

## THE EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL ECOLOGY AND THE SHIFT OF LITERARY SPIRIT: A STUDY ON THE RECONSTRUCTION OF LITERATI MENTALITY FROM YUAN HAOWEN TO ZHANG KEJIU

RUINING LI<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup> Faculty of humanities, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, 999077, China.  
Corespondent Email: [25061189g@connect.polyu.hk](mailto:25061189g@connect.polyu.hk)

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**Abstract:** The Song-Yuan dynastic transition represents a crucial turning point in Chinese literary history, a historical process that not only reshaped the political landscape but also triggered profound transformations in the spiritual world of literati. This study takes Yuan Haowen and Zhang Kejiu as core subjects of investigation, employs a political ecological perspective, and constructs an analytical framework of "political ecology - literati mentality - literary expression" to explore the internal mechanisms of literary spiritual transformation during the Song-Yuan period. The research reveals that from the Northern Song's civil governance tradition to the Jin Dynasty's ethnic integration, and then to the Yuan Dynasty's multi-ethnic governance, each political transformation left profound imprints on literati mentality. Yuan Haowen represents the transition from active engagement to literary salvation, with his "poetry of chaos and loss" embodying profound historical grief and strong cultural mission; Zhang Kejiu represents the spiritual shift from traditional Confucian ideals to individual aesthetic experience, with his sanqu creation revealing the cultural connotations of the "elegant and refined" style. By constructing a bidirectional "push-pull" analytical model, this study reveals the process of spiritual transformation in Song-Yuan literature from "practical statecraft" to "aesthetic self-sufficiency." This transformation not only reflects the passive adaptation of literati groups to political pressure but also embodies their conscious awakening of subjective consciousness. The research conclusions hold significant academic value for understanding the developmental patterns of ancient Chinese literature and grasping the complex relationship between literature and politics, while providing historical insights for contemporary literary development during periods of social transformation.

**Keywords:** Song-Yuan dynastic transition; Political ecology; Spiritual transformation; Yuan Haowen; Zhang Kejiu; Literati mentality; Literary salvation; Aesthetic self-sufficiency.

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### INTRODUCTION: ISSUES IN LITERARY HISTORY DURING THE SONG-YUAN DYNASTY TRANSITION

The transition from the Song Dynasty to the Yuan Dynasty marked a profound civilizational transformation in Chinese history. This historical process not only reshaped the political landscape and social structure but also triggered unprecedented upheavals and reconstructions in the spiritual world of literati. Kang Zhen (2024) points out that, guided by the "second

combination" approach, large-scale, systematic literature compilation and theoretical interpretation have achieved remarkable results. The knowledge spectrum and theoretical system of ancient literary research have been continuously refined, and the construction of an independent knowledge system for ancient literary research has embarked on an innovative path of disciplinary, academic, and modern development. Reexamining the internal transformation mechanisms of Song and Yuan literature within the context of this emerging research paradigm not only has important academic value but also provides a unique perspective for understanding the historical evolution of Chinese civilization.

## **PROBLEM RAISING AND RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE**

Traditional literary historiography tends to examine Song and Yuan literature from the perspective of genre evolution or the alternation of schools of thought. However, this approach often overlooks the profound impact of shifting political spheres on the mindsets of literati. Yuan Haowen and Zhang Kejiu, the former a literary leader between the Jin and Yuan dynasties and the latter a master of sanqu (literary verse) in the mid-to-late Yuan dynasty, witnessed the complete trajectory of the shift in the literary spirit during the Song and Yuan dynasties through their creative journeys. Yu Dongxin and Zhang Wenzhu (2023) point out that since the 1980s, with the expansion of academic perspectives, changes in research methods, and updates in perspectives, academic research on Yuan Haowen has achieved significant success. This is particularly true in the areas of Yuan's poetic art and poetic theory, surpassing previous studies in both the number of findings and the depth of research, laying a solid foundation for future research on Yuan Haowen and Jin and Yuan literature. Despite this, existing research often takes an internal perspective from literary history, lacking a systematic examination from the perspective of political ecology.

Political ecology, as a complex concept, encompasses multiple dimensions, including power structures, institutional arrangements, and cultural atmosphere. During the succession of the Song, Jin, and Yuan dynasties, literati faced not only a shift in dynasties but also a reconstruction of their entire value system. From the Northern Song dynasty's tradition of civil governance to the Jin dynasty's ethnic integration, and finally to the Yuan dynasty's pluralistic rule, each political transition left a profound mark on the literati's mindset. This shift in mentality ultimately manifested itself in fundamental shifts in the subject matter, emotional tone, and expressive techniques of literary creation.

This study attempts to construct an analytical framework of "political ecology—literati mentality—literary expression," providing new theoretical tools for understanding the relationship between ancient literature and politics. By utilizing interdisciplinary approaches such as political ecology and psychohistory, this research path is expected to promote the modernization of ancient literary research. Guo Changbao (2024) argues that the concept, system, and practice of "foundational studies" in ancient China already existed. Only by drawing on national cultural traditions and drawing on Western classical studies to form a unique knowledge system and discourse system can China establish its own classical discipline and shoulder the new mission of inheriting and innovating traditional culture. On this basis, by examining the mental reconstruction process of two representative literati, Yuan Haowen and

Zhang Kejiu, this study seeks to reveal the underlying mechanisms of the spiritual shift in Song and Yuan literature, providing historical references for the development of contemporary literary creation during a period of social transformation.

## RESEARCH STATUS AND PROBLEMS

Current academic research on Yuan Haowen and Zhang Kejiu each has its own distinct characteristics, but there are still issues worthy of further exploration. Regarding Yuan Haowen, scholars primarily focus on his poetic artistic characteristics, his contributions to history, and his cultural salvation activities. Hu Chuanzhi (2024) explored in depth the relationship between Yuan Haowen and the History of Jin, noting that while Yuan Haowen did not directly participate in the compilation of the book, he made unique contributions to it, and his stele inscriptions provided important historical source material for the book. Cheng Qianfan (1991) was an early observer of Yuan Haowen's important position in the history of Jin Dynasty literature, emphasizing that his poetry was not only literary but also epic, and that his literary achievements were inseparable from his profound historical foundation.

Scholars studying Zhang Kejiu have often approached the art of sanqu (literary verse), emphasizing his crucial role in the refinement of Yuan opera. Lü Weifen (2023) conducted a detailed examination of Zhang Kejiu's life and works in her Annotated Collection of Zhang Kejiu, laying a solid foundation for subsequent research. In his Taihe Zhengyinpu (Collection of Poems), Zhu Quan of the Ming Dynasty called Zhang Kejiu the "master of ci poetry," observing that "his ci is clear and elegant, yet not gaudy." This assessment remains of significant value today.

However, existing research suffers from three deficiencies. The first is a limited perspective: most studies remain confined to the analysis of literary history, failing to adequately address the profound impact of shifting political environments on the mindsets of literati. The second is a lack of depth in comparative research: Yuan Haowen and Zhang Kejiu represent literati from different periods, yet a systematic comparative analysis of their spiritual heritage is lacking. The third is a relatively weak theoretical framework: existing research primarily focuses on case studies, lacking attempts to construct explanatory models at a macro level.

## RESEARCH METHODS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs a combination of documentary analysis, comparative research, and interdisciplinary analysis. In the documentary analysis, we draw on Yuan Haowen's "Yishan Collection," Zhang Kejiu's complete collection of sanqu (literary works), and related historical documents. Through close reading of the texts, we explore the political attitudes and psychological states reflected in these works. In the comparative analysis, we place Yuan Haowen and Zhang Kejiu within the same historical context for a comparative analysis, exploring their different coping strategies in the face of political pressure and their literary expressions. In the interdisciplinary analysis, we draw on theoretical findings from political

science, sociology, psychology, and other disciplines to construct a multidimensional analytical framework.

In terms of theoretical framework, this study constructs a two-way "push-resistance" analytical model. "Push" refers to the positive factors that motivate literati to engage in literary creation, including personal ambition, a sense of cultural mission, and support from peers; "resistance" refers to the negative factors that hinder literati from realizing their ideals, including political oppression, value conflicts, and survival pressures. Within the unique historical context of the Song-Yuan transition, the interplay of "push" and "resistance" determined the evolving trajectory of literati's mentality, thereby influencing the thematic orientation and artistic style of their literary creations.

Table 1 : The "thrust-resistance" analysis model of the spiritual shift in Song and Yuan literature

Historical period	Push factors	Resistance factors	Literati mentality	Literary Expression
Northern Song Dynasty	A tradition of civil governance, the development of the imperial examination system, the rise of Neo-Confucianism, and numerous opportunities for political participation	Military pressure and fierce party struggles	Active involvement and idealism	Political concern, responsibility, and diverse styles
Jin Dynasty	National integration, cultural openness, and individual talent	Regime instability, ethnic conflicts, and identity crisis	Complex contradictions and a sense of crisis	Epic creation, cultural heritage, melancholy and tragic
Yuan Dynasty	Literary tradition, personal cultivation, and aesthetic pursuit	Ethnic discrimination, political marginalization, and value reconstruction	Inward transformation and aesthetic self-sufficiency	Personal emotions, natural landscapes, and elegance

Liu Shi (2024) proposed that with the rapid development of big data technologies such as computer deep learning, text mining, and artificial intelligence, while ancient texts continue to be digitized, they should also begin to transform into knowledge-based texts, forming a systematic "Chinese Classical Knowledge Project" to better develop Eastern classical studies. This perspective inspires us to use modern technology to conduct more precise quantitative analysis of texts to support the conclusions of qualitative research.

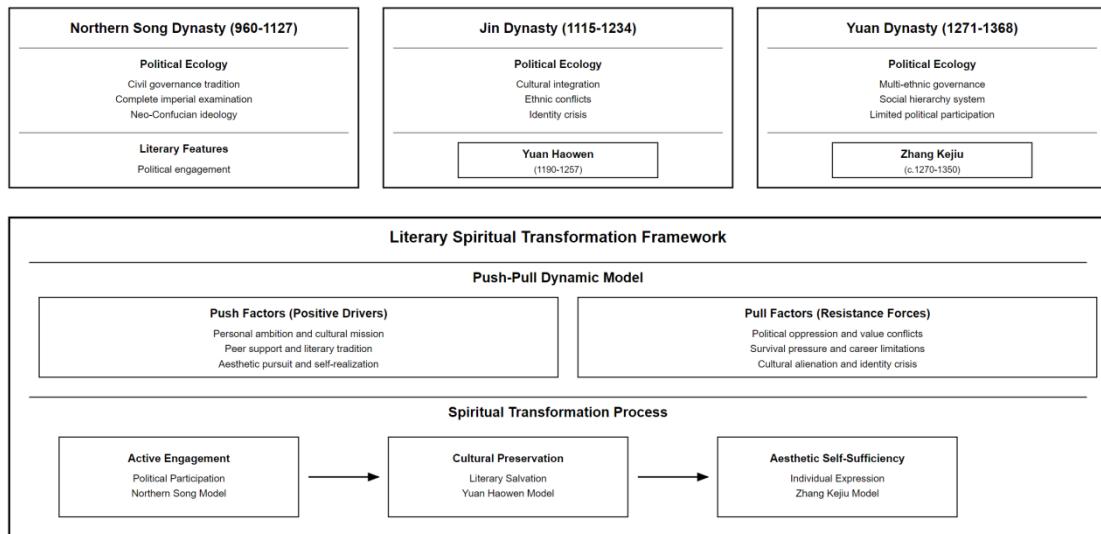


Figure 1 Conceptual framework of political ecological evolution and literary spiritual shift

## POLITICAL ECOLOGICAL CHANGES: HISTORICAL CONTEXT FROM SONG TO YUAN

The transition from the Song Dynasty to the Yuan Dynasty marked a major turning point in ancient Chinese political history. This historical process signified not only the change of dynasties but also fundamental transformations in political institutions, cultural philosophies, and social structures. Understanding the shifting political ecology of this period constitutes a crucial prerequisite for analyzing the reconstruction of the literati's mindset.

### The Establishment and Influence of the Northern Song Dynasty's Cultural Tradition

Since the founding of the Northern Song Dynasty, its rulers, drawing lessons from the fragmentation of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, have established a fundamental principle of governing the country through culture. The historical allusion of Emperor Taizu of Song "releasing military power with a cup of wine" symbolically illustrates the Song Dynasty's political orientation of suppressing military power and promoting culture. This political choice had far-reaching historical consequences, not only shaping the Song Dynasty's unique political culture but also providing unprecedented space for the development of the literati community.

The improvement of the Song Dynasty's imperial examination system provided institutional guarantees for literati to participate in politics. Compared with previous dynasties, the Song Dynasty's imperial examination placed greater emphasis on literary talent, with poetry and prose becoming important examination subjects. This institutional arrangement not only elevated the political status of literati but also strengthened the inherent connection between literature and politics. As Yu Yunguo (2023) observed, the deterioration of the political ecology in the Southern Song Dynasty was due to the bottleneck of the imperial examination system. Therefore, even after taking the imperial examination, some literati who still maintained their integrity wanted to formally enter politics and realize their ideals. However, the political environment did not allow it, and there were few official vacancies. As a result, their Neo-

Confucian ideals and enthusiasm for governing the country and pacifying the world were not completely extinguished.

The rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty provided new spiritual support for the literati community. The ideals advocated by Neo-Confucianists, "to establish a mind for Heaven and Earth, to establish a destiny for the people, to carry on the lost teachings of the sages, and to bring peace to the world for all eternity," inspired a strong sense of mission and responsibility among the literati. This pursuit of values was not only reflected in political practice but also profoundly influenced the themes of literary creation.

However, the Song Dynasty's tradition of civil governance also contained inherent contradictions. On the one hand, the elevated status of literati fostered cultural prosperity and development; on the other, overreliance on civil governance led to a relative weakening of military power, laying the groundwork for subsequent regime crises. This contradiction was particularly pronounced during the Southern Song Dynasty, where the conflict between the military pressure of the southward advance of the Jin army and the ideals of civil governance became a significant factor influencing the mentality of literati.

### **Cultural Integration and Conflict under the Jin Dynasty**

The establishment of the Jin Dynasty disrupted the relatively stable political landscape of the Song Dynasty. As a minority regime, the Jurchens needed to draw on Han Chinese political and cultural traditions while maintaining their own unique characteristics in their rule over Han Chinese areas. This complex political imperative created a unique cultural ecology.

The Jin Dynasty rulers adopted a relatively open attitude toward Han culture. During the reign of Emperor Shizong of Jin, they vigorously promoted the study and dissemination of Han classics, even personally participating in literary activities. This policy provided space for Han literati to develop and promoted the exchange and integration of ethnic cultures. Yuan Haowen's upbringing precisely reflects this historical context: he inherited Han literary traditions while also seeking his own fulfillment within the political environment of the Jin Dynasty.

It's worth noting that ethnic conflict was a constant variable in the Jin Dynasty's political landscape. The identity struggles faced by Han Chinese intellectuals under the Jin regime became a crucial factor influencing their mental state. They faced the emotional trauma of national demise while simultaneously seeking ways to survive and thrive in the new political environment. This complex psychological state is profoundly reflected in Yuan Haowen's "Mourning and Chaos Poems."

The unique nature of the Jin Dynasty's political system also had a significant impact on the literati community. Compared to the Song Dynasty, the Jin Dynasty had relatively limited channels for political participation. While the imperial examination system existed, its influence was far less pronounced than in the Song Dynasty. This institutional difference forced literati to rethink their values and life choices. The traditional path of "study hard and become an official" was no longer the only option.

## **The Mongol Yuan Dynasty's Pluralistic Rule Strategy**

The Yuan Dynasty, established by the Mongols, represented a radically new political model in Chinese history. As a conquering dynasty, its rulers faced the immense challenge of integrating diverse ethnic groups and cultural traditions. In this process, they adopted a relatively flexible strategy of pluralistic rule, which had a particularly profound impact on the literati community.

The Yuan Dynasty's ethnic hierarchy divided the population into four classes: Mongols, Semites, Han Chinese, and Southerners. Han Chinese literati primarily belonged to the latter two classes. This institutional arrangement not only affected the political status of literati but also profoundly impacted their psychological well-being. Compared to the Song and Jin dynasties, Yuan Dynasty literati faced a more severe identity crisis, and their traditional cultural superiority felt unprecedented challenges.

The Yuan dynasty's attitude toward traditional culture was complex. On the one hand, to maintain the legitimacy of their rule, Yuan rulers needed to draw on the political and cultural traditions of the Han Chinese. On the other hand, due to ethnic political considerations, they maintained a certain degree of vigilance toward Han culture. This conflicting attitude contributed to the instability of Yuan cultural policy and increased uncertainty among the literati community.

Changes to the imperial examination system during the Yuan Dynasty had a profound impact on the literati community. In the early years of the Yuan Dynasty, the examination system was abolished for a time, not restored until the reign of Emperor Renzong. Even after its restoration, its social influence was far less than that of the Song Dynasty. This shift forced literati to re-evaluate traditional life paths and seek new ways to realize their values. It was against this backdrop that folk literature forms such as sanqu (literary arias) flourished. The creative practices of Zhang Kejiu and others exemplify this historical trend.

## **The Literary Significance of Political Ecological Changes**

The shift in political ecology from the Song Dynasty to the Yuan Dynasty not only altered the living environment of the literati community but also profoundly influenced the historical trajectory of literary development. This influence is primarily manifested in several key aspects. The most significant shift in the function of literature was its importance. Song Dynasty literature carried a strong political purpose, with literati expressing political ideals and participating in political discussions through their literary creations. However, during the Yuan Dynasty, as opportunities for literati's political participation declined, the aesthetic function of literature gradually became more prominent, with entertainment and lyricism becoming the primary characteristics of literary creation.

Equally striking is the shift in literary subject matter. Song Dynasty literature focused primarily on national affairs and social issues, reflecting the political concerns and social responsibility of scholars. Yuan Dynasty literature, on the other hand, shifted more towards more personal themes, such as personal emotions, natural landscapes, and daily life, reflecting the inward-looking mentality of scholars.

The evolution of literary style should also be considered. Song Dynasty literature exhibited diverse styles, but overall embodied an uplifting spirit. Yuan Dynasty literature, on the other hand, exhibited a relatively restrained and subtle character. The elegant style of Zhang Kejiu's *sanqu* (literary verse) perfectly reflects this shift.

The changes in the way literature is disseminated are also noteworthy. Song Dynasty literature was primarily disseminated through official channels, with a strong elitist character. Yuan Dynasty literature, on the other hand, relied more heavily on folk dissemination. The rise of popular literary forms such as *sanqu* (literary songs) and operas reflects a trend toward the democratization of literary dissemination.

Han Jingtai (2024) argues that the construction of an independent knowledge system for Chinese literature that embodies the principles of autonomy and originality urgently requires a conscious awareness of practical theory. This awareness requires a continuous deepening and expansion of problem awareness. From this perspective, the changes in the political ecology of the Song and Yuan dynasties are not only historical phenomena but also an important entry point for understanding the laws governing the development of Chinese literature.

Table 2: Comparative table of the impact of political system changes in the Song and Yuan dynasties on the literati group

dynasty	Political system characteristics	Political status of literati	Imperial Examination System	literary function	Literary themes	Literary style
Northern Song Dynasty	Literary tradition, emphasizing culture over martial arts	Higher status and more opportunities to participate in politics	Perfection, emphasis on literary talent	Strong political function, carrying out the doctrine and making clear the aspirations	Pay attention to national affairs and social issues	Upbeat and diverse
Jin Dynasty	National integration and Sinicization policy	Limited status and identity crisis	Existing but declining influence	Outstanding historical value	Themes of mourning and chaos, historical reflection	Gloomy and tragic, epic characteristics
Yuan Dynasty	Pluralistic rule, ethnic hierarchy	Declining status and limited channels for political participation	It was abolished for a time, then restored but with little impact	Aesthetic function highlights	Personal emotions, landscape and nature	Introverted, reserved, elegant and graceful

Through in-depth analysis of this historical process, we can better grasp the complex relationship between literature and politics, and literature and society, and provide useful inspiration for building an independent knowledge system for Chinese literary research.

## **YUAN HAOWEN'S HISTORICAL WITNESS AND LITERARY TURN**

Yuan Haowen, a leading figure in the literary world during the Jin and Yuan dynasties, bore the profound imprint of the changing times in his life and literary creations. He was not only an exceptional writer but also a witness and recorder of history. His "Mourning and Chaos Poems" possess not only significant literary value but also provide valuable historical material for understanding the changing mentality of literati during the transition from the Jin to the Yuan dynasties.

### **From "Child Prodigy" to "Lost Mountain": Life Trajectory and Mentality Evolution**

Yuan Haowen's life trajectory exhibits distinct phases, closely related to his changing mindset. In his early years, he truly lived up to the title of "child prodigy." He could compose poetry at the age of seven, studied under Hao Tianting for six years at the age of fourteen, and by the age of twenty, he was already "famous in the capital." During this period, Yuan Haowen was imbued with the idealism of youth and held a strong hope for the imperial examination and officialdom.

However, repeated failures in the imperial examinations gradually eroded his resolve. From the age of sixteen, he began taking the exams, but only achieved the title of Jinshi (Jinshi) at the age of thirty-one (1221), a fifteen-year search for officialdom. Hu Chuanzhi (2021) notes that Yuan Haowen initially had little interest in writing history. In 1224, when he joined the National History Institute as a temporary editor, he was hesitant and lacked enthusiasm for participating in the compilation of the "Xuanzong Shilu," as it involved evaluating numerous contemporary figures and events, which could easily lead to controversy and conflict.

This shift in mentality is clearly reflected in his works. Early works like "Jishan" and "Qintai" reflect the hardships he encountered during his travels, yet they remain vibrant and reveal grand ambitions. After turning 28, his career struggled, as if awakening from the dream of officialdom. Poems from this period, such as "A single inch of fame has disheartened me, a decade's long journey returns in dreams" (from "To the Members of Cui Leishe") and "My scholarship is unjustly at odds with the times, like a blind man lost in despair" (from "After the Snow, I Invite My Neighbor Wang Zanzi for a Drink"), reveal his disillusionment with fame and fortune.

The act of calling himself "Yishan" itself carries profound symbolic significance. "Yishan" refers not only to the Yishan Mountain in Dingxiang where he studied, but also to his self-awareness of being "abandoned" by the times. This shift in identity marks Yuan Haowen's shift from active involvement in the world to a relatively detached mindset.

## The Historical Value and Literary Significance of "Mourning and Chaos Poems"

Yuan Haowen's "Mourning and Chaos Poems" are an important part of his literary creation and a crucial source of historical material for understanding the social realities of the Jin-Yuan period. These works possess not only literary value but also significant historical significance.

In the second year of the Zhenyou reign (1214), the Mongol army captured Xiurong City, and Yuan Haowen's elder brother, Yuan Haogu, was brutally murdered. The 25-year-old Yuan Haowen sought refuge in the northern mountains of Yangqu, a neighboring county. This traumatic experience profoundly influenced his understanding of war and his thinking about history. In his "Renjin Miscellaneous Records," he recorded extensive personal experiences of the late Jin Dynasty's wars. These writings serve not only as fodder for literary creation but also as valuable historical material.

Cheng Qianfan (1991) was among the first to note the epic nature of Yuan Haowen's poetry, emphasizing that his literary achievements were inseparable from his profound historical scholarship. Yuan Haowen's "mourning and chaos poems" often organically combine personal emotion with historical narrative, possessing both literary appeal and historical authenticity. For example, "Three Poems on Qiyang," through its description of the Battle of Qiyang, depicts the historical scene of the Jin army's defeat while simultaneously expressing the poet's deep sorrow for the destruction of his country and his family.

This unique blend of history and literature gives Yuan Haowen's works a value beyond pure literature. He was not only creating poetry but also writing history, leaving behind a true record of this important historical period, the transition from the Jin Dynasty to the Yuan Dynasty.

## Literary Salvation Activities and Their Contemporary Significance

After the fall of the Jin Dynasty, Yuan Haowen faced a profound spiritual crisis. In his book "Another Kind of Scholar: North China Society and the Imperial Examination System During the Jin and Yuan Dynasties," Iiyama Chiho (2021) examines the imperial examination system in North China during the Jin and Yuan dynasties, noting that North China under Jin and Yuan rule and southern China under the Southern Song dynasty experienced completely different historical processes in terms of the imperial examination system. This shift in the institutional environment deprived Jin Dynasty scholars like Yuan Haowen of their traditional means of realizing their values.

Faced with this dilemma, Yuan Haowen chose a unique path: saving the nation through literature. Instead of devoting his primary energy to political activities, he devoted himself to preserving and organizing literary texts. The compilation of the Zhongzhou Anthology exemplifies this effort. The Zhongzhou Anthology includes works by over 120 Jin Dynasty poets, preserving a valuable literary legacy for future generations.

This literary act of national salvation has profound historical significance. Yuan Haowen recognized that, in the face of political irreversibility, cultural heritage became a crucial means of preserving the national spirit. In his "Preface to the Zhongzhou Collection,"

he wrote: "The nation may perish, but history cannot be destroyed." This historical awareness reflects a scholar's sense of cultural responsibility at a time of national ruin and family ruin.

Yuan Haowen's literary salvation efforts were also reflected in his cultivation of later generations. According to historical records, Bai Pu, known as one of the "Four Great Masters of Yuan Opera," grew up under Yuan Haowen's care and guidance. By nurturing his students, Yuan Haowen ensured the continuation of literary traditions and laid the foundation for the development of Yuan Dynasty literature.

### **Adjustments To Creative Strategies Under Political Pressure**

Yuan Haowen adopted different creative strategies in different historical periods, adjustments that reflected his sensitivity to political pressure. During the Jin Dynasty, his writing enjoyed relative freedom, allowing him to directly express his concerns and criticisms of current affairs. After the establishment of the Yuan Dynasty, the political environment underwent fundamental changes, and Yuan Haowen's creative strategies adapted accordingly.

Under Mongol rule, Yuan Haowen adopted a relatively cautious approach. He no longer directly criticized politics, but instead expressed his values through historical writings and literary compilations. This strategy avoided political risks while achieving the goal of cultural inheritance.

Notably, Yuan Haowen wrote to Yelü Chucai, the Mongol Chancellor, listing 54 Jin Dynasty Confucian scholars, including Wang Ruoxu and Yang Huan, and requesting their appointment. This move sparked some controversy, but from a historical perspective, it demonstrates Yuan Haowen's foresight in protecting talent. Fifteen of these individuals are mentioned in the History of Yuan Dynasty, playing a significant role in the inheritance and preservation of Central Plains culture.

### **ZHANG KEJIU'S AESTHETIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY AND SPIRITUAL DESTINATION**

Zhang Kejiu, a master of sanqu (literati) from the mid-to-late Yuan Dynasty, embodies a distinct spiritual dimension among Yuan literati through his creative career and inner journey. Compared to Yuan Haowen, Zhang Kejiu's life experiences were relatively ordinary, yet his inner world was no less rich and complex. His sanqu (literati) not only represents one of the highest achievements of Yuan qu art but also reflects the shift in spirit among Yuan literati from traditional Confucian ideals to individual aesthetic experience.

### **The Transition from Confucian Ideals to Individual Experience**

Zhang Kejiu's life story is relatively brief, but existing records indicate that he served several times as a low-level official, such as a "lu li," before rising to a higher position and becoming the Tonglu Dianshi. Qian Weishan's "Jiang Yue Song Feng Ji" contains a poem titled "Farewell to Zhang Xiaoshan on his Way to Tonglu Dianshi," suggesting that his official position was relatively low. Li Qi's "Yunyang Collection: Postscript to He Yuanzhong's Remaining

Calligraphy" records that in the early years of the Zhizheng era, he was over seventy years old and still working as a staff member in Kunshan. His talent was unappreciated throughout his life, and he alternated between officialdom and seclusion.

This state of mind, characterized by "empty fame on a piece of paper, a journey of thousands of miles," led Zhang Kejiu to gradually abandon the traditional pursuit of fame and turn to cultivating his own spiritual world. Unlike the intense political concerns of Song Dynasty literati, Zhang Kejiu's work focused more on personal emotional experience and aesthetic sensibility. Liu Xizai's "Art Outline" describes the Qiao and Zhang families as "elegant and unrestrained, without resorting to joking, but Zhang's style stands out as unique and detached." This "detached and detached" state of mind precisely reflects his spiritual journey from external fame to inner cultivation.

Zhang Kejiu's numerous landscape-themed verses in his sanqu (literature) reflect his unique appreciation for the beauty of nature. The phrase "making wine with pine blossoms and brewing tea with spring water" in "Full Moon: Mountain Writings" reveals an aesthetic of life that transcends worldly concerns through exquisite depictions of the details of secluded life. This shift in aesthetic orientation marks a significant shift in the spiritual world of Yuan Dynasty literati.

### **Analysis of the Reclusive Feelings in Sanqu Creation**

Zhang Kejiu's reclusive sentiment is different from the traditional theme of retreat, but has a distinct characteristic of the times. In the special political environment of the Yuan Dynasty, reclusiveness is not only a personal choice, but also a cultural strategy.

In his early years, Zhang Kejiu associated with Ma Zhiyuan, Lu Zhi, and Guan Yunshi, composing and singing in concert with each other. These relationships reflected the values of the literati circle he inhabited, a community characterized by a de-emphasis on fame and a focus on literature. Zhang Kejiu's "Spring Thoughts" (Qing Jiang Yin) expresses regret for the fleeting beauty of spring through depictions of natural scenery and the emotions of the characters, but this pain is transformed into a poetic experience.

It's worth noting that Zhang Kejiu's reclusive spirit wasn't entirely passive, but rather encompassed a positive pursuit of a better life. His works often feature meticulous depictions of landscapes, which serve not only as a display of artistic skill but also as an expression of spiritual sustenance. Through his discovery and expression of natural beauty, Zhang Kejiu achieved spiritual self-perfection.

### **The Cultural Connotation of the "Qingli School" Style**

Zhang Kejiu is hailed as a representative of the "Qingli School" of Yuan Dynasty sanqu (literary poetry), a style whose formation holds profound cultural significance. In his "Taihe Zhengyinpu," Zhu Quan called Zhang Kejiu the "master of the ci world," observing that "his ci is both pure and elegant, yet elegant without being gaudy, possessing a sense of transcendence and a sense of the ordinary." This assessment is not only a recognition of his artistic achievements but also a testament to his cultural character.

The formation of the "Qingli" style is closely related to the spiritual state of Yuan Dynasty literati. With political participation restricted, literati turned their attention to the meticulous refinement of literary techniques. Zhang Kejiu emphasized rhythm and rhyme, focusing on refined diction and phrasing, well-balanced parallelism, and harmonious and beautiful words and sentences. He integrated and applied the techniques of poetry and lyrics, emphasizing the subtlety and elegance of his works, often incorporating famous lines from poetry and lyrics to achieve elegance. This creative orientation reflects the Yuan Dynasty literati's pursuit of literary purity.

Li Kaixian's "Preface to Xiaoshan Xiaoling" states that "Qiao and Zhang are to Yuefu what Li and Du are to poetry." While this comparison may be overstated, it certainly reflects Zhang Kejiu's significant position in the history of Yuan dynasty qu. Early Yuan dynasty sanqu writers favored a natural and straightforward style, while later pursued a refined, elegant, and upright style. Zhang Kejiu played a significant role in this epoch-making shift. He strived to break away from the traditionally simple and straightforward style of sanqu and embrace elegance and refinement. His rich and elegant style, combined with its richness and elegance, made him a remarkable figure in Yuan dynasty sanqu.

### **New Characteristics of Literary Communication and Reception**

Zhang Kejiu's literary dissemination exhibits new characteristics distinct from those of previous generations. Among the over 220 Yuan Dynasty writers, only Zhang Yanghao, Qiao Ji, and Zhang Kejiu have extant collections of sanqu (literary works). However, the other two only published their works before or after their deaths. Zhang Kejiu, on the other hand, not only has four sanqu collections extant during the Yuan Dynasty, but also has the most works included in the Yuan Dynasty anthologies "Yangchun Baixue" and "Yuefu Qunying."

This shift in dissemination patterns reflects the new characteristics of Yuan Dynasty literature. Unlike the Song Dynasty, which relied primarily on official channels for dissemination, Yuan Dynasty literature relied more heavily on popular dissemination. According to records, even Emperor Wuzong of the Yuan Dynasty ordered palace maids to sing Zhang Kejiu's sanqu (literary songs) while admiring the moon in the imperial palace, demonstrating that his works had already gained widespread social recognition during the Yuan Dynasty.

The widespread dissemination of Zhang Kejiu's sanqu is closely related to its artistic characteristics. His works retain the popular appeal of sanqu while also possessing a high level of literary refinement. This quality, appealing to both the elite and the masses, has enabled them to reach a wider audience. This shift in dissemination patterns foreshadows a significant transformation in the dissemination of ancient Chinese literature.

Table 3: Comparative analysis of creative characteristics between Yuan Haowen and Zhang Kejiu

Comparison Dimensions	Yuan Haowen	Zhang Kejiu
Life Era	Jin and Yuan Dynasties (1190-1257)	Middle and late Yuan Dynasty (approximately 1270-1350)
Political experience	He was a Jinshi, held many posts, and lived in seclusion after the fall of the Jin Dynasty.	He worked as a low-level official for a long time and had an unsatisfactory career.
Genre	Mainly in poetry, also good at lyrics, prose and history	Specializing in Sanqu, especially Xiaoling
Main themes	Mourning poems, historical works, and literary compilations	Landscape, secluded life, personal emotions
Artistic Style	Gloomy and tragic, epic characteristics	Clear and elegant, with exquisite craftsmanship
spiritual pursuit	From Actively Participating in the World to Literary Salvation	From the pursuit of fame to aesthetic self-sufficiency
literary function	Outstanding historical value and cultural heritage	Outstanding aesthetic value and emotional expression
Mode of transmission	Mainly spread through literary circles	Appreciated by both the elite and the masses, widely circulated
Historical status	"Northern Wenxiong" and "Wenzong of the First Generation"	"The master of poetry" and "the representative of the Qingli School"

## CONCLUSION: THE DEEP MECHANISM OF THE SPIRITUAL TURN IN SONG AND YUAN LITERATURE

Through an in-depth examination of two representative literati, Yuan Haowen and Zhang Kejiu, we can clearly discern the underlying mechanisms of the shift in literary spirit during the transition from the Song Dynasty to the Yuan Dynasty. This shift is not only a literary historical phenomenon but also a process of spiritual reconstruction of Chinese civilization under specific historical conditions. From Yuan Haowen's historical testimony to Zhang Kejiu's aesthetic self-sufficiency, we witness a historic shift in the spiritual world of ancient Chinese literati from a focus on practical application to a focus on aesthetic self-sufficiency. This shift was both a passive adaptation to external political pressure and an active choice driven by the awakening of the literati's subjective consciousness. Faced with limited channels for political participation, literati redefined their own means of self-realization through literary creation, thereby transcending the changing times on a spiritual level. This historical experience not only enriches our understanding of the laws governing the development of ancient Chinese literature but also provides profound insights for the development of contemporary literature during a period of

social transformation: the value of literature lies not only in its reflection of reality but also in its exploration and enhancement of the human spirit.

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