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Legitimation Process of Female Poetry During the Tang Dynasty (618–907)

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Abstract

This paper investigates the legitimation process of female poetry in Chinese culture during the Tang dynasty. My argument is that this process has three interrelated elements covering macro, meso and micro levels. *The first level* deals with the political, social and cultural conditions under which poetry writing was very prolific and thriving for poets at that time. *The second level* deals with gender dimensions when after the An Lu-shan rebellion a changed gender balance of power weakened the gender barriers. As a result, the social composition of female poets changed significantly. A great number of *shi* poems were written by women with low social status and in many ways this practice set the stage for *ci* poetry with its controversial reputation because of its association with entertainment quarters and female singers. *The third level* deals with the poetic skills of four female poets: Li Ye (李冶, 732?–784), Xue Tao (薛濤, 768–832), Liu Caichun (劉采春, 9th century) and Yu Xuanji (魚玄機, 844–871). Having analyzed 167 extant poems, I revealed the innovations allowing to distinguish them from other mediocre female *shi*. The final stage of the legitimation process is seen as an appreciation of their poetry by male poets borrowing their lines, images and rhymes during the following centuries and their recognition as "Four Greatest Female *Shi* Poets of the Tang Dynasty" ("唐代四大女詩人").

Keywords: the Tang dynasty, female poetry, *shi*, Li Ye, Xue Tao, Liu Caichun, Yu Xuanji.

Introduction

The focus of this paper is on the relationship between power, gender and poetry during the Tang dynasty. There is valid information of 16 female poets (2nd century BC – early 7th century AD) who were members of the imperial family, imperial concubines, or women of elite families (Idema & Grant, 2004, pp. 17–153). This number is incomparable with the hundreds of male poets as well as with the influence of the latter on genre canons[1]. However,

[1] In particular, only 7 of 16 poetesses influenced the poetry of later dynasties, e.g. some lines from their poems were borrowed by other poets. At the same time their male contemporaries exerted the greatest influence on later generations and on the development of Chinese literature.

during the Tang dynasty the number of female poets increased rapidly [2], which eventually led to the creation of a kind of Chinese female "Mount Rushmore" – "Four Greatest Female *Shi* Poets of the Tang Dynasty" ("唐代四大女詩人"). This can be seen as a sign of a changed gender balance of power, when women's achievements were highlighted and evaluated on the same grounds as men's. Since then, female poems have been included in various anthologies, individual collections of female poets have been compiled, and female poetry has been accepted as an integral part of Chinese literature. At the same time, the reasons, stages and specific mechanisms of this process have not yet received the necessary attention in academic studies.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the legitimation of Li Ye (李冶, 732?–784), Xue Tao (薛濤, 768–832), Liu Caichun (劉采春, 9th century) and Yu Xuanji (魚玄機, 844–871) as the emerging canon of female poetry of the Tang dynasty.

- *Legitimation of Female Poets in Male-dominated World: Three Levels*

I use Jean Lyotard's (1984) definition of "legitimation" as a central concept in this paper: "Legitimation is the process by which a legislator is authorized to promulgate such a law as a norm" (p.8). On the one hand, it is broad enough to consider not only the grand narratives of the Western world, but also the processes of "classicalization" of medieval Chinese poetry. On the other hand, it allows to clearly distinguish three core elements – *a legislator, a law* and *a norm* – involved in the legitimation process of female poetry.

In medieval China, poetry was traditionally considered as an activity associated with power and public space where men of different social status established the rules. Therefore, *legislators* in this elite male-dominated literary world are men (emperors, high-ranking officials, literati, etc.). A certain body of poetic texts produced by a particular social group as well as the innovations they have (poetic devices, themes, images, etc.) can be considered as *a law*. However, not every group of the texts can become a part of a literary process. When the special practice of poetry writing becomes sufficiently widespread beyond the circle of legislators and its elements are borrowed by others, then it can be thought as *a norm*.

My point of departure is that legitimation process has three interrelated elements covering macro, meso and micro levels. The *first level* deals with the political, social and cultural conditions determining both the necessity and desirability of literary recognition in the structure of power relations in Chinese society, and the appearance of new actors.

First of all, as the poetry composition was a requirement for the examinations (Rouzer, 2017a, p.248) aimed to recruit high-ranking officials, literary recognition remained highly desirable for those who wanted to be included in the established system of power.

One of the results of the An Lu-shan rebellion in 755 was the increase in the number of people engaged in entertainment in general and poetry writing in particular. As the dynasty's political capacity and economic prosperity was greatly eroded, it led to "the gradual decline of

[2] The largest collection of Tang poetry *Complete Tang Shi* (*全唐詩*, 1705) includes 680 poems written by 126 women. And it is just the examples of *shi*, the very genre which is directly related to power, men, and the examination system. *Ci* genre (詞) having close ties with entertainment quarters, courtesans, and music started to emerge in late Tang and had a huge impact on female poetry of the Song dynasty (960–1279).

the dominance of the preeminent clans" (Yao, 2002, p.27). Because of the political breakdown and decentralization after the rebellion, courtesans and musicians had to flee the capital and "began to seek new locations for their musical performances" (Chang, 1980, p. 9). The fall of this center of power led to the proliferation of entertainment halls in the different cities and the increase in people engaged in this sphere. Not only scholar-officials and literati poets were the regular visitors of these entertainment quarters, but also "the emperors themselves had liaisons with professional singers" (p. 14).

The second level of legitimation deals with gender dimensions. Gender stereotypes during the Tang dynasty presupposed that the noble women being educated in Confucian teachings were oriented to marriage and family and played three main social roles: daughter, wife, and mother[3]. However, courtesans and nuns suddenly turned to be incorporated into a new system of power relations, including elite male-dominated literary world.

The connection between literati-officials, entertainment quarters and poetry resulted in the popularity of courtesan culture in Chinese society. The number of courtesans is really stunning: there were more than 40,000 of palace courtesans during Emperor Xuanzong's reign (712–756) and only 11 409 courtesans were listed in the Music Bureau (教坊) as those who performed at official banquets (Xu & Yang, 1995, p.45). There is no data about other types of courtesans, but their number was undoubtedly much greater throughout the country than the number of palace courtesans in the capital.

In addition to their entertainment functions these quarters had "indispensable role in the public life of scholar-officials", because they "provided a space where examination candidates were initiated into the tastes and manners of the power elite" (Ko, 1994, p.255). There was also a place to exhibit the new elite's "pleasure and to seek public recognition of their dominance in the power structure and literary culture" (Yao, 2022, p.68). Moreover, literati-officials "developed relationships with courtesans based on the shared love of music and poetry" (Blanchard, 2018, p.120), the very thing they might never obtain in their family life. At the same time, it was the place where women could freely write poetry, sing songs and perform, so these entertainment quarters gave women the chance to be recognized as artistic creators. Thus, they brought "together the public and private lives of the male elites, as well as the oral and visual arts" (Ko, 1994, p.255).

At the same time, the Tang dynasty saw a full-fledged establishment of Daoist monasticism [4]. The goddess cult associated with fertility, divine matchmaking, sensual appeal, erotic desire, and romantic passion (Jia, 2018, p.11) greatly changed the image of a woman as well as views of ideal womanhood, which resulted in the popularity of Daoist monasteries among female believers (Hinsch, 2020, p.73). These places gave women some independence as they had an opportunity to form "their own communities and enjoyed their own autonomous sphere" (Jia, 2018, p.15).

Like the entertainment quarters the Daoist monasteries brought about another shift in the role of a woman in medieval Chinese society: "the priestesses were not completely

[3] The concept of "three obediences" (三從) dated back to the 2nd century BC. It defined the hierarchical relationships between women and men in their families at different stages of their lives: as a daughter to obey her father (未嫁從父), as a wife to obey her husband (既嫁從夫), as a widow to obey her son (夫死從子).

[4] Tang emperors enthusiastically patronized Daoism (Hinsch, 2020, p.73) and a lot of them supported the building of Daoist monasteries (Jia, 2018, p.37–39).

cloistered but were also active in public spheres formerly dominated by men" (Jia, 2018, p.15). Buddhist and Daoist nuns made up less than 1% of female population [5] during this period. According to *The six statutes of the Tang dynasty* (*唐六典*, 738) there were 550 female Daoist monasteries and 2113 female Buddhist convents during 713–779 with the total number of nuns up to 100,000 (Gao, 2011, p.99) .

Nuns could maintain an interactive and forceful relation with men occupying high social positions. They took part in secular social occasions with high-ranking officials, literati, monks and priests as well as in various public activities where they "gave public sermons, performed rituals, reached out to local people, and became religious mentors even to emperors" (Jia, 2018, p.15). Thus, such factors as «flexibility in gender relations, the elevation of women's status, Daoist sexual practices, the cult of the goddess, the culture of romance, and changes in the gendered power structure» (p.15) led to the reshaping of gender patterns in the Tang society. Furthermore, the sharp increase in the number of courtesans and nuns brought them into dominance in the female literary arena. Men from elite families were greatly limited in communication with educated women outside their own families because of the segregation of the sexes (Idema & Grant, 2004, p.174). Therefore, the educated courtesans being trained from childhood in poetry, music and dance had a unique opportunity to demonstrate their skills. There was a highly competitive market where the most popular women were those who met at least two main requerements: firstly, their poetic skills were as good as the accepted standards in this elite male-dominated literary world; secondly, their poetic innovations could be highly commended by officials and literati.

Political, cultural, gender and other factors were closely intertwined in the lives of four greatest Tang female poets. Besides Liu Caichun, three others were both courtesans and Daoist nuns in different periods of their lives (Idema & Grant, 2004, p.175). Li Ye's father sent her to a monastery at the age of 11, as he thought she could not become a virtuous woman because of her poetic talent (Yang, 2011, p.91). In her final years, Xue Tao withdrew from the world and lived in seclusion, "clad in the garb of a Daoist nun" (Idema & Grant, 2004, p.183). Though she did not live in the Daoist community and such a move did not indicate her pure religious devotion, she was called as female Daoist priest (女冠) (Larsen, 1987, p.xx). Having returned to the capital after an unsuccessful marriage, Yu Xuanji was registered as a courtesan (Cahill, 2002, p.102), but a year later she became a Daoist nun at aristocratic Xianyiguan (咸宜觀) (Xin, 1994, p.518), where she even had "her own chamber and courtyard within the complex" (Jia, 2018, p.15).

The social status of these four women was rather low as they belonged to the two lowest ranked groups of courtesans [6]. Xue Tao was first registered as a "government

[5] According to the census taken in 754 there were 52,880,488 people in China (Gao, 2011, p.9). If at least half of them were women, then it was about 26 million women in 8th century.

[6] By mid-Tang there were four types of courtesans listed in a descending order of their rank:

1. *gongji* (宮妓, "palace courtesans") lived in the capital, served as the instructors in the Music Bureau and performed at official banquets (Blanchard, 2018, p.119);
2. *jiaji* (家妓, "household courtesans") entertained the high-ranking officials and wealth literati at their households (Bossler, 2012, p. 96);
3. *guanji* (官妓, "government courtesans") and *yingji* (營妓, "barracks courtesans") were assigned by the government to civil or military officials respectively (Bossler, 2012, p.92);
4. *shiji* (市妓, "city courtesans") lived in urban brothels (Wu, 2006, p.79).

courtesan" (Larsen, 1983, p.103–104), but at the age of 15 she became a "barracks courtesan" (Wu, 2006, p.95–96). It allowed her to get aquainted with two *jiedushi* (節度使, military governor) Wei Gao (韋皋, 745–805) and Yuan Zhen (元稹, 779–831) as well as with a number of high-ranking officials [7] (Larsen, 1983, p.86). Liu Caichun was likely to be a "city courtesan", as this is precisely the group that was allowed to perform in the street troupes as professional actors together with their husbands [8] (Wu, 2006, p.135). Talking about Li Ye and Yu Xuanji modern researchers use neutral terms *jinü* (妓女, "courtesan"), *mingji* (名妓, "famous courtesan") or *ji* (妓, "courtesan") (Wang, 2004, p.93). But according to the information about their lives they were likely to be "government courtesans".

The third level deals with the poetic skills of four female poets. The very fact of hundreds of female poets appearing from almost nowhere during the Tang dynasty was a very weighty claim to start considering female poetry as an integral part of the literary process. At the same time, legitimation of female poetry in patriarchal medieval China presupposes the classification of the relevant poems according to the same principles applied to male poetry. The practice of honoring the achievements of outstanding people in the field by joining them into a group of four or eight was very widespread in ancient and medieval China [9]. Thus, it was an established way of identifying the unique and influential poets, and from the Tang dynasty onwards it became a common way of appreciating female talents and poetic skills [10]. In turn, such "classicalization" involves the selection of a very small number of female poets, whose skills are evaluated in accordance with some generally accepted standards.

Having analyzed 167 poems, I will try to reveal the innovations allowing to distinguish *shi* written by four greatest female poets from those written by other potentially mediocre female poets. The final stage of the legitimation process is seen as appreciation of their poetry by male poets of later dynasties borrowing their lines, rhymes and images.

Shi (詩) tracing its roots back to the early 3rd century or a little later (Rouzer, 2017b, p.351–352) was a dominant genre of poetry during the Tang dynasty. The first signs of distinguishing "modern style poetry" *jintishi* (近體詩) from "ancient style poetry" *gutishi* (古體詩) can be seen during the Southern Qi (南齊, 479–501) (Qian & Liu, 2016, p.2). The difference between them mainly concerns five elements: the number of lines, the number of characters in each line, the balance between a level tone *ping* (平) and an oblique tone *ze* (仄), the place of rhyme (韻), and antithesis (對仗). As *jintishi* was gaining more popularity during the Tang dynasty, writing within this increasingly complicated set of rules turned to be a great challenge to the poet's talent and skills (Cai, 2008, p.161). However, despite all its popularity *jintishi* did not completely supplant *gutishi* and in late 8th century poets continued to write

[7]Such famous officials and literati as Bai Juyi (白居易, 772–846), Liu Yuxi (劉禹錫, 772–842), Pei Du (裴度, 765–839) and others were among her lovers (Wu, 2006, p.96).

[8] Fan Shu (範攄, fl. 870) in *Friendly Talk at Misty Brook* (*雲溪友議*) mentioned that "actors Zhou Jinan, [Zhou] Jichong and his wife Liu Caichun came from Huai [region]" (有俳優周季南、季崇及妻劉采春，自淮甸而來) (Xu, 2014, p.35).

[9]E.g. "The Four Paragons of the Early Tang" ("初唐四傑"), "The Eight Great Literati of Tang and Song Dynasties" ("唐宋八大家"), etc.

[10] E.g. "Four Great Female *Ci* Poets of the Song Dynasty" ("宋代四大女詞人"), "Eight Beauties of Qinhuai" (" 秦淮八艷"), etc.

both of them [11]. Though three of four female poets – Li Ye, Xue Tao, and Liu Caichun – wrote both *jintishi* and *gutishi*, the proportion of the latter is rather small ranging from 12% (Xue Tao) to 20% (Li Ye). Being born much later than the other three female poets Yu Xuanji wrote only *jintishi*. Therefore, by giving preference to *jintishi* these female poets chose the most popular kind of poetry in the Tang elite society at that time.

There are three types of *jintishi*: an eight-line regulated verse *lüshi* (律詩), a quatrain *jueju* (絕句), and a verse of indeterminate length *pailü* (排律) [12]. Though each of these types has its own specific features, I do not present them here. The focus of this paper is first of all on the writing style of four Tang female poets, the thematic peculiarities, and the images of their *shi*.

1) Masculine Style and Thematic Diversity of Female Poetry

During the Tang dynasty, female poets mostly appropriated the writing styles and conventional themes from the poetry written by men from a woman's point of view: "Men writing as women expressed stereotypical male views of womanhood, portraying the female subject as extremely passive and dependent" (Hinsch, 2020, p.101). In the 8th-9th centuries, the writing of poetry was seen "as an unsuitable occupation for a proper lady" (Idema & Grant, 2004, p.163), that is why a lot of female poets from elite families refrained from writing altogether [13] or at least "tried to maintain a sense of propriety by censoring themselves and refusing to reveal strong and intimate emotions" (Hinsch, 2020, p.101). Unlike the vast majority of women four female poets expressed their thoughts, desires and aspirations in a straightforward manner in most of their *shi*, and this writing style is rather inherent in male poetry than in female one.

Another sign of such masculine style [14] of writing was present in poems addressed to a courtesan where a poet mentions the circumstances of their meeting (for example, a banquet) or the details of their sharing the special moment. It allowed male poets to address "a respected female poet as a peer, downplaying gender difference" (Hinsch, 2020, p.104). To my mind, another important aspect has escaped researchers' field of vision. This poetic correspondence allowed the addresser and the addressee to share each other's memories of that meeting. But at the same time they both have the totally different relations with the mutual acquaintances and vicariously experience different emotions: the woman acts as a lover / courtesan / entertainer having the sexual liaisons with male guests, while the man acts as a friend to the same guests.

[11] The outstanding poet Yuan Zhen (元稹, 779–831) noted that a lot of Tang poets still gave preference to *gutushi*: "Those, who loved ancient [style], abandoned modern [style]" ("莫不好古者遺近") (Qian & Liu, 2016, p.4). Paul Rouzer (2017a) mentioned that in 8th century "poets would often choose to write *gushi* as a self-conscious rejection of modern, fashionable tastes" (p.247). The reason was their desire "to mark themselves as morally authentic archaists" (p.247).

[12] The genesis of *shi* and the peculiar features of these types are examined in: Kroll, 2001, pp. 275–276; Hsieh, 1996, pp.25–28; Cai, 2008, pp.161, 199–200.

[13] Sun Guangxian (孫光憲, ?–968) in *Trivial stories [from] the North [of] Meng* (*北夢瑣言*) mentioned that one very talented female poet once burnt all her poems, "because she felt that poetry was not the proper work of a married woman" (Idema & Grant, 2004, p. 165).

[14] The term "masculine style" regarding Chinese poetry was used in the number of relevant works. See: Li (2012), Hinsch (2020), etc.

Three of four female poets dedicated a lot of poems to their male acquaintances: 8 of 20 Li Ye's *shi* (40%), 37 of 91 Xue Tao's *shi* (40.66%), and 20 of 50 Yu Xuanji's *shi* (40%). Some of them are written in masculine style to different men on various occasions (as gratitude for the precious gift, the memories of their meeting, a reply to an invitation, etc.). Their proportion is rather high among all their poems dedicated to men: Xue Tao has 19 such *shi* of 37 poems addressed to men (51.35%), and Yu Xuanji – 13 of 20 (65%).

Though at that time there were female poems with deep emotional attachment, but some of them were considered to be the proper ones for women while the others were thought the bold ones as they appropriated the masculine style in direct expressing their thoughts and feelings. The former were written by wives to their husbands: such poems "praise a husband's success, lament his failure, or express dismay at forced separation" (Hinsch, 2020, p.11), the latter were mainly written by courtesans who "used spare diction and avoided ornamental flourishes, expressing their thoughts and aspirations in a straightforward manner" (p.101-102). Here are some lines from the poems written by Li Ye as an illustration of such direct expression of deep emotions (worries, lovesickness, regret and parting sorrow) experienced by a courtesan after meeting with a man [15]:

1. to Lu Yu (陆羽, 733–804)

相逢仍臥病，*[We] met by chance, again [I am] ill in bed,*
欲語淚先垂。*[I] want to tell [you a lot], [but] tears start falling.*

2. to Zhu Fang (朱放, ? –?)

相思無曉夕，*[I] am lovesick [about you], [there is] neither dawn nor dusk,*
相望經年月。*[I would] look at [you] and spend months [and] years [this way].*
….
別後無限情，*After [you] left, [my] feelings are boundless,*
相逢一時說。*[When we] meet by chance [again],*
[I will] immediately tell [you about them].

3. to Han Kui (韓揆, ? –?)

別恨轉依依。*Parting sorrow has turned into thoughts about [you] all the time.*

The same straightforward manner can also be seen in Yu Xuanji's poems. Thus, she writes to unknown man:

曾陪雨夜同歡席，*Once [I] accompanied [you] in rainy night,*
together [we] enjoyed the banquet,
別後花時獨上樓。*After saying [you] goodbye in the season of flowers,*
[I] alone climb the tower.
…
莫倦蓬門時一訪，*Do not be tired of coming to [my] humble house,*
once [you] visit [the town],
每春忙在曲江頭。*Every spring [I will] be busy here [waiting for you]*
at the bank of Qujiang.

[15] All translations from Chinese are made by the author of this paper.

It may seem that there is no such vivid and direct expression of emotions in Xue Tao's and Liu Caichun's poems. But it should be noted that most of their poems are quatrains or *jueju*: 76 of 91 Xue Tao's *shi* (83,51%), and 5 of 6 Liu Caichun's *shi* (83,33%). Moreover, Xue Tao gave preference to seven-character *jueju* while Liu Caichun preferred to write five-character *jueju*. As the total number of characters is limited to 28 and 20 respectively, "it cannot give free rein to its expressions and feelings" (Yuan, 2017, p.97). By choosing this type of *jintishi* the poet deliberately set himself / herself a more difficult task as *jueju* "is limited in structure and has little room for maneuver" (p.97). But we can find the lines expressing the internmost female feelings even in such short *jueju*. Thus, Xue Tao wrote to the ministry councilor Yao:

萬條江柳早秋枝，*[There are] ten thousand twigs of river willow,*
early autumn [gets to] the branches,
裊地翻風色未衰。*[They are] touching the ground, wavering in the wind,*
[their] colors are not faded yet.
欲折爾來將贈別，*[I] want to break [one] for you, [and] give as a parting gift,*
莫教煙月兩鄉悲。*Not to let mist [and] moon [in] both places sigh with sorrow.*

In spite of a very small size the poem is full of meaning and different emotions. Though almost every Tang poet used the image of willow for describing springtime[16], its symbolic meaning is not limited to this one. As two characters "willow" (柳) and "to stay" / "to ask someone to stay" (留) are homophones, it is often associated with parting: "Beginning with the Han dynasty (206 B.C. – A.D.220) it became customary to present a willow branch to a departing friend as a farewell gift" (Frankel, 1976, p.96). Moreover, "the plucked willow branch was believed not only to have the power to delay the friend`s departure but also to lure him back if sent to him while he was traveling" (p.96). At the same time, the direct connection of the willow with spring added erotic symbolism to this image: willow acts as a symbol of an attractive lonely woman, especially the courtesan (Liu, 1962, p.111–112)[17].

Taking everything abovementioned into account, the last line of Xue Tao's *jueju* can have at least two interpretations with different emotions. Firstly, willow branch can be used in traditional way as a parting gift, and, consequently, as a reminder of the place Yao is leaving. Thus, the last line can be seen as a description of their looking with sadness at the same misty moon at two different places. Secondly, as willow represents a courtesan, the last line can be interpreted as woman's lament of her solitude. Being a "misty moonlighted [willow]" she is the one who feels sorrow of separation, and this feeling is as big as two places.

The variety of themes also fundamentally distinguishes the poetry of four Tang female poets from the conventional poems written by women or men from a woman's point of view. Traditionally such poems described life in the inner chambers and expressed women's feelings of loneliness and longing. The scope of poetry was greatly expanded by four female

[16] Later, a lot of these phrases became set expressions, e.g. 柳暗花明 (*dense willows [and] bright flowers*), 柳嚲莺嬌 (*willow [branches] hang out, orioles [are] charming*), 花紅柳綠 (*red flowers [and] green willows*), etc.

[17] Willow is often used in the phrases associated with entertainment quarters and courtesans, e.g. 問柳尋花 (*visit willow and look for flowers*) or 柳陌花街 (*[along] the street [with] willows [and] path [with] flowers*) means "to visit brothels".

poets with such themes as war, exile, chaos, Daoist spiritual practices and visits to temples, reflections on own destiny, love poetry, description of objects, etc.

Moreover, there are some *shi* standing out from their poetry where we can see the courageous expression of female thoughts and even the desire to act more like a man than a woman. A perfect example is Yu Xuanji's *jueju* titled *Visiting the Southern Tower in Chongzhen Temple to See the Names of Those who Passed the Imperial Examination* (*遊崇真觀南樓睹新及第題名處*). This poem is the only one from all Tang *shi* where a female poet described the limitations imposed on women (Idema & Grant, 2004, p.195) and openly expressed her dissatisfaction with the gender barriers in the society:

雲峰滿目放春晴，*Cloudy peaks fill [my] eyes revealing spring light,*
歷歷銀鉤指下生。*One by one silver hooks arise under the fingers.*
自恨羅衣掩詩句，*I hate silk gown [that] hides [my] shi lines,*
舉頭空羨榜中名。*Lifting the head in vain [I] covet [my] name in the list.*

She moves away from the traditional canon challenging the bureaucracy and the Confucian role prescribed for women: she is not inferior to men who had the right to take part in the imperial examination and her poetic talent is worth being appreciated. Her appearance (the beautiful silk dress she wears) and inner feelings (the poet inside it) are in disharmony making her regret her gender. Being unable to fulfill her poetic potential and to receive the imperial recognition for her poetry on equal terms with men, she can not escape from this intractable situation. However, the very idea of equality between men and women was revolutionary at that time (Peng & Zhang, 1995, p.80). Furthermore, Yu Xuanji introduced a new theme: a female poet who clearly understands the importance of self-realization and the limits imposed on women by society.

Though female poets in general and Yu Xuanji in particular deliberately violated gender norms of the Tang patriarchal society, but such perversion did not lead to any punitive response from *the legislators*. This poem was not banned from publication, on the contrary, it was included in different anthologies over the centuries, e.g., *Complete Tang Shi* (*全唐詩*).

2) Plant and Flower Images

The greatest variety of plant and flower images is represented in the poetry of Xue Tao and Yu Xuanji: each of them mentioned more than 20 kinds of different plants [18]. Though four female poets gave preference to different plants, the image of the willow (柳) with long branches (絲 / 條 / 枝) was the most frequently used. As this image was extremely popular in Tang poetry, it can not be considered as a specific feature of their poetry. At the same time, two images used by female poets were very unusual for Tang poetry in general (蘼蕪, *miwu*) and for female poetry in particular (牡丹, *peony*), that is why their use can be regarded as a peculiar feature of their poetry.

[18] Having analyzed *shi* written by 126 Tang female poets Luo Zongtao (2004) makes a conclusion that the most widely used images in their poetry are flowers (p.80). Besides, there is a correlation between the use of a particular flower and the social status of a woman (p.81). The researcher considers only flowers but not the plants in the whole.

Due to Han *yuefu* ballad (206 BC–220 AD) *Going Up the Mountain to Pick Miwu* (*上山採蘼蕪*) this plant became a classical allusion and a metaphor for an "abandoned wife" (Peng & Zhang, 1995, p.49): a woman went to the mountain to pick *miwu* and met her former husband there. Even though this image is directly related to the conventional theme of an abandoned wife, the most Tang male and female poets ignored it for some reason [19]. However, Li Ye and Yu Xuanji used the image of *miwu* in their poems by reinterpreting it drastically.

In the poem titled *Caught by the Rebels: Sent to [My] Former Husband* (*陷賊後寄故夫*) Li Ye mentioned that the addressee was her husband, but she used the image of *miwu* as a metaphor for a citizen abandoned by the emperor [20]. Her lyrical persona went to the mountains to pick *miwu* against her will just like Li Ye was made to praise a leader of the rebels: 教妾採蘼蕪 ([I was] ordered to pick *miwu*). Though in Yu Xuanji's poem the picked *miwu* in woman's hands is a metaphor of an "abandoned wife" (蘼蕪盈手泣斜暉), there is a transformation in expessing the female feelings: in Han *yuefu* a woman showed submission and devotion to her former husband, but Yu Xuanji's lyrical persona felt hurt and indignant at having been treated unfairly by her husband who made her feel lonely and helpless.

The image of peony was very popular and widely used in the Tang male *shi*, but it is not presented in female poetry. Yu Xuanji is the only one of the 126 Tang female poets who devoted *lüshi* to this flower – *Selling a Wilted Peony* (*賣殘牡丹*). Peony was the most highly valued plant during the Tang dynasty because of its association with Yang Guifei (楊貴妃, 719–756), the favorite concubine of Emperor Xuanzong (唐玄宗, 685–762). He was fond of her face flushed with wine, thus male poets often compared her with the peony praising her beauty [21] (Xu, 2009, p.38). During the Tang dynasty, this flower became an emblem for the highly trained and expensive courtesan (Rouzer, 1993, p.195) and this "mixture of the outer luster and the inner lust" made a peony "a conventional erotic, even pornographic, symbol within Chinese literature" (Yang, 2012, p.239–240).

Though Yu Xuanji did not directly compare her lyrical persona with Yang Guifei, but a certain parallel could be traced. Having dropped this subtle hint she indicated that she was definitely not any worse than the favorite concubine and also could be compared with a peony. However, men's attitude towards her was completely different, as she was much less attractive to men than emperor's concubine. Yu Xuanji pointed out three reasons for such an indifferent attitude: firstly, she placed high value upon herself (應為價高人不問); secondly, her unsurpassed beauty made men feel unconfident and no one dared to even approach her (卻緣香甚蝶難親); thirdly, her humble origin limited her opportunities (紅英只稱生宮裡，

[19] I use https://sou-yun.cn/QueryPoem.aspx as a database, as it has almost 1,245,000 poems of different genres from pre-Qin era (先秦時代, 771–221 BCE) up to 20th century. Image of *miwu* is used in 28 of about 55,000 Tang poems (0.05%). Except Li Ye and Yu Xuanji the authors of other poems are men.

[20] In 783 a leader of the rebels Zhu Ci (朱泚, 742–784) occupied the capital forcing Emperor Dezong (唐德宗, 742–805) to flee having abandoned all his palace women. During this time Li Ye was caught by the rebels and made to write a poem in honor of Zhu Ci. When Dezong returned to the capital, he ordered to beat Li Ye to death (Chen, 1984, p.3).

[21] Here we can clearly see the connection between the emperor as *a legislator*, who "authorized" the use of this image in poetry, and its use as *a law* in male poetry.

翠葉那堪染路塵). In the last line Yu Xuanji appealed directly to those who could not appreciate her talents stating that they would regret having rejected her (王孫方恨買無因).

- *Borrowing the Elements of Female Poetry as a Norm*

I consider the borrowing of three elements – the lines, rhymes and images – from female *shi* by male poets of later dynasties as the final stage of the legitimation process.

Chinese poets often borrowed lines from famous poems of the past and used them as an important element of their own poems. The main purpose of different borrowings was "the expectation that they would be recognized and that this recognition was part of reading or hearing a text" (Sargent, 2001, p.323). In this case, borrowing lines from female poets' *shi* can be regarded as a kind of appreciation of their poetic talent by high-ranking officials and literati.

In total, there are 129 cases [22] and the earliest ones can be traced back to the Tang dynasty: three poets Quan Jishi (全濟時, ?–805?), Yao He (姚合, 775?–855?), and Liu Yuxi (劉禹錫, 772–842) borrowed lines from Li Ye's poems. The largest number of borrowings (almost 70% of all) can be found in the poems of Qing officials and literati. The peculiar feature of borrowings during this period is that they mostly (almost 75%) belonged to Huang Zhijun (黃之雋, 1668–1748) who was famous for writing *jiju* (集句), poems composed wholly of the lines by other poets. Therefore, in his poems, Yu Xuanji's line is next to the lines of such outstanding and famous Tang male poets as Li Bai (李白), Du Fu (杜甫), Bai Juyi (白居易), Li Shangyin (李商隱), etc.

Another distinctive feature is that the lines from female poems were borrowed and then used not only in *shi*, but also in two other genres of poetry: *ci* (詞), poems composed to the different tunes, and *sanqu* (散曲), lyrics written to arias from drama [23]. These genres have a number of specific features to be taken into account, thus it could be much more difficult to incorporate the borrowed *shi* lines into *ci* or *sanqu.*

In contrast to the more widespread practice of borrowing lines there are only 23 cases of borrowing rhymes from female *shi* [24]. Moreover, only Li Ye's and Yu Xuanji's rhymes were borrowed by high-ranking officials and outstanding literati starting from 9th up to 20th century [25].

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[22] Only cases when a full poetic line from female *shi* was borrowed were taken into account.

[23] E.g. a line from Li Ye's *shi* is used in *ci* to the tune *Mo Mountain Creek* (*驀山溪*) composed by Liu Jufan (劉菊房, ?–?). Yan Jidao (晏幾道, 1030–1106) used a line from Liu Caichun's *shi* in his *ci* to the tune *Won the Battle* (*破陣子*). A line from Xue Tao's *shi* was borrowed by Wang Shifu (王實甫, 1260–1316) and used in the aria *Play with a Child* (*耍孩兒*) from *Romance of the Western Chamber* (*西廂記*). Ye Xianzu (葉憲祖, 1566–1641) used a line from Liu Caichun's *shi* in the aria *Tiger from Pan Mountain* (*番山虎*) from *Story of Luan hairpin* (*鸞鎞記*).

[24] Here I consider only *lüshi* as its strict rules of writing and the fixed number of rhymes (4 or 5) allow to trace their borrowing by the other poets.

[25] Rhymes from two Li Ye's *lüshi* were borrowed by seven male poets and among them were a famous chancellor Quan Deyu (權德輿, 759–818) and outstanding poet Liu Changqing (劉長卿, ?–?). Sixteen male poets borrowed rhymes from six Yu Xuanji's *lüshi*. Among them were such Buddhist monks as Wuke (無可, ?–?), Qiji (齊己, 863–937) and Shi Hanke (釋函可, 1611–1659), famous poets and literati as Sadullah (薩都剌,

In Chinese poetry, borrowing images from other poets was rather popular and widespread practice. However, it was precisely those poems where the poet managed to "endow such imagery with fresh force and significance so as to redeem it from its hackneyed state" (Liu, 1962, p.122) that were highly valued.

The most vivid illustration of such borrowing is the image of a parrot from Xue Tao's poem *The Parrot Separated from the Cage* (*鸚鵡離籠*) from the cycle *Ten Shi on Separation* (*十離詩*). The latter is usually seen as an example of "the courtesan's dependency, helplessness, and submissive social status and feelings" (Jia, 2014, p.120).

Image of the parrot as an allegorical description of the poet first appeared in *Fu on the Parrot* (*鸚鵡賦*) by Mi Heng (禰衡, 173–198) having an enormous impact on Han poetry. The poet broke with the tradition according to which the author of *fu* should have described "how lucky his bird was to belong to such a master" presenting instead of it "a long and very moving lament on the bird's misery in captivity" (Graham, 1979, p. 52). Therefore, in Chinese classical poetry the image of a caged parrot is traditionally considered as a symbol of "the gentleman of high ability whose gifts and talents lead to the loss of his freedom" (Idema & Haft, 1997, p.109). It also determines the corresponding interpretation, when the only dream of the caged parrot (i.e. poet) is "to be freed from his own captivity" (Graham, 1979, p. 50).

Xue Tao completely reinterpreted this image by introducing a new connotation: now the parrot is a symbol of a lonely woman imprisoned in a luxurious room like a caged bird [26]:

隴西獨自一孤身，*[Arriving from] Longxi [it was] all alone, a solitary one,*
飛去飛來上錦茵。*To and fro [it] flew, over the brocade cushion.*
都緣出語無方便，*Because [it] spoke [those] words,*
[something] inappropriate,
不得籠中再喚人。*[It] can never again [be] in a cage*
calling out for someone.

This poem stands out in the cycle. Firstly, its title has four characters while the titles of other nine poems have three characters, which immediately captures the reader's attention. Secondly, Xue Tao wrote it as "ancient style poetry" *gutishi* opposing it to the others written as "modern style poetry" *jintishi*. As mentioned above, writing *gutishi* the author had more freedom of expression being unbound by certain strict rules of versification. Thus, it can be assumed that having intentionally chosen *gutishi* instead of *jintishi* Xue Tao considered the strict rules of the latter as a kind of a "cage" for the poet limiting the freedom in expressing thoughts and feelings. Thirdly, the image of the parrot is ambivalent: it can be interpreted as a caged bird in the inner chamber to entertain a woman as well as a metaphor for a woman herself, who spends almost all her time there as in a cage.

1272?–1355) and Wu Weiye (吳偉業, 1609–1672), high-ranking officials as Yu Qian (虞謙, 1366–1427) and Li Minbiao (黎民表, 1515–1581), etc.

[26] Though the previous male poets often described a woman spending her idle hours in luxury inner chamber interpreting it as a physical and emotional prison (Birrel, 1982, p.19), the lyrical persona in their poems was a conventional image of a submissive woman waiting for her lover. The "embroidered cage" (繡櫳) appeared in "palace-style poetry" in 6th century and referred to "the luxurious boudoir that metaphorically imprisoned the lovelorn woman, who spent her days and nights there longing for her absent lover" (Laing, 1990, p.288).

At first sight, this *shi* demonstrates that the loss of a master's affection neither directly led to the death of the parrot nor caused it certain inconveniences. Having spent a long time in the cage like Mi Heng's parrot, "to be freed from his own captivity" was certainly the only dream. The bird should enjoy the first feelings of that long awaited freedom. But if we interpret this image as a metaphor for a woman, such kind of "freedom" might not bode well for her as she lost everything she got used to: the luxurious lifestyle, male protection and patronage. If we interpret a cage as a metaphor for strict *jintishi* rules, then unlike a parrot or a woman who received freedom as a punishment, being a poet, she is the very person who can make her own choice: to stay in cage (i.e. to write *jintishi*) or to choose freedom (i.e. to use the style she wants).

The image of a caged parrot as a metaphor for a woman imprisoned in the inner chamber was borrowed not only by Xue Tao's contemporaries, but also by successors [27]. The illustrative example is the aria *Field cricket* (*油葫蘆*) from the play *Prefect Qian wisely bestows favor upon Xie Tianxiang* (*錢大尹智寵謝天香*) written by the notable playwright and poet Guan Hanqing (關漢卿, 1234?–1300). The lyrical persona laments her life of a prostitute (歌妓) comparing herself with a caged parrot:

你道是金籠內鸚哥能念詩。*You say that in the golden cage*
a parrot can recite poems.
這便是咱家的好比似。 *It is exactly my case.*
原來越聰明越不得出籠時。*It turns out that the cleverer [you are],*
the harder to get out of the cage.

After Xue Tao passed away, the high-ranking official Li Deyu (李德裕, 787–850?) and the outstanding poet Liu Yuxi (劉禹錫, 772–842) wrote poems clearly influenced by her *shi* about a parrot. Though they both used the image of a peacock instead of a parrot, they mentioned Xue Tao's name in the titles of these poems thus making a parallel beween her and this kind of a bird: *Lament on [the Death of] a Peacock and Xue Tao* (*傷孔雀及薛濤*) and *Lament on [the Death of] a Peacock and Xue Tao: Response to [the Poem by] Minister Li of Xichuan* (*和西川李尚書傷孔雀及薛濤之什*). Borrowing Xue Tao's idea and thus appreciating her talent as a female poet, these outstanding representatives of the elite male-dominated world, nevertheless, did not change their attitude towards her as a courtesan: "even though Xue was talented and famous, they still viewed her as an object owned by them, just like the peacock" (Jia, 2014, p.120).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the legitimation process of female poetry in medieval Chinese literature in general and its canon represented by Li Ye, Xue Tao, Liu Caichun, and Yu Xuanji in particular. Given the close connection between poetry and power in medieval China, the key concept of the paper – legitimation – is defined as "the process by which a

[27]E.g., a poem *A Parrot* (*鸚鵡*) written by a renowned Tang poet Bai Juyi (白居易, 772–846) or *ci* to the tune *Sweet grass* (*甘草子*) by famous Song poet Liu Yong (柳永, 987–1053). In the Southern Song paintings "parrots could stand for either courtesans or, less specifically, for lonely women" (Blanchard, 2018, p.214).

legislator is authorized to promulgate such a law as a norm". According to such interpretation, *legislators* in the elite male-dominated literary world of medieval China are men (emperors, high-ranking officials, literati, etc.). A certain body of poetic texts produced by women (courtesans, entertainers, nuns, etc.) as well as the innovations they have (thematic diversity, masculine style, poetic devices, images, especially plant and flower ones, etc.) can be considered as *a law*. Finally, *a norm* is seen as a stage when this special practice of poetry writing becomes sufficiently widespread and its elements are borrowed by other poets.

Such operationalization allows to consider the legitimation process of female poetry during the Tang dynasty on three levels. The *first* or *macro level* is structural (political, social and cultural) conditions determining a great deal of opportunities for literary recognition of new actors in the structure of power relations in Chinese society. *The second* or *meso level* of poetry legitimation deals with gender balance of power during the Tang dynasty. The long-term consequences of An Lu-shan rebellion were the gradual decline of three main female social roles (daughter, wife, and mother), which turned out to be supplanted by courtesans and nuns in the public (poetic) space. It led to the exponential growth of female poetry, starting from 16 female poets during 2nd century BC – early 7th century AD up to 126 female poets during the Tang dynasty. The changes in the gender system of power created all the proper conditions for women of low social status to interact with men occupying high social positions. As a result, women could not only forge new roles for themselves, but also make their poetry be appreciated by the male-dominated literary world. As a result, a corpus of texts with its recognizable features was formed and it implies *the third* or *micro level* of the legitimation process. It deals with the specific poetic innovations allowing to talk about female poetry for the first time in the literary history of China. I have tried to distinguish these features after analizing 167 poems written by four greatest female poets: Li Ye (李冶, 732?–784), Xue Tao (薛濤, 768–832), Liu Caichun (劉采春, 9th century) and Yu Xuanji (魚玄機, 844–871). The intuition behind this attempt is that the outstanding female poets are more likely to embody the specific fetures of female poetry than hundreds of potentially mediocre female poets. By adopting masculine style of writing four female poets greatly expanded the scope of poetry with such themes as war, exile, chaos, Daoist spiritual practices and visits to temples, reflections on own destiny, etc. Another distinctive feature of their poetry is direct expression of thoughts and feelings experienced by a courtesan after meeting with a man. The final stage of the legitimation process is seen as appreciation of female poetry by male poets of later dynasties borrowing their lines, rhymes and images which became a female *shi* canon.

At the same time, new gender roles and identities paved the way for the brand new *ci* poetry and its legitimation during the Song dynasty (960–1279). The problem of the interaction between *shi* and *ci* during the Tang and Song dynasties as well as the comparison of the legitimation processes of two different genres require further research.

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