

Exploration of the Cause for the One-Thousand-Year Popularity of the Tang Dynasty Musical Composition, *A Parting Tune With a Thrice Repeated Refrain*

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Abstract

The Tang dynasty musical composition, *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain*, has been spread for over a thousand years and loved by people all the time. The article analyzes the cause for that of the aspects of its background, literary and artistic charm, emotional identity, material guarantee, singers’ word of mouth, and its complete adaptation.

Key words: *A parting tune with a thrice repeated refrain*; Spread; Cause; Flourishing period of Tang dynasty; Musical composition

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INTRODUCTION

The Tang dynasty musical composition, *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain*, originated from the seven-character poem, *Farewell to an Envoy on His Mission to Anxi*, written by Wang Wei, a famous poet in Tang dynasty.

The original poem is: What’s got Weicheng’s path dust wet is the morning rain, the willows near the Hotel become green again.

I urge you to empty another cup of wine, west of the Yangguan
Pass you’ll see no more of mine.

This poem shows the poet’s farewell scene with the parting of love to his friend Yu’er. Since there are two location names, “Yangguan” and “Weicheng”, the poem is also called *Yangguan Tune* or *Weicheng Tune*. When it is sung, it is repeated three times; therefore it is called *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain*. This poem became a song in the flourishing period of Tang dynasty and it became very popular in middle and late Tang dynasty. It became even more popular in Song dynasty and it was a classic farewell song for farewell feasts. In Jin and Yuan dynasties, it was still sung among people. In Ming and Qing dynasties, it became instrumental composition. In the contemporary, it has various performing forms such as solo, chorus, piano, guqin and dulcimer and so on. *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain* has been handed down from the 8th century to the 21st century, passing a thousand years and still timeless, and it has a widespread and profound impact on Chinese literature and music. The analysis of its causes is as follows.

1. THE BACKGROUND OF THIS COMPOSITION

1.1 The Popularity of Music in the Flourishing Period of Tang Dynasty

In the heyday of Tang dynasty, it accomplished great cultural, political, economic, and diplomatic achievements. It was one of the heydays in the Chinese history and it was also one of the powers in the world at that time. The emperor during the flourishing period of Tang dynasty was Tang Taizong was fond of music and he was proficient in music as well. At the same time, he emphasized the positive role of music in educating the public and improving folk customs, which brought a huge development to music

with the palace as its center. The successive emperors and royals were fond of music and were willing to learn music and it became a common practice, which had a huge impact on other social members.

1.2 The Writing Demand of Lyrics During the Flourishing Period of Tang Dynasty Was Unprecedented

During the flourishing period of Tang dynasty, music developed in the palace and there came out a lot of new musical compositions. Gradually people's demand in lyrics sung with music increased. In Tang dynasty, there were two sources for song lyrics: the first was the written lyrics according to the music; the second was to choose poems to become the lyrics. During the flourishing period of Tang dynasty, scribes had a high enthusiasm in the creation of lyrics and it had been integrated into their daily life.

1.3 The Literary Talent of the Lyricist, Wang Wei

The flourishing period of Tang dynasty was a peak period of classic poetry writing. During that period of time, a lot of excellent poets and poems emerged. According to the *Statistics of Poems in Tang Dynasty*, there were 50,000 poems in Tang dynasty and there were about 2,000-3,000 poets. The writer of *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain*, Wang Wei, was a leading poet at that time. Wang Wei, also called Mojie, originated from Qixian, Shanxi, was one of the most outstanding four poets in the flourishing period of Tang dynasty together with Li Bai, Du Fu, Cen Shen. The style of his poems is either forceful and gorgeous, or beautiful and elegant, forming a separate faction in Tang dynasty and having a long-lasting influence. Wang Wei was not only proficient in poetry and painting, but also proficient in music. In addition, he had been living in the prosperous place of music in the flourishing period of Tang dynasty, Chang'an; therefore, his musical talent, social activities and poetic characteristics fitted the musical culture in the flourishing period of Tang dynasty, which made his poems popular and widely sung among people.

2. THE LITERARY AND ARTISTIC CHARM OF THE COMPOSITION

A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain was a poem written by versatile Wang Wei in Weicheng to bid farewell to his friend, Yuan'er who was going to Xi'an. This poem describes his parting love to his friend. The meaning of the poem is as follows: the morning in Weicheng is in the misty rain and the air is moist; the rain wet the dust on the ground of Weicheng. The hotel covered with tiles nested in the fresh green new willow; I sincerely request you to drink one more cup of wine; a thousand words are all in the wine; west of Yangguan, there would be no close friends any more. With a simple style to describe the farewell scene in detail, *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain*

creates a touching state and fully expresses the sincere feelings of unlimited care and nostalgia of the poet to his friend who is going to travel far away. It is very poetic. Its melody integrates closely and naturally with the rhythm, mood and content environment of the lyrics. *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain* is a seven-character poem with a structure of four-front and three-back combination. The rhythm structure is also a combination of tense front and loose back. The combination of the lyrics and the composition is perfect and natural. We can appreciate the elegance in the singing and deeply feel its unique classical, subtle and rigorous beauty.

3. IT TRULY REFLECTS PEOPLE'S LIVES AND PEOPLE'S COMMON EMOTIONS AT THAT TIME

Since the Tang Emperor Taizong and Gaozong expanded the territory of Tang dynasty, it needed to "call up" a large number of farmers who stationed at the borderland. Weicheng in the poem is in the northwest of Xi'an and Yangguan is in the southwest of Dunhuang County in Gansu province. They were the inevitable paths for people called up to the border. At that time, the destination of Yu'er was An'xi which refers to Kuche in Xinjiang. At that time, the transportation and communications were not well developed and that place was remote. The workload was heavy and painful and the place was also a barren place; therefore the servants and their family and friends all felt depressing and sad. This poem reflects the real living status of people at that time. When it was released, it was widely spread and became popular. Once a poem becomes popular, it has the opportunity to combine with music. It is likely that when the poem was written and the music composition of it appeared shortly and people started to sing it. In a poem by Li Shangyin, there was such a sentence: "Red cherry blossoms have white snow inside. A heartbroken voice is singing *Yangguan Tune*."

After Tang dynasty, the parting emotions poets express have gained more people's sympathy. Gradually it was moving away from specific character and environmental relationship in the poem and became a universal voice for people to express their parting emotions. People often use it as a medium to express parting emotions of all kinds of relationships. The song was more widely sung. With spread of the song, the word "Yangguan" has become a synonym of "parting" in Chinese national literature.

4. THE SINGING OF PEOPLE AS WELL AS PROFESSIONAL SINGERS PROMOTES THE SONG

When Wang Wei's *Farewell to an Envoy on His Mission to An'xi* was used in music and became *A Parting Tune*

with a *Thrice Repeated Refrain*, it was sung by refined scholars and vendors at marketplace. There are historical records: *Records of Tang* by Anonymous says: Li Guinian, Pengnian and Henian were brothers and they were prestigious scholars during Kaiyuan years. Henian was expert in singing *Weicheng*; Pengnian was good at dancing and Guinian was good at musical drums. The *Weicheng* sung by Li Henian just refers to the *Weicheng Tune* by Wang Wei. Bai Juyi also often listened to and song this tune. When he met with friends, they song *Yangguan Tune* together: "When getting together, please don't find excuse of being drunk. Let's listen to and sing *Yangguan* for the fourth time." When they were depressed, they would sing *Yangguan Tune* to urge people to drink: "I don't have any other skills to comfort you. I can only sing *Yangguan* for a toast." In *The Word Records of Liu Binke* by Wei Xun, it is recorded that a vendor of a small pancake store sang *Wencheng Tune* every early morning: the Director of the Criminal Department Cong Baibai one said: a resident at the lane who sells pancakes sings every morning. One day, he talked to the resident and felt sympathy for his poverty. Then he gave him a lot of money and said that he would eat his pancakes every day. After that, he never heard him singing again and went to ask why. The resident said he was too busy to sing *Weicheng*. This story is also recorded in Vol.16 of *Baikong Liutie* by Bai Juyi. A pancake vender song this song every morning, and it indicates that *Weicheng Tune* was extremely popular at that time.

At that time, there were also a lot of professional singers who were famous for singing *Weicheng Tune*, such as Mi Jiarong and He Zhan. It is recorded in *Miscellaneous Records* by Lu that: the wonder of music has a long history. In Yuanhe, there are Mi Jiarong and He Zhan for national music and in recent, there is Chen Buxian...Liu Yuxi in his *A Poem to Mi Jiarong* says: "Three emperors have hired Mi Jiarong who can spread new songs to make them popular. Now the new generation is respected while the seniors are lightened. You'd better dye your white mustache to serve the young generation." In his *Returning to Capital since Deprecated Hearing He Zhan's Singing*, it says: "It has been twenty years since I left the capital. Re-hearing capital music makes me emotional. The only old friend left is He Zhan and then I invite him to sing *Weicheng*." With the promotion of famous singers like Mi Jiarong and He Zhan, *Yangguan Tune* became even more popular.

5. TYPOGRAPHY MAKES IT POSSIBLE FOR MUSICAL SCORES TO BE PRESERVED AND SPREAD

The appearance of typography in Song dynasty makes it possible for musical scores to be widely published

and preserved. In the relevant records, Wang Wei's *Weicheng Tune* was included and recorded in various musical scores with a diverse name. From Ming dynasty to 1922, there are 29 musical scores we can collect that include *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain* and there are three types of scores which were recorded by using a traditional Chinese musical notation. Among them, the *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain* recorded in *Zhe Sound Explaining Musical Score* which was published before 1491 is believed to most like the original *Yangguan Tune* in Tang dynasty, according to the evaluation of experts. The later published musical scores contain development and complementation. The *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain* recorded in *Swire Music Heritage* published in 1511 uses staff. The *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain* familiar to us is translated by Yang Yinliu, a musical historian in our country. He translated the tune based on *An Introduction of Qin* compiled by Zhang He in 1876. In Tang dynasty, many poems became music. However, when they passed down, only the literary form is preserved and most of them don't have the musical score. *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain* is an exception, which has lyrics and melody and is preserved in scores. The record of score text provides the material guarantee for the thousand years' spread of the tune.

6. REPAIR AND ADAPTATION ALONG THE TIME MAKE THE TUNE MORE COMPLETE

In its spreading process, the form and the content of traditional Chinese music continue to develop and this is also a normal rule in the development and evolution of our national music

In content, the repeating form of *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain* continues to change. The so-called "thrice repeated" refers to the three-time repetition of the same tune; while in each repetition, there are some improvised factors, so the work is developed. In Tang dynasty, repetition is a widely used musical form. In Song and Yuan dynasties, *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain* was developed based on the original text by Wang Wei. There were more repetitions in some sentences or some lyrics were expanded into "long tunes". The repeating way was quite simple. In Ming and Qing dynasties, the version of *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain* and the change of its lyrics were more prominent. Over the 400 years from 1491 to 1922, in the recorded 29 ancient musical scores, there are 37 works related to *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain*. If we calculate from the original poem of Wang Wei, from Tang dynasty to the early years of Republic of China, there were 48 musical compositions or lyrics related to *A Parting Tune with a*

Thrice Repeated Refrain. These works enrich the artistic conception of Wang Wei's original poem from different perspectives and develop the musical culture of China.

In the singing and playing forms, there were various styles and forms of *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain* in Tang dynasty, including the singing forms with Xian and Qin as well as other instruments (such as flute) and even being used in dancing music. Through the development of 1000 years, in contemporary times, *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain* is not only a popular solo song sung by singers in their concerns, but also adapted into various performing forms. Professor Wang Zhenya adapted it into chorus with female leading and mixed chorus based on the score of Xia Yifeng, in which the mixed chorus is very distinctive. In the chorus, the work is more refined and complete which has achieved good results and also improved the appreciative level of this work. Composer Li Yinghai adapted it into a piano composition in which the distinctive sound and playing techniques of piano integrate with the playing techniques of ancient Qin. It uses western instrument to interpret traditional Chinese national musical score, integrates the eastern and western culture and promotes the further development of the spiritual civilization of human beings. The educator and composer Huang He adapted *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain* into dulcimer solo, using a large bass dulcimer to play it. It gives a new feature to the ancient tune and the sound of large dulcimer increases the musical appeal of this ancient tune.

Up to now, the ancient tune *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain* continues to spread, change and expand so that its form and content are more dazzling than

before and it has become a wonderful work in the treasure of Chinese music.

From the spreading track of *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain*, we can conclude that, the spread of a musical tune for over a thousand years, in addition to some subjective factors such as its musical charm and its close relation to people's emotions and life, is also driven by some external factors such as the transmission media.

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