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POETIC SENSIBILITIES OF EXILED LITERATI: POLITICAL PERSEVERANCE AND RESENTMENT IN THE MID-TO-LATE TANG DYNASTY

Han Zhimiao[1*], and Chin Mooi San[1]

[1]Department of Foreign Languages, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

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Corresponding Author: Han Zhimiao (GS64735@student.upm.edu.my)

ABSTRACT

Most scholars in ancient China experienced exile at some point in their lives. The traditional Confucian ideal of political engagement had become deeply internalised as a core value shaping their worldview and conduct. As a result, even in the early stages of exile—despite enduring physical hardship, psychological torment, and profound humiliation—the literati remained steadfast in their Confucian convictions and sustained a strong sense of political purpose. Simultaneously, their exile writings expressed deep resentment and disillusionment toward the court and corrupt officials. Through articulations of grievance and political misfortune, they sought to reaffirm their moral integrity and unwavering adherence to the righteous path. Although existing scholarship has addressed the political expression and Confucian ethos in exile poetry, the coexistence of Confucian political ideals and a psychology of grievance remains insufficiently explored. This study adopts the perspectives of literary rhetoric and Confucian political ethics, combined with close textual analysis of mid-to-late Tang exile poetry, to examine the psychological adjustment mechanisms of exiled literati and the dynamic evolution of their Confucian identity. It aims to deepen the understanding of political emotional expression and the resilience of Confucian thought within exile literature, while offering new insights into the intellectual and spiritual history of mid-to-late Tang scholars.

KEYWORDS: Mid-To-Late Tang Dynasty, Exiled Scholars, Psychology Of Resentment, Confucianism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Exile was one of the most widespread and profound social phenomena in the political life of Tang Dynasty intellectuals. Scholars were often punished for becoming entangled in political struggles or for offending powerful figures, gradually forming a marginalised group excluded from the central power structure. During the Tang and Five Dynasties periods, the exile of literati became particularly pronounced, with the highest concentration of cases occurring in the Mid-to-Late Tang Dynasty. As Shang Yongliang observes, the exiled scholars of this era and the literary works they produced constitute a distinctive cultural phenomenon—one that not only illuminates the political structure and institutional logic of ancient Chinese society but also reveals the psychological coping mechanisms of intellectuals confronted with political upheaval.

The exiled officials of the Mid-to-Late Tang Dynasty reflected the distinctive ideological and psychological currents of their time. First, in terms of scale, the number of exiles during this period was substantial, with exile incidents occurring frequently amid ongoing political turbulence, rendering scholarly careers highly precarious. Second, in the wake of the An Lushan Rebellion, the intertwining of political instability and social crises intensified intellectuals' sense of disillusionment and identity marginalization, giving rise to profound inner conflict and psychological distress. Their poetic works simultaneously reveal a steadfast adherence to Confucian ideals of state salvation. This perseverance was reflected in two principal ways. First, despite the harsh conditions of their exile, they clung to the hope of returning to court, a sentiment often embodied in poetry centred on the motif of the "Tower of Hope for the Capital." （望京樓）Second, exiled literati actively embodied Confucian ideals of benevolent governance, conscientiously administering local affairs with compassion and a genuine commitment to the welfare of the people. And sharp criticism of the corruption and treachery within the court. The coexistence of these elements vividly exposes the complex spiritual world of exiled officials and offers crucial insights into the lived experiences and ideological transformations of Tang Dynasty scholars.

2. POLITICAL PERSEVERANCE OF EXILED LITERATI

It was rare for officials to remain in Chang'an throughout their lives and enjoy a stable political environment and comfortable living conditions. "Ten years serving in exile along the Ba River, my hair turned white with the coming of spring"（十年蹭蹬為逐臣，鬢毛白盡巴江春）(Li She, Farewell to Zhang Hu at Yueyang) poignantly captures the lived reality of scholars during this period.

When "deceit and treachery become a livelihood... flatterers and deceivers gain favour with the ruler, act with impunity, monopolies power, sow discord, envy the virtuous, harm the loyal, devise cunning schemes, and harbour ambitions of usurpation... their crimes clearly reveal their betrayal of heaven"（唯以奸傾為業.....騁諛佞而得君，遂恣橫而持政。專權生事， 妒賢害忠， 動多詭異之謀，潛懷僭越之志.....罪實見其欺天）(The Second Demotion of Li Deyu to the Position of Magistrate in Yizhou), politically motivated demotions would almost inevitably follow, forcing officials into harsh and remote environments. As Liu Yuxi lamented, As Liu Yuxi lamented, "Exiled officials were seldom posted to fertile lands, but were often banished to the desolate regions of the Five Streams"（放臣不宜与善地，多徙五溪不毛之乡）([Tang Dynasty] Liu Yuxi, Reading Zhang Qujiang's Collection and Writing an Introduction). Similarly, Liu Zongyuan wrote, "The sharp mountains by the sea resemble sword tips; in autumn, they cut through the heart with sorrow"（海畔尖山似劍芒，秋來處處割愁腸）(Viewing the Mountains with Master Haochu and Sending a Letter to Relatives and Friends in the Capital), a verse that vividly reflects the collective emotional state of exiled officials.

Upon arriving at their places of exile, the stark contrast between the prosperity and familiar climate of the capital and the desolation and inhospitable environment of the exile regions became immediately apparent. Liu Zongyuan described Yongzhou as a place where "poverty and squalor make self-sustenance difficult; pestilence and noise aggravate one's weariness"（窮陋闕自養，疠氣劇囂煩）([Tang] Liu Zongyuan, Zhong Xian Lingpi), revealing his deep sense of frustration. Moreover, the alien and perilous geography further intensified the psychological impact of exile: "Venturing into the wild, there are vipers and giant wasps; looking upward to the sky and downward to the ground, every step is fraught with exhaustion and unease"（涉野有蝮虺、大蜂，仰空視地，寸步勞倦） ([Tang] Liu Zongyuan, Letter to Li Hanlin Jian). Such unfamiliar surroundings deepened the anguish of banishment.

The mid-Tang poet Yuan Zhen harboured an even stronger ambition for political advancement. Yet, the experience of exile forced a painful shift in his

aspirations. From the once lofty resolve of "Since ancient times, great birds transform to soar southward; though Zhejiang is a land of prominence, I remain unsatisfied" （由來鵬化便圖南，浙右雖雄我未甘）(To Zhou Congshi of Yuhang, in Response to His Gracious Poem), he was soon confronted with the bitter realisation that "Before the path to honour could be secured, misfortune had already unfolded" （未容榮路穩，先踏禍機開）(In Response to Secretary Lu). His ambitions were thwarted by circumstances beyond his control.

The British aesthetician Christopher Smart (1722–1771) observed that true tragedy lies not in passive submission to adversity, but in the characters' unyielding struggle against fate . The exiled literati of the Mid-to-Late Tang Dynasty embodied this tragic spirit: exile represented not merely a setback in their official careers but a profound ordeal in their lives. Yet, compelled by their inner ideals, they refused to yield, steadfastly upholding their commitment to serve the state and pursue their principles, thereby manifesting a profound moral resistance and unwavering political convictions.

Taking the Yongzhen Reform（805） as an example: though it collapsed within months, it profoundly influenced the political consciousness of the literati and helped shape the steadfast and reform-oriented political character of Tang Dynasty scholars. Wang Anshi praised Liu Yuxi, Liu Zongyuan, and the other "Eight Samaritans"（八司馬）as "extraordinary talents of the world," who remained unwavering in their convictions despite exile. They fully understood that any theory incapable of addressing the pressing political maladies of the time was mere empty rhetoric. Consequently, they integrated Confucian ideals of political engagement with pragmatic concerns, fostering a strong commitment to combating corruption and pursuing renewal, while becoming ever more confident in their initial reformist aspirations.

Liu Zongyuan expressed his unwavering political resolve in exile in his "Two Poems on Feelings and Encounters": "A light frost is trodden by all, but who pities the heart that suffers from the cold of winter?" （微霜眾所踐，誰念歲寒心）

Liu Yuxi, likewise, compared himself to the "sleeping dragon"—a metaphor for latent talent awaiting its time—in his poem "On the Imperial Edict of the Year Yuanhe Jiawu, All Exiled Officials from Jiangxi and Hunan Were Summoned Back." After journeying from Wuling to the capital, he reflected at the Capital Pavilion on the gentlemen who would soon arrive Employing bitter images such as "ten years on the Chu River" and "ten years without a transfer," he underscored that a decade of exile had left his political passion undiminished. At last, he had reached the moment when "the imperial edict summoned him back" （一旦天書召回）and "the former marquis could return home"（故侯也好歸來）

A blend of bitterness and joy filled their hearts as they faced both the hardships of exile and the elation of being recalled to Chang 'an. For these lifelong devotees to the ideal of "serving the world and upholding the Way," the joy of returning to the center of power was more profound. Having once been "exiles who crossed the south eleven years ago,"（十一年前南渡客） they now firmly believed that "the postal roads would bloom anew everywhere" （驛路開花處處新）([Tang Dynasty] Liu Zongyuan, Imperial Edict Summoning Me to the Capital: Arriving at Bao Ting in February). An optimistic mindset now dominated their thoughts. They were filled with confidence in their future official prospects, and the hardships and bitterness of exile were momentarily eclipsed by the joy of their return.

Following the An Lushan Rebellion, political turmoil and social crises heightened the literati's sense of civic duty, with many scholars expressing both their longing for the capital and their hopes for political reinstatement through exile poetry. For example, Linghu Chu's line "Year after year, I see no spring in the imperial capital"（年年不見帝鄉春）(Reflections on Hearing News of the Imperial Capital) is a representative example. Wu Ruyu observed that the Mid-to-Late Tang exiled literati's desire to re-engage with public life was "genuine" . Although these scholars lived during a period marked by the coexistence of the three major teachings—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—the Confucian ethos of political engagement remained dominant, not yet supplanted by the Buddhist and Daoist ideals of withdrawal from worldly affairs.

Although exile inflicted a significant psychological impact on scholars, most saw it not as an end, but as a period of strategic hibernation, and remained resolute in their ambitions for political restoration. As Yuan Zhen declared in "Admonitions to My Nephews": "Serving in office without fear of disaster, facing matters with a resolve to the death" （效職無避禍之心，臨事有致命之志）

They applied Confucian ideals in local governance, with a deep concern for public welfare. In Liuzhou, Liu Zongyuan abolished outdated customs and promoted education, yielding tangible results (Old Book of Tang: Biography of Liu

Zongyuan). Han Yu similarly documented his own accomplishments: "The people's livelihoods were established, the displaced returned, and they were happy to engage in work" (民業有經，流逋四歸，樂生興事), thus demonstrating the unwavering commitment of Confucian scholars to the ideal of "governing with virtue," even amid adversity.

Compared to the Central Plains region, the exile locations were economically and culturally underdeveloped. However, the exiled literati did not succumb to despair or abandon their sense of mission. Instead, they actively implemented reform measures, diligently managed local governance, and worked to enhance local living standards. In doing so, they embodied the Confucian ethos of "though in a lowly position, I dare not forget my duty to the nation" (位卑未敢忘憂國) (Lu You, Reflections on Recovery from Illness).

Similarly, Li Deyu vigorously combated corruption and promoted moral education in Zhexi, achieving significant results (Institute of Chinese Studies, Tsinghua University, 2021, p. 198). As Mou Zongsan observed, Confucianism lies in "upholding the moral subject" (挺立道德主體). Exiled figures such as Liu Zongyuan and Li Deyu, through their concrete actions during exile, sought to fulfill the otherwise unrealized ideals of political participation— "turning exile into a stage for embodying Confucian values, and banishment into a path for realizing the Way"—thereby highlighting the integrity and sense of responsibility of the literati.

The bureaucratic elite possessed a profound Confucian education and intellectual lineage, and a character forged through Confucian ideals of worldly engagement, remaining steadfast in their political ideals even under the adversity of exile and demotion. The Confucian view of worldly responsibility became the standard by which ancient intellectuals judged their self-worth. After centuries of refinement, this ethos became internalised in the cultural identity of the Chinese literati, forming a kind of collective unconscious that continuously guided and regulated their daily behavior, thoughts, and emotions.

Yet exile seemed a cruel mockery of fate, threatening their sense of personal worth and dignity, and giving rise to intense resentment. The need to alleviate the suffering of exile became a major impetus for their poetic creation. This also explains the internal tensions inherent in exile poetry, which simultaneously expressed hopes for political reinstatement and dissatisfaction with court politics. For instance, the literati of the Yongzhen Reform, despite their dedication to the nation, ultimately suffered as a result of their unwavering ideals. As Liu Tiefeng (2005) observed, adherents of Confucian virtue often bring defeat upon themselves when they clash with the treacherous .

3. RESENTFUL PSYCHE OF EXILED LITERATI

Exile deepened individuals' understanding of life and offered these exiled literati a reflective interlude, providing them with ample time for self-reflection. By reflecting on their official careers and the distinctive experiences of exile, they increasingly recognized that exile was not merely the result of personal failings, but more often stemmed from systemic political corruption, imperial incompetence, and the machinations of their colleagues. As a result, the criticism of the court and political adversaries in their poetry became especially incisive.

Liu Yuxi, for instance, exposed the schemes of his political enemies in his letter to Duke Du (《上杜司徒書》) (Liu Yuxi, ed. by Tao Min and Tao Hongyu, 2019, p. 1522), and used poetic metaphors to satirize the political reality. He employed such metaphors in "The Poem of the Dim Mirror," (《昏鏡詞》) where the "clear mirror" and "dim mirror" symbolize virtuous officials and flatterers, respectively, criticizing Emperor Xianzong for abandoning the virtuous and appointing sycophants. The satirical intent of the poem develops progressively, reflecting the poet's profound critique of the existing power structure, albeit with a humorous tone.

Similarly, Li She invoked the virtuous ministers of the Tang Dynasty's golden age to contrast Emperor Xianzong's moral failings in "Inscription on the Hot Spring":

"He could bring forty years of peace; the sage emperor of the Kaiyuan era had virtuous ministers. At that time, Yao and Song, Yan and Xu, were all attendants at Mount Li." (能使時平四十春，開元聖主得賢臣。當時姚宋並燕許，盡是驪山從駕人。)

The reason the Tang Dynasty could not recapture its former glory lay not in the absence of capable and virtuous individuals, but in the inability of the current rulers to discern virtue from vice—exiling the upright and elevating the treacherous and petty.

The technique of invoking the past to critique the present was extremely common in exile poetry of the Mid-to-Late Tang Dynasty . It is worth noting that the Tang Dynasty imposed relatively few restrictions on intellectual thought, and the literati enjoyed a significant degree of poetic freedom, allowing them to express individual emotions with relative openness. However, for exiled officials living on the political margins, this freedom was greatly curtailed.

Exile itself was a form of political imprisonment, and any overt criticism of the ruling authorities would inevitably invite harsher punishment. Consequently, poets could not voice their criticisms directly. In such circumstances, exiled poets employed techniques such as citing ancient allusions to critique the present and invoking classical references to openly reveal the humiliation they had endured—conveying a satire that was both subtle and piercing. This remained a common mode of expression in exile poetry.

This sharp rhetoric functions both as a critique of political realities and as an affirmation of personal integrity. For this reason, the theme of self-vindication features prominently in exile poetry. For example, Liu Yuxi, in "Langtao Sha," (《浪淘沙》) writes: "Though the process of sifting and washing is arduous, only after blowing away the wild sand does one reach the gold" (千淘萬漉雖辛苦，吹盡狂沙始到金), employing gold as a metaphor for personal integrity, conveying disdain for slander and confidence in eventual vindication. Similarly, Li Shangyin, in "Farewell to Xue Yuanbin," (《別薛元賓》) uses the image of "pure rules cannot be compared, so I use jade-hued ice" (清規無以況，且用玉壺冰) to illustrate the clarity of his moral resolve. Both poems exemplify the use of poetic imagery for self-defense and moral affirmation.

Not only poetry but also prose writings carry this tone of appeal and resistance. In "The Punishment of Guilt," (《懲咎賦》) Liu Zongyuan laments: "Slander and jealousy are constructed without warning, yet I remain steadfast in my convictions. Alas, my comrades are unworthy, and I have suffered the sudden pressure of being entrusted with responsibility" (谗妒構而不戒兮，猶斷斷於所執。哀吾黨之不淑兮，遭任遇之卒迫。) (ed. by Huang Rensheng and Luo Jianlun, 2013, p. 420). Though titled "Punishing Guilt," the work serves to denounce the slander and harm inflicted by petty officials and to advocate for justice for oneself and fellow officials.

Similarly, Bai Juyi, in "On Yuan Shao's Third Petition: The Demotion of Yuan Rang, Inspector of the Imperial Court, to Clerk of the Jiangling Prefecture," (《論元稹第三狀·監察禦史元穰貶江陵府士曹參軍》) spoke out in defense of his friend Yuan Zhen, pointing out that he had been punished for offering forthright counsel to the emperor: "Some may use public opinion as a pretext, to settle personal grievances, thus causing false accusations to reach the ears of heaven... This is one of the unacceptable things" (或假公議，將報私嫌，遂使誣枉之聲上聞天聽.....此其不可者一也。) This not only expresses indignation at political intrigue but also reveals the difficulty upright individuals face in surviving within the bureaucratic world.

The stronger their belief in their own moral integrity, the sharper and more incisive their poetic criticism of political rivals became. Negative imagery was strategically employed in exile poetry to satirize treacherous ministers. For instance, Yuan Zhen's "The Great-Billed Crow" (《大觜烏》) uses the crow to symbolize sycophantic behavior, while "the master is utterly bewildered, lured without rest" (主人一心惑，誘引不知疲) implies that the ruler lacks the wisdom to discern loyalty from treachery. Similarly, Liu Yuxi's "The Song of the Gathering Mosquitoes" (《聚蚊谣》) describes: "On a dark summer night, the hall is opened, and mosquitoes swarm in the darkness, their buzzing like thunder" (沉沉夏夜蘭堂開，飛蚊伺暗聲如雷), comparing court officials who ascend through flattery to mosquitoes that breed in the filth of summer.

Such imagery exposes the flattering facades of powerful figures who rise to prominence through opportunism and slander reform-minded officials dedicated to the nation. This is fundamentally analogous to the mosquitoes' innate preference for "chaos" and "darkness"—though they may flourish for a time, they are ultimately destined to perish.

Clearly, such imagery in exile poetry consistently serves to highlight the poet's own moral uprightness and refusal to associate with corrupt officials. Moreover, the recurring motif underscores the belief that treacherous ministers, represented through these images, will inevitably face their downfall. Thus, while voicing grievances, such poetry simultaneously conveys hope for the poet's own political future and for a more just and transparent political order.

5. CONCLUSION

Exile poetry often reaffirms the Confucian bond between the state and the people, imbuing it with a strong sense of practical and contemporary significance. Confronted with recurrent political crises and social upheavals, these exiled literati sought to embody their political ideals through action, motivated not by personal gain but by a commitment to national service. Over time, they internalized these ideals, which developed into a more resilient and profound moral philosophy. Whether serving at court or in remote exile, they consistently exemplified the spirit of Confucian scholars—upholding moral integrity, a commitment to public service, and concern for the welfare of the people and the perils of war. As Bai Juyi wrote, "The

life of an ant is trivial, but the affairs of the state are of utmost importance”（螻蟻之命至輕，社稷之事極），underscoring their prioritization of moral cultivation and state responsibility above personal hardships.

At the same time, the political vision articulated in their poetry continued to expand. In the early stages of exile, much of their literary expression focused on how to channel their frustrated political aspirations. Despite the harsh natural environment and the physical and emotional suffering they endured, they remained committed to political engagement and continued to harbor ambitions of achieving significant reforms. At this stage, the exiled literati exhibited no inclination toward withdrawal from public life. They steadfastly maintained their Confucian ideals, with their most fervent aspiration remaining the realisation of a golden age of governance.

Yet their poetry remained imbued with dissatisfaction toward the court and their peers. This phenomenon represented not a rejection of the Confucian value system, but rather an externalization of their sense of powerlessness and resistance in the face of political realities. Though their satire and criticism conveyed elements of personal autonomy, they remained bound by the underlying ethos of “loyalty to the ruler and devotion to the country.” Such dissatisfaction reflects the lament of unrecognized Confucian scholars, rather than a fundamental departure from the ideal of official service. Even in the face of institutional setbacks, these exiled scholars continued to uphold the Confucian ideal of “cultivating oneself, harmonizing the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world.” Their frustration and resistance thus remained a form of struggle and appeal within the existing moral and ideological framework.

However, as the experience of exile deepened and the years in exile lengthened, the political ideals they had once upheld gradually eroded under the relentless pressures of reality. As it became evident that the court had no intention of recalling them, and the dream of returning to the capital grew increasingly remote, the fervent expectations once embodied in the “Tower of Longing for the Capital” motif gradually faded from their poetic expressions. Under such sustained external pressures and spiritual distress, the career aspirations of exiled literati inevitably underwent transformation.

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