus on the peaceful and tranquil aspects of Qi Ji's everyday Buddhist life.

Tracing the origins of this style, it is closely linked to Qi Ji's identity as a poet-monk and his pursuit of elegance in art. This artistic view sets Qi Ji's tea poetry apart from the works of other monk poets.

In conclusion, Qi Ji's tea poetry exemplifies the rich and profound tradition of Chinese tea culture. By integrating Zen, tea, and poetry, he created a distinctive "qinghe" style that encapsulates the essence of tranquility, harmony, and elegance. Qi Ji's tea poetry serves as a testament to the enduring influence of tea in Chinese society and its ability to inspire artistic expression that resonates with people from all walks of life.

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