

An Interpretation of the Tragic Beauty in Xin Qiji's Lyrics from the Perspective of Patriotic Sentiment

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Abstract: Xin Qiji's poetry is a reflection of his life—his life is like his poetry, and his poetry is like his life. Xin Qiji's poetry is characterized by its vast imagery and dynamic momentum, often employing metaphors, allegories, and a wealth of allusions. He infused his patriotic sentiments, life experiences, and lofty ideals into his poetic creations, forming a unique artistic style. Xin Qiji's "Breaking the Array: A Heroic Ode Dedicated to Chen Tongfu" stands as a treasure of classical Chinese literature, renowned for its bold style, profound emotion, and distinctive artistic techniques. This paper analyzes the emotional trajectory, artistic techniques, and specific imagery within the ci to reveal an aesthetic shift from heroic fantasy to desolate reality. By comparing it with works by Lu You and Su Shi, it uncovers Xin's unique artistic paradigm of "using grandeur to accentuate sorrow," exploring its contribution to deepening the tragic-heroic aesthetics of classical poetry.

Keywords: Xin Qiji; Patriotic Sentiment; Aesthetic Shift; Tragic Grandeur

1. Introduction

Xin Qiji composed over six hundred poems and lyrics throughout his life, among which "Breaking the Array: A Heroic Ode for Chen Tongfu" stands as a masterpiece. This lyric is both majestic and desolate, revealing a thread of delicate depth amidst its stirring fervor. Through depicting battle scenes envisioned in a state between drunkenness and dreams, the author reveals his boundless aspirations and expresses the anguish of being unable to serve his country. This analysis examines the emotional trajectory, artistic techniques, and specific imagery of the poem to explore the tragic grandeur aesthetics in Xin Qiji's lyrics.

In drunken haze, I light the lamp to gaze upon my sword;

In dream's return, I hear the bugle call across the encampments.

Shared roasts from eight hundred li mark the commander's feast;

Fifty strings resound with frontier melodies; Autumn muster on the battlefield.

My steed gallops like the legendary Lu, My bow's string snaps like thunderclap.

To settle the sovereign's affairs under heaven, To win renown both in life and after death-

Alas, my white hair grows! [1].

Against the backdrop of the poem's grandeur, the poet's lofty ambitions turned into unfulfilled aspirations, a regret that lingers in the somber echoes of the verses. "The Song of the Breaking Array" builds up an intense, soaring passion for battle to its peak, only to halt abruptly in a sudden shift of momentum. It concludes with the poet's long sigh, bringing the piece to an end and vividly expressing the poet's intense anguish and sorrow [2].

2. The Sudden Emotional Shifts in Xin Qiji's Lyrics

2.1 The Construction of Heroic Passion through Drunken Dreams

First, the poet begins with "In drunken haze, I light the lamp to examine my sword," creating a contrast between dream and reality. Lighting the lamp suggests sleepless anxiety in the dead of night, while intoxication serves as a disguise to escape reality; The sword's gleam points toward distant battlefields, yet the body remains imprisoned within the confines of a small room. The warrior's instinct to caress his weapon ultimately devolves into an absurd ritual with no battlefield to pursue [3]. This contradiction delivers a more visually striking emotional impact than Lu You's direct expression in "A lone sword clangs by my bedside."

Secondly, the poet's subsequent emotional outpouring in the dream sequence surges with unrestrained intensity: "Eight hundred li" alludes to the roasting ox anecdote from Shi

Shuo Xin Yu, where soldiers sharing a meal in a rugged scene radiate an unshakable belief in victory; “Fifty strings” likens the zither to war drums, with frontier melodies carried on desert winds; the Lu horse tramples through smoke signals, thunderous strings shatter the sky. The lyricist forges scenes of autumn muster, battlefield archery, and fulfilling the sovereign's command into an epic of heroism. By the line “to win renown both in life and after death,” the emotional intensity reaches its peak—a deliberate build-up that sets the stage for the subsequent outpouring of feeling.

2.2 The Tragic Conclusion of “White Hair”

When the vision of ideals reaches its zenith, the poet's brushstrokes unleash “Alas, white hair has sprung forth” like a thunderous cascade from the heavens. Chen Tingzhuo, in Baiyu Zhai Ci Hua, comments that “this sudden plunge leaves lofty ambitions shattered,” [4] yet fails to fully capture the depth of its anguish. This fall is not a gradual descent but a precipitous plunge. Compared to Lu You's restrained conclusion in “Expressing Indignation”—“The Great Wall on the frontier remains a vain boast”—Xin Qiji's verse shatters like metal and stone, radiating acute pain. These five characters are not merely the lament of a poet whose ambitions went unfulfilled, but the collective, voiceless sorrow of the Southern Song Dynasty's pro-war faction. As the bold declaration “to settle the affairs of the world” still echoes in the air, the mirror reveals graying temples that announce all dreams have vanished into thin air. This creates a cruel irony of emotional contrast, revealing immense emotional tension [5].

3. Xin's Artistic Originality

3.1 Structural Innovation through Abrupt Conclusion

Traditional lyrics like Su Shi's “Nian Nu Jiao” maintain a gradual descent: the first stanza describes the Red Cliffs, the second laments Zhou Yu's achievements, with the lament “life is like a dream” still offering a buffer. Xin Qiji, however, shattered this structure, pioneering a unique concluding technique. On one hand, he created a dreamlike torrent that refuses to subside: “Autumn muster on the battlefield” should have concluded the first stanza, yet “horses gallop like the legendary Lu” immediately follows, binding scenes of muster,

archery, and valor into an inseparable flow—like surging lava—mimicking the chaos and rapid shifts of dreams. On the other hand, it abruptly severs reality where continuation would be expected: the final line stands alone, creating a numerical gap with the preceding nine lines. This is akin to a sudden break in the strings during an orchestra's ensemble, leaving only a jarring, hollow resonance—much like the abrupt ending in Bai Juyi's “Pipa Xing.”

The depiction of “a single note from the four-stringed zither shatters like torn silk [6]. This extraordinary structural shift subtly reveals the political reality of the pro-peace faction's dominance, which severed hopes for a northern campaign, while also expressing the author's deep concern for the nation's fate.

3.2 Tragic Beauty: Magnifying Sorrow through Heroism

If “winning fame both in life and after death” represents the poem's climax, then the final line's abrupt shift—“Alas, my hair has turned white”—plunges like a fall from dizzying heights into an abyss. It transforms heroic ambition into profound melancholy, subtly evoking the desolate resonance of “beauty fading, heroes at their end.” Whether victorious or defeated on the battlefield, black hair has long turned to frost; or though the general harbors grand ambitions to gallop across the frontier and pacify the realm, alas, his temples are streaked with gray, leaving only unfulfilled aspirations. This sigh resonates with the subtlety of evening drums and morning bells, reverberating through the echoes of history. In his youth, the poet joined the resistance against the Jin invaders. After returning to the Song court, he repeatedly presented plans for national restoration. Though favored by the emperor, he never achieved his ambitions. Though repeatedly appointed by the Southern Song court, his loyalty was perpetually questioned. When Han Tuo Zhou's northern expedition ended in defeat, the dream of reconquest shattered completely. The poet could only spend his remaining years in rural seclusion, watching time turn his temples white. This line expresses not only lamentation over personal circumstances but also an indictment of the era's predicament: the privileged occupied high positions yet remained incompetent and idle, while talented individuals found no avenue to serve their country, growing only more

despondent as time slipped away [7]. The poet's anguish stems not only from his own plight, but also from that of his peers and the common people.

If the opening nine lines of “Drunk, I light the lamp to examine my sword” are all bold and unconstrained, then the abrupt shift to the concluding words ‘Alas’ represents a rare stylistic device in the realm of ci poetry [8]. Throughout the entire poem, Xin Qiji meticulously constructs a narrative rhythm of dramatic ups and downs: opening with “In drunken reverie,” it conceals turbulence within stillness; then unfolds the grand scenes of mustering troops, preparing for battle, and fierce combat, advancing layer by layer like crashing waves; Finally, it abruptly ends with “Alas, my hair has turned white,” injecting profound sorrow into the majestic tableau. This interweaving of fervor and lamentation unleashes a power that shakes the soul.

3.3 The Interplay of Concrete and Abstract Imagery

“Autumn muster on the battlefield” serves as the concluding stroke of the first stanza, freezing the grand spectacle of a thousand troops arrayed with majestic grandeur while simultaneously building momentum for the battle depiction in the second stanza. The following lines—“horses gallop like the legendary Lu, bows snap like thunderclaps”—sketch the scene of fierce combat with taut brushstrokes: Brave warriors spur their steeds, whips crackling—horses gallop like the legendary Lu from the Records of the Three Kingdoms. The trembling bows emit thunderous snares, echoing the claps of thunder described in the History of the Southern Dynasties when Cao Jingzong drew his bow, pushing the battlefield's grim intensity and heroic grandeur to their zenith. The poet skillfully employs historical allusions, imbuing the warhorses with mythical grandeur while amplifying the battle's thunderous impact through bowstrings that crack like thunder. This creates a scene saturated with dual sensory assault—both visual and auditory.

Though the lyrics depict a fictional battlefield scene, the palpable authenticity that permeates every line is deeply moving. This authenticity stems from Xin Qiji's rich military career: he personally led elite troops in night raids on Jin camps, capturing traitorous generals; he commanded battles during years of constant

warfare, gaining firsthand understanding of the battlefield's brutality and grandeur. When he took up his brush, those memories of flashing swords and whirling spears flashed back like scenes from a movie, crystallizing into the symbolic imagery of “horses galloping like thunder” and “bows trembling like thunder.” This artistic approach avoids tedious battle details while precisely capturing the battlefield's fleeting essence through two core images: the speed of horses and the tension of bowstrings. Within the ephemeral window of opportunity lie life-and-death decisions; the moment the bowstring tightens determines survival or demise [9].

The poet deliberately avoids panoramic depictions of the battle's progression, instead focusing on the most explosive moments. This art of leaving space paradoxically heightens the tension of the scene. Readers can almost hear the thunderous crash of hooves shattering yellow sand, see the cold gleam of arrows slicing through the air, and feel the battlefield's unique, piercing chill penetrate their very souls. Beneath the stirring, impassioned surface lies a profound recognition of war's essence: behind the seemingly majestic slaughter, countless lives vanish in blood and fire. This interplay of reality and abstraction not only showcases the soldiers' heroic spirit but also subtly reveals the brutal truth of war. The entire poem thus radiates a cold sharpness within its grandeur, and a profound compassion within its vastness.

4. Aesthetic Dialogue among Poets

First, Xin Qiji's lyrics resonate with and transform Lu You's patriotic poetry. Lu You similarly constructs the “iron horses and frozen rivers” dreamscape in “On the Fourth Day of the Eleventh Month, the Wind and Rain Rage,” yet his opening line—“Lying stiff in a lonely village”—already sets a tragic tone. Xin's verse, however, is like first pouring fiery liquor before feeding bitter gall—the soaring intensity of the first nine lines makes the final line's plunge all the more devastating. The two are like twin blades of a sword: Fangweng's poetry shatters like a blue-steel blade snapping inch by inch, while Jiaxuan's verse cracks like black iron suddenly splitting [10].

Second, Xin's verse contains a breakthrough from Su Shi's bold and unconstrained poetic realm. Su Shi's heroic spirit, embodied in lines like “I'll draw my bow like a full moon,”

unfolds within the bounds of reality. Xin Qiji, however, consigns such bold declarations entirely to the realm of dreams. When Dongpo sighed, “Life is but a dream,” there remained a sense of detachment; when Jiaxuan faced “white hair sprouting,” only suffocating disillusionment remained. This technique—of utterly aestheticizing ideals only to shatter them abruptly—elevates the aesthetics of tragedy to unprecedented intensity.

Moreover, Xin's lyrics represent an evolution of the poetic spirits of Qu Yuan and Li He. Tracing back to the Chu Sao tradition, Qu Yuan's anxiety—“old age creeps upon me, yet I fear my noble name remains unestablished”—is transformed in Xin's work into the concrete image of gray temples reflected in a mirror. Li He's eerily beautiful vision—“Autumn graves echo with ghostly chants of Bao's verse”—is reimagined here as the collective memory of a blood-soaked battlefield. The five-character final line creates a temporal-spatial rupture, inheriting and innovating upon the poetic spirits of Qu and Li. The instantaneous transition from youthful ardor to twilight desolation constitutes a millennia-spanning echo of “Only the withering of grass and trees, I fear the beauty's fading years.” [11].

5. The Contemporary Significance of Xin's Tragic-Heroic Aesthetics

The tragic-heroic aesthetics in Xin Qiji's lyrics, interweaving the grandeur of “golden spears and iron horses” with the poignancy of “alas, white hair,” offers spiritual enlightenment to contemporary readers. Its relevance lies in the spirit of resistance amid adversity, the contemporary transformation of patriotic sentiment, and the timelessness of artistic expression.

First, it manifests in the spirit of resistance amid adversity. The tragic grandeur depicted in Xin's lyrics—where “ambitions remain unfulfilled yet resolve remains unshaken”—inspires modern individuals to maintain resilience in adversity. The persistent resolve expressed in “Pò Zhèn Zì” (“To accomplish the sovereign's grand designs”) mirrors an attitude of never abandoning ideals. Second is the contemporary transformation of patriotic sentiment. The profound love for country in the lyrics evolves into today's sense of social responsibility, reminding individuals to uphold their values amidst the currents of the times. The tragic beauty of Xin Qiji's lyrics also

lies in the timelessness of their artistic expression. Their aesthetic quality—a blend of grandeur and melancholy, as seen in “Mó Yú Er” (“Once, a beauty's brows were the object of envy”)—provides a paradigm for modern artistic creation: settling reflection within fervor, conveying strength through sorrow, and making literature a spiritual bond that transcends time and space.

Xin Qiji's poetry is a reflection of his life—his life is like his poetry, and his poetry is like his life. He wrote with heroic and solemn tones, expressing his yearning to serve the country by fighting enemies. When discussing Xin Qiji, no one can forget the passionate spirit of defending the nation and reclaiming the Central Plains, as depicted in his lines: “Drunk, I lit the lamp to see my glaive; / When I awoke, / I heard the horns throughout the camp blown. / Under the flags, beef grilled / Was eaten by our warriors brave / And martial airs were played by fifty lyres: / 'Twas an autumn maneuver for our troops.” His words never fail to stir our hearts. Xin Qiji's poetry is characterized by its vast imagery and dynamic momentum, often employing metaphors, allegories, and a wealth of allusions. He infused his patriotic sentiments, life experiences, and lofty ideals into his poetic creations, forming a unique artistic style [12].

6. Conclusion

This poem evokes the formidable array of the troops fighting against the Jin in earlier years and the poet's own battlefield experiences, expressing the ideal of defeating the enemy, serving the nation, and reclaiming lost territories. It conveys the poet's sorrow and indignation over unfulfilled aspirations and the twilight of a hero's life. By creating a majestic and extraordinary atmosphere, the poem vividly portrays the image of a general who is utterly loyal, true-hearted, and presses forward with indomitable courage.

Eight centuries later, rereading “Breaking the Array,” the blue-steel sword once studied by lamplight has long rusted away. Yet the wrenching cry of “alas, white hair has sprung” still tears at humanity's eternal spiritual dilemma: When fervent ideals collide with the cold dome of reality, shall one weave heroic epics in drunken dreams, or confront the frost of autumn in the mirror's light? Xin Qiji offers his lyrics as sacrifice, transforming this unsolvable riddle into a tragic-heroic star in the firmament of

aesthetics [13]. The entire poem weaves illusion and reality, dreamlike and ethereal; though its scenes are largely imagined, its emotions shake heaven and earth. "Breaking the Array" inherits the bold, unrestrained style characteristic of Jiaxuan's lyrics while infusing its grand, sweeping grandeur with a touch of desolate melancholy and unresolved grief. Its delicate moments are profoundly moving, while its intense passages echo with the clamor of battle. Within a single lyric, it achieves such unfathomable transformation, revealing an author whose breadth of vision and spirit far surpasses that of ordinary mortals. Each time I savor "Breaking the Formation," it feels as though I'm personally battling on the battlefield, as though I'm hearing the lamentations from beyond the frontier with my own ears. My heart fills with sorrow, and I cannot contain it.

Acknowledgments

Funding Project: Research outcome of the 2025 Jiangxi Province Shangrao City Economic and Social Development and Philosophy and Social Sciences Planning Project (Project No.: 25YB62).

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