

An Overview of the Study of Liu Yong in the Last Thirty Years

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Abstract: Taking thirty years (1990-2020) as the scope, this paper conducts a brief overview and analysis of the scholarly studies on Liu Yong's life and Ci in Northern Song society, the discernment between elegance and vulgarity, and the causes of the tragedy in an attempt to restore a historically true and objective Liu Yong.

Keywords: Liu Yong; Ci; Studies; Overview.

1. The Beginning of the Acceptance History of Liu Yong (1990-2000)

This paper provides an overview about the scholarly studies on Liu Yong and his Ci in the last thirty years (1990-2020), taking ten years as a phase. During this period, the research perspectives on Liu Yong keep increasing, the scope of research is constantly expanded, and many issues are being explored more deeply. Based on the overview, the author will summarize the main issues as follows.

In the history of Chinese Ci, Liu Yong had a high reputation in the Northern Song Ci world, even though he was not of high political status. However, because of his experience and the "specialty" of his Ci, there's been a mixed response from the academic circles. Coupled with the political influence of the era, the research on Liu Yong was also apparently deserted for a long time after the founding of the People's Republic of China.¹

In the decade 1990-2000, few studies were conducted on Liu Yong. During this period, he was not in the mainstream, with studies only comparing his works with those of other artists of the graceful and restrained school, such as Li Qingzhao, Zhou Bangyan and Qin Guan. The association of Liu Yong with the public class, the style and cultural deposits embodied in his Ci, as well as his own philosophy and taste for life, have all been touched upon slightly, but not deeply.

In terms of content, both Liu and Zhou are known for their 'voluptuousness'. Compared to Zhou's use of flamboyant rhetoric to cover up and embellish his debauched life, Liu's are straightforward and unapologetic, showing his 'true nature'. Li Qingzhao's words are relatively elegant and more about the inner emotions of the boudoir, focusing on the refinement of words and sentences, but the mood is not open enough.

In terms of form, Liu Yong made a unique contribution to the slower Chinese Ci, boldly creating a 'new sound' based on the work of predecessors. Under his pen, the slower Chinese Ci was perfected and became a mature literary style, expanding the capacity of the Chinese Ci. Zhou Bangyan's new tune was a perfect successor and he developed it by examining the rhythms of the tune.² Li Qingzhao also inherited the euphemisms and complete narrative of Liu Yong and Zhou Bangyan, achieving a certain level of success.

In general, Liu Yong differed from other artists of the graceful and restrained school in content and was ridiculed as being vulgar, while in the form it was indeed a consistent succession of development. On the basis of his creation, Liu's Ci prospers constantly in a flourishing manner.

There are only several related studies during this period, most of which were about the history of the reception and vindication of Liu Yong or his Ci. However, this sets the stage for the research fever of Liu Yong and his Ci in the next decade.

2. "Research Fever" of Liu Yong and his Ci (2000-2010)

The decade since the 21st century (2000-2010) has seen a boom in the study of Liu Yong's Ci. According to the author's search on the Internet, there are more than 1,400 research papers alone in CNKI, more than three times the total number of publications in the second half of the 20th century.

2.1 Liu Ci and the Rhythm of the Vulgar

As the social and cultural deposits in Liu's Ci fully restore parts of the real life of Northern Song dynasty, the continuous enhancement of the understanding of the socio-cultural dimension in Liu Ci became a topical issue focused by the academic circle. In this decade. It is well known that the Qingming Shanghe Tu (Ascending the River at Qingming Festival) was no more than a mediocre customary painting in the Song Dynasty, while what's more important for today is the historical value contained in it. Similarly, the burst of research on Liu Yong relies on the historical value behind the culture itself. Deng Jian and Chen Hua argue in 'An Analysis of the Socio-Literary Nature of Liu Yong's Ci' that Liu's Ci "is not only a literary work with aesthetic value, but also a social and cultural apocalypse of the early Song Dynasty."³

Liu Yong's Ci has created a boom both in the Northern Song and in the present. The phenomenon of "Liu Yong fever" is summed up in the phrase "wherever there is well water to drink, one can sing his Ci".⁴ Although the world has mixed responses about Liu Yong's Ci, the objective hype has greatly expanded his influence. After the founding of the Northern Song Dynasty, the social situation was relatively stable for a long time, known as the 'Hundred Years of Peace', which reached its peak during the reign of Emperor Renzong. It was in this social and humanistic environment of flamboyant rule that Liu Yong's Ci was developed and nurtured. In 'Watching the Tidal Bore', he describes the West Lake in Qiantang, where 'Sweet Osmanthus scent fills the September air, Lotus flowers are fragrant and fair'; in 'Through the Sky', he says, 'In times of peace, there is much joy in the court and the countryside'. The merry songs and joyful dances of the city are the artistic reproduction of the 'peaceful scene' of the Northern Song Dynasty.⁵

The development of the urban commercial economy, the growth of the civic class, and the awakening of civic consciousness in the Song dynasty were all necessary factors promoting the popularity of Liu's Ci. It was known as the 'spokesman of the citizens' because it incorporated a great deal of vernacular. The charm of Liu's Ci lies in their vulgarity in those days. In the history of Chinese literature, elegance and vulgarity have been at odds with each other and have contributed to the prosperity of Chinese culture. Today's study of Liu's Ci has generally broken the shackles of the various arguments of 'elegance and vulgarity' of previous generations and begun to provide a more objective and fair assessment based on the original state of Liu's Ci. ⁶ The general public's appreciation of songs is based on the idea that they are easy to listen to and understand. Liu Yong's focus on writing popular lyrics won him the popularity of the common people at the bottom. Besides, , with the superficially peaceful scenes of the Northern Song dynasty including the life of the lower classes, the magnificent mountains and rivers, the grievances of the detainees and the sighs of nostalgia, Liu Yong's innovative Ci was adapted to the needs of social development in the Northern Song dynasty, which made it a cultural product with widespread social basis and a hit with the masses. The 'vulgarity' of Liu's Ci has been its label for thousands of years.

In the new century, we live in an economically prosperous society. The charming prosperity and the strong flavor of life in Liu's Ci, bring us a sense of familiarity and satisfaction both in sense organs and psychology. The phenomenon of 'Liu Yong fever' and the emergence of 'research fever of Liu Yong' today, which are both based on the millennial harmony of similar social styles, represent the deep recognition of today's people towards the 'vulgar' culture.

2.2 Liu Yong's Ci and humanistic concerns

Another research focus is the exploration of the causes of Liu Yong's tragic life circumstances and the coincidental cross-class humanistic concerns in Liu's Ci. Liu Yong, a great artist of Ci and a

household name among people, was a ridiculous and ludicrous clown in the eyes of the self-proclaimed noble literati community. If someone had questioned Zhou Bangyan, as Su Shi did to Qin Guan, as to why he had followed Liu Qi's example, I am afraid he would have said the same thing in defense: 'Although I am ignorant, please spare me your empty words, and do not ruin my reputation'.⁷ This is because the comments on Liu Yong for being a "vulgar" artist were too abusive, and at the same time, a habitual prejudice was formed in the minds of the Song literati who were deeply influenced by Confucian ethics, like cultivating one's moral character and studying to become an official. Those Song literati who denigrated and despised Liu Yong also had debauched private lives but were outwardly decent men who criticized the debauchery of others in order to boast of their own decency. No one wanted to get a reputation as bad as Liu Yong's 'misbehavior', but they cannot resist the powerful influence of Liu's Ci in their own creation, so they had to adhere to his name violating the truth.⁵ Li Qingzhao criticized Liu's words as 'dusty', but her style of writing was a pursuit of vulgar beauty, called 'vulgarity as elegance'.

Liu Yong's life was a tragic one. He was disillusioned in his quest and pursued in his disillusionment; he was desperate in hope and hopeful in despair and this contradiction brought him indefinable suffering, which painted his Ci with a tragic color. Disillusionment, bitterness, and the sinking of indulgence in sensuality, hung over him all his life. Having failed the imperial civil examinations many times, for the first time he passed the exam, Liu was deliberately deposed by Emperor Renzong at the time of the publication of the list, on the grounds that "this man is addicted to lascivious poetry and lyricism, there is no point in having a reputation, he should go back to writing" (Wu Zeng, *Neng Gai Zhai Man Lu*, vol. 16). He was not reappointed in his later years, but he was not appreciated or promoted, and finally he died in depression.

What Liu Yong's life portrayed was not only a confrontation between the individual and the ruling class, but also a confrontation between the culture of personal pleasure and the mainstream culture. It is these cultural confrontations of the time that caused his tragedy.⁸ The disdain and criticism he received from the mainstream literati was so intertwined with his innermost thoughts of the ideal of fame and fortune that he had to struggle to compose and sing his own words, expressing his resentment and sorrow for his underappreciation.

Liu Yong was depressed by his Ci, but he was also famous for it. "He was a man of success and a man of failure." He was never a high-ranking official, but by chance he was close to the prosperous and affluent worldly life of his time, so he experienced a very happy life in a dashing and fastidious career. Unlike the rest of the scholarly class, however, Liu Yong looked at the courtesans with deep sympathy, and describe their lives and emotions in his Ci. Many researchers have argued that Liu Yong was complimentary towards the courtesans, putting them on an equal footing in his writing. For example, 'there was a beautiful courtesan Yao Qing who was good at writing' ('The Phoenix Titled Cup'), and in the four 'Mu Lan Flowers' songs, 'all the behaviors of the Lady Chong are warm and gentle'. Facing courtesans who possessed real emotions, and he tried to explore their inner world to understand and sympathize them with them about what they had been through. Although there is a suspicion of promiscuity, in the end one should not be overly critical of Liu Yong under the feudal system. But the faint embers of humanistic concern that transcend class and the deep identification with the marketplace have made Liu's lyrics still fascinating across the millennia.

The first decade of the twenty-first century has seen a flourishing of scholarly research on Liu Yong and his Ci, and a number of comprehensive, all-encompassing studies of Liu Ci have mushroomed, largely confirming his influence and his place in the Chinese Ci world. The content of these studies may lack novelty, but they conduct deep explorations into Liu Ci. Liu Yong's masterpieces, such as 'Yu Lin Ling' and 'Ba Sheng Gan Zhou', remain the focus of scholarly discussion.

3. New Changes in the Study of Liu Yong (2010-2020)

In the decade from 2010 to 2020, according to the author's search on CNKI, the number of studies on Liu Yong or his Ci has remained almost the same as in the previous decade and more perspectives and viewpoints have been provided.

First of all, the study of Liu Yong's Ci about courtesans and female figures is quite fruitful. In contrast to the approval and praise found throughout the previous decade, there are occasional critical voices. The courtesans were the singers and main objects of Liu Yong's Ci; of the 212 surviving Liu Ci, approximately 150 deal with the emotional aspects of the courtesans. Apparently, the courtesans had a significant impact on Liu Yong's life and creation. However, most readers only focus on the positive influence of courtesans on Liu Yong and ignore their negative impact on him. While it is undoubtedly true that the courtesans inspired Liu Yong's creative passions and fulfilled some of his emotional pursuits, which in turn contributed to his creative style, some scholars argue that their negative influences on Liu cannot be ignored.

Born into a family of officials, Liu Yong was deeply influenced by Confucianism and never gave up the pursuit for fame and fortune throughout his life. However, he often lingered in the 'Qin Lou Chu Guan' and his frequent interactions with courtesans gradually built his romantic and unrestrained character. After failing the imperial examinations, he indulged even more freely in brothel in the name of detoxification, thus angering Emperor Song Renzong, and go round and begin again, resulting in vicious spiral. His character was not allowed by feudal ethics and became one of the causes of his tragedy. Although Liu Yong's creations are based on his intuitive feelings and personal experiences in his interaction with the courtesans, they are mostly arbitrary, too much emotional and too little rational, lacking a higher aesthetic value. The second is the erotic tendency of the content and the aesthetic morbid interest. In addition to the numerous works depicting women's physical appearance, Liu Yong's Ci also contain contents even more vulgar. For example, "Let go of the stitches for a moment. The unclothed, wanton love is infinite". The Qing dynasty's Li Tiaoyuan commented on this lyric saying, "Liu Yong's lascivious Ci are no better than the one in 'Chrysanthemum Xin'." This poem, which reveals a low level of interest is thus considered to be the most erotic work of Liu Yong. Many scholars and critics have argued that Liu Yong's Ci are excessive in their representation of sexual desire, sexual awareness and mind, and this is one of the reasons for the low aesthetic value of his Ci.⁹

Other scholars have argued that Liu Yong, who was educated in traditional Confucianism, could not have been unaware of the difference in status between himself and the prostitutes, and that his descriptions of the sounds and smiles of the prostitutes focused more on the enjoyment of sex, another outlet for the realities of spiritual emptiness, and it is difficult to see how he really placed the prostitutes on an equal footing with himself.¹⁰

The author believes that Liu Yong failed to break away from the limitations of his time to have a deeper and more equal understanding of women, and that the vulgar depiction of male desire and vulgar and crude words in his Ci are all the result of the times. Literature is a philosophy about humankind. It is not surprising that sex, as a human instinct, can be seen in the writings of literati, but there should be limits to the depiction of sex in works of art. However, limits change with the changing of the time, and it is also not surprising that the 'limits' have become broader today when we look at Liu Yong' Ci again.

In short, we look at the relationship between Liu Yong and the courtesans correctly and comprehensively with dialectical thinking in order to restore a true and flesh-and-blood Liu Yong.

In the last decade, in addition to the study of Liu Yong himself, the study of Liu's Ci has also gone beyond the borders of China. The article *The Dream Road to the East of the Sea* 11 notes that, same as in China, Su Shi and Liu Yong had a huge influence in Japan. Despite their very different styles of writing, the Japanese like to compare them to each other and take in both. "Among the wind and flowers there are the words of great men", and the three Meiji masters were all fond of Liu Yong's Ci, and Mori Kainan wrote a special song for him, "After the words of Liu Qi Xiao Feng Can Yue": "耆卿绝调,奉天家圣旨,蓬莱宫阙。报道宫娃争按拍,满殿歌云凝咽。红杏尚书,

微云学士,让尔传新调。重来谁识,晓风吹尽残月" Mori Kainan described him as a man of great talent but not appreciated by the governor to show his infinite admiration and sympathy for Liu. Morikawa Takeshi's 'Yu Lin Ling' (Rainy Night) and 'Watching the Tidal Bore Qin Guan' (The Tide of the Sea) are both rhyming pieces, namely, they use the rhyming words of Liu Yong's original work in turn. This shows how far Liu's Ci spread in Japan and how influential it was. The study of Liu Yong and Liu Ci has taken on a broader dimension.

4. Summary

Through the researches for thirty years, it is undeniable that Liu Yong is credited with 'three creations'. (1) The creation of style: In order to reflect the richness of urban social life and the complexity of his thoughts and feelings, Liu Yong wrote slower Ci in full force, improving the expressive power of Ci, thus providing the most basic artistic form and textual norms for the development of Song Ci. (2) The creation of idea: Liu Yong injected new emotional qualities and aesthetic connotations into his words, and the tumultuous and tragic life he experienced made his words focus on expressing his emotional state of mind, joy, anger and sadness. (3) The creation of method: Liu Yong transplanted the fugue method to his Ci, spreading the narrative and lyricism to a certain extent. This met the need for a change in the institutional structure of slower Ci, resolved the contradiction between the traditional Chinese Ci method and the emerging system, and promoted the development of the art of slower Ci.¹²

The above discusses the results of research into Liu Yong and his Ci over the last thirty years, including his personality, comparisons with his contemporaries, the characteristics of elegance and vulgarity in his slower Ci, overseas dissemination, and the characters and social patterns involved in his Ci. Overall, Liu Yong's life and his works vividly reflect the urban life of the Northern Song Dynasty and provide us with more possibilities for the study of literature today in the period of reform and opening up. The study of Liu Yong and his Ci, however, seems to have gone too far, from extreme criticism to extreme praise. There are still many articles today repeating the same old issues and opinions of the academy, failing to break out of the shackles and propose new propositions. But the research fever for Liu Yong is still rising steadily and orderly, and I hope that the research will tend to be more dialectical and pluralistic, with more new ideas and new approaches springing up. It is the mission and responsibility of rigorous scholarship to show the world a real Liu Yong with the great glory that the pearl cannot be comparable to and the impurities that cannot be ignored.

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