

# Affect, Chou, and Nalan's Ci

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## ABSTRACT

Nalan Xingde is an important figure in the Chinese literary history. Claimed as one of the three most renowned writers of the Ci (song lyric) genre in the 17th century China, Nalan established his name with Drinking Water Poem. His Ci has a peculiar quality featuring a profusion of emotions and feelings, expressive of the structures of feelings of his time. Recent decades have seen an "affect turn" in humanities and social sciences, and studies of emotion and its history have provided a new framework to approach Nalan's Ci and himself as an extraordinary historical figure. Taking Chou, the most prominent feelings as the focus, this paper first charts Nalan's traumatic private and public life to show the mechanism causing his Chou. It argues that repressed, negative feelings of Chou shaped Nalan's individualistic way of expressing emotions and his visions for unique literary creation. And in return, his investment in poetic creation of affective world helps him to resist and eventually live with negative feelings.

**Keywords:** Nalan Xingde, Affect, Emotion, Chou, Seventeenth-century Chinese Literature

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nalan Xingde (1655-85), courtesy name Rongruo, a Manchu poet in the early Qing dynasty, is an essential figure in the Chinese literary history. Nalan has been claimed as one of the three most renowned writers (the other two are Zhu Yizun and Chen Weisong) of the Ci (song lyric) genre in the 17th century China. He established his name with Drinking Water Poem, a collection of 342 Ci poems. It has been considered as the first Ci collection in the Manchu ruled Qing period and many poems of it have been widely circulated among ordinary households. His Ci has a peculiar quality featuring a profusion of emotions and feelings, expressive of the structures of feelings of the 17th century in which personal sentiments, emotions and their unique ways of expression gained new interest in the literary world, according to many scholars (Lynn 410).

The most prominent feeling in Nalan's Ci, however, is the melancholy-like "Chou", negative feelings of pensive sadness, distress, anxiety and even despair because of the loss of some important things such as freedom, friends, and relatives. The word Chou appears almost 100 times in his poems. Considering the social, class privileges Nalan enjoyed as son to the then Grand Secretary Nalan Mingzhu (1635-1708), and as close associate of the Kangxi Emperor, the looming Chou in his lyric poems is strikingly provoking. Although some studies have approached emotional patterns in Nalan's poetry, scant attention has been paid to Chou and its roles in shaping, and also being shaped by, Nalan's autobiographical, ethical, and aesthetic traces and visions. In Western humanity and social science, an affective turn has shifted critical attention to inquiry of emotions and their histories. This paper will draw on affect

studies and the history of emotions to examine negative feelings which boils down to Chou in Nalan's poetry. It argues that repressed, negative feelings of Chou shapes Nalan's individualistic way of expressing emotions in his Ci. And in return, his poetic creation of affective world in his Ci helps him to resist and eventually live with negative feelings. In doing so, it brings a new perspective to interpret Nalan's Ci and sheds new light on Nalan as an extraordinary historic figure. Furthermore, it will enrich and even challenge current studies of history of emotions that predominantly focus on Western historical and literary sources.

### 1.1. "I am a melancholy wanderer in the world"

So why is Chou so important to Nalan's Ci and where does it come from? I argue that this emotion of Chou is mostly arising from the impossibility to negotiate the gap between his lived, actual life and an ideal world. An ideal world where one's self is free, free to love, free to live a self-willed life, and free from social constraints that make it impossible to achieve his aspirations. Nalan as a historical figure constantly experienced emotional sufferings. He was born into a powerful royal family with close ties to the then emperor and grew up with social privileges beyond ordinary people. However, he was also subjected to all kinds of social, moral constraints of the seventeenth-century China. For one thing, romantic love, for him, was indeed traumatic. Throughout his life, he was forced to separate from, and abandoned his loved ones again and again. One of them was Shen Wan, a prostitute of Han ethnicity. Their relationship was therefore regarded as a disgrace and shame, but Shen turned out to be Nalan's

muse, inspiring him to compose many love lyrics. Although Nalan was forced to give up Shen Wan, his unyielding passion for her turned into endless sorrow, distress, and agony. Feelings like such necessarily fed Chou into his Ci.

For the other, social restriction also distorted his professional life and blocked channels to let out his negative feelings. Talented as he was, as a mere imperial guard, he never found a place he deserved and desired. Self-realization was denied to him because the Manchu rulers decided what he was. More damagingly, the Qing Court adopted a very strict social and cultural censorship mechanism, repressing its subjects' freedom of speech in the public. The fear of articulating ideas became one of the structures of feelings of the seventeenth-century China and Nalan was part of a process of subjectification which Michael Foucault has defined. Nalan's conscious self-policing prevented him from directly confiding and expressing his distress. The paradox between the accumulated, negative feelings and the impossibility to release them eventually made Nalan to turn to concentrate more on his inner world, pursuing to fashion a true, free self in his Ci that gave space to his affective, emotional life.

If melancholy, as Judith Butler insightfully points out, is a positive process of cultivating new selfhood, it can be said that Nalan's Chou also propels him turn inward, promoting him to be at home with the surroundings to create a new self. It also contributes to the development of his poetic voices as well as his psychological and emotional life. His traumatic events in his private life become what Patrick Colm Hogan calls "emotion episodes". Namely, the eliciting conditions, the circumstances that triggers the production of emotions such as despair and anxiety which are expressed in his Ci. This process was the key of Nalan's literary creation. From the aspect of the affect studies, emotions play active, rather than passive, role in a person's self-awareness and his perceptions of the surrounding world. It is therefore arguable that emotions also contribute to the formation of the way for Nalan to resist social constraints without hurting himself.

### 1.2. "I thought it was common"

Nalan pays close attention to emotions, as I have suggested, and he also invents new literary techniques to register, express affective forces. Namely, he is able to evoke feelings through careful use of sensory sensations. For example, in Sumuzhe, a love song that is very representative of Nalan's ci, is a very good illustration. Here goes this piece of work:

Su Mu Zhe  
Spiciness on the pillow  
a remnant of spring flower path  
meeting my lover in the dark  
cold day with the alcohol  
pear blossom falling slowly  
the east wind blew all night

Hiding in the back of the flower screen  
The sleeve hang down  
Where comes the sound of xiao  
Watching the light moon on the tree of doukou  
The moon is like that of that day  
What about the person here?

As is mentioned before, the emotion Chou enhances a poet's self-awareness. It can be found in Nalan's many literary works that a poet's heightened self-awareness is expressed through the intensity, and the use, of sensory sensations. In Su Mu Zhe, senses of vision, audition and touch are all evoked in a single Ci. The poet emphasizes ceaselessly how the surroundings stimulate himself to burst forth the strong emotion Chou of missing his lover who is nowhere to see. Specifically, a desolate feeling is felt by an image that "the weather becomes cold"; a vision of decay is seen through the "falling pear blossom"; Sounds also comes into play. "Where comes the sound of xiao", the music triggers and brings back the poet's memory in which he was together with his beloved girl and enjoyed the happiness together. Yet all the sweet memory is a far cry from seeing her in person. Chou in this Ci is the agony of not seeing his beloved. A poet's sensitive sensory senses impel the actualization of his affective experiences that feed into the Ci and reinvents poetic ways to express emotions.

The importance of sensory sensations also points to another creative strategy Nalan chooses to convey emotions. Different from his contemporary Ci poets, Nalan tends to construct a subjective world in his Ci to release his repressed emotions. For instance, compared with Zhu Yizun, one of the three famous writers talented in creating love Ci (Fong 437), Nalan has a different style to express himself. Zhu always describes details of the objects, his lover, such as "then running underneath the rose trellis, she catches the butterflies alive among the flowers" and "her spring robe tailored, her face lightly rouged". Nalan, however, focuses on invocation of the poet's subjective experiences by concentrating on and describing the affective forces received through various senses. This feature becomes more evident in another love ci, Picking Mulberries. The whole Ci has only one line portraying the objective surroundings. That is "fragrance diminished, quilt chilled and last flicker of the lamp gone out". It expresses the Chou of not seeing his beloved and of the impossibility to pursue his love. On the one hand, the remaining lines of the mentioned stanza the first stanza describe the poet's psychological activities. He wants to know what his loved girl is doing, asking directly, "query tonight whether she stops up or lies down?". Then he mentions the recurrence of the reality that he counts days and nights after their separation. Additionally, Nalan often remoulds the image in his mental eyes, combining with his own affective world and then writes it into in ci to express the Chou of romantic but saddening love.

Nevertheless, except for the sensitivity of senses interacting with his Chou, there is one more important point and that is he always prefers to construct conflicts

between an imagined, ideal world and the reality the poet is living. In the tune *Sumuzhe*, for example, a tension arises in the gap between a dream and the reality. In the scene of a fictitious dreamland, he met his beloved girl, but immediately in the second stanza, the sorrow of lovers being separated is intensely conveyed. It thus forms a strong paradox that makes the Chou even stronger and more acute. Sharp contrast of emotions is not only presented in his Ci about romantic love. It also can be detected in a famous Ci of nostalgia for the hometown - the tune *Chang Xiang Si*. He first depicts the harsh reality of military life by invoking images of traveling over land and water, the thousands of lights in the tents as well as the military sounds. The described location then swiftly moves to his dreamlike hometown where no fighting or slaughtering sounds are heard. From this drastic emotional difference arises a very acute Chou of missing his hometown and of disapproving of a military life.

So what did Nalan do after experiencing those strong emotions? Did he find the fundamental problems and the way out? By analysing his ci mentioned above, we can find that it is the Chou produced by the paradox between the social moral constraints and his desire that made him despaired. But in his Ci, he hardly addresses the difficulties induced by moral constraints: the moral hypocrisy that made him lose his beloved once and again, for example. In his Ci, he also never criticises the corrupt officialdom or show his discontentment with the imperial regulations, considering the fact that the emperor broke his dream of self- realization by making him a mere royal guard despites his talents and merits. He experienced a lot of tragic losses caused by the then social moral restrains we have mentioned but he hardly talked about them in his ci and never expressed his anger directly. Due to strict social and cultural censorship, Nalan, as an official close to the emperor, must be extremely discreet in words and cautious in deeds. One way out is to transfer the tension into his ci in a more indirect and more allusive way. From Nalan's literary stance, we can catch a glimpse of the ways he aspired to seek freedom .

Having come of age in an increasingly stabilized society when the Manchu rulers made huge progress in the assimilation and intervention of Chinese culture (Ropp 97), Nalan was familiar with the literary, intellectual and artistic culture, that was essentially a Chinese tradition. According to Richard John Lynn, the four decades 1644 - 1682 that "spanned the Manchu conquest and consolidation of Ch'ing rule," a period corresponding to Nalan's entire life course, saw "a surge of interest in Sung and Yuan era poetry", and it led to "a renovated and expanded archaism (fu-ku) and was reflected in new traditions in poetry" (410). Modelling literary style of the ancients was recognized by the mainstream but Nalan was not satisfied with constraints imposed, and insisted to advocate innovation, renovation and expansion. What really attracted Nalan in terms of literary creation exceed the modelling on ancient style. Instead, he suggested in *Lushuiting Zashi* that a poet should develop his own voice before reaching out to imitating Du Fu or Tang poetry styles. Furthermore, he insisted on the importance of

instilling emotions into Ci. He agreed with the theory that it was significant for literature works to express the real emotion of writers. He revealed the reason for his sympathy with *HuaJian Ci* in his letter to Liang Yaotin: "It is because *HuaJian Ci* expresses subtlest feelings".

One subversive move is Nalan's persistent interest in composing Ci themed on *Qing*, a word "connoting romantic love, desire, passion, sexuality love" (Fong 439). According to *Qing*, Grace S. Fong suggests, denotes "margins of gendered emotions considered improper for exploration and exposition in high literature" (439). However, Nalan does not avoid this shameful subject and instead writes it in his Ci directly and massively, concentrating on the new ways of expressing emotions generated by failed love, rather than copying the traditionally lascivious style featured in ci about love and lust. This is likely one way for him to challenge, subvert the social, cultural and literary constraints.

Sometimes, he indeed tries express his discontentment in his literary works but approach it in a very obscure and illusive way. For example, in *Ta Suo Xing*. Nalan just expresses his aspiration to freedom, but does not provide candid, straightforward criticism. Here is this ci:

Writing letters and leaning against the willow  
Play freely with crooked hat in the flowers  
It is better to be bound to others  
Which turned my hair from black to white  
Sitting in the gold palace in the night  
The grass grew up on the steps  
Who am I supposed to talk to about all sorrowful thing  
I prefer to live in a small attic watching the clear  
moonlight

Why must people waste their best years in vanity fair  
This ci was composed for Nalan's friend. He still expresses Chou by constructing the conflict between ideal world and an unhappy reality, and also heavily used vivid descriptions of his sensory sensations. The theme this Ci expresses, however, is changed, turning to expressing the dissatisfaction with the craving for personal fame and gain, and to showing his desire for a care-free life. However, from his life experience, we can conclude that his frustration is not likely to be brought by not achieving wealth or fame. Nalan still does not make it clear that the origin of his Chou, namely, what has disappointed, distressed him, is the social moral restraints that have caused his tragic life. What he does is to pay more attention to bring out his literature stance , a stance where he attaches importance to a poet's affective life and the creative way for self-expressing. This is a point opposite to the social norm that tightly restricts people's thoughts, feelings, and their expression, and ruthlessly destroys the freedom of writing.

## 2. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Chou, the predominant emotional pattern of his affective life, has greatly influenced Nalan Xingde both in terms of his literary creation and in terms of his own private life. On the one hand, Chou influences his ways of creating a subtle and refined poetic world through writing into Ci his heightened sensitivity to his sensory sensations. On the other hand, Chou makes him accustomed to escape from the harsher and more real world, so that he can focus on his inner world. It also contributes to his unique though illusive way to criticize the social moral restraints while circumventing disaster of breaking the rules. As a literary legend of the Seventeenth century, Nalan has influenced poets in the following ages. It is said that Nalan is the archetype of Jia Baoyu in the classic fiction *The Story of the Stone*. Although it is not proved, we can understand that Nalan has an unusual position in China's literary history. Generally, scholars always study *The Story of the Stone* to examine structures of feelings of the Qing dynasty. With the popularity of the history of emotions I believe that it will also be meaningful to take Nalan as a case to study and to revisit the history of emotions of the literati class in the Seventeen-century Qing and beyond.

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