



The Influence of Geographical Factors on the Frontier Poetry in the Silk Road

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Abstract. Every major geographical discovery has a significant impact on world history and culture. The opening of the Silk Road provided a new path for the dissemination of Chinese civilization and culture, and also influenced the creation of Tang poetry as a cultural resource. Readers can trace the cultural and historical landscape of the Tang Dynasty's Silk Road through frontier poetry or explore the impact of the environment on cultural creation from a geographical perspective. The desolate and vast geographical conditions of the Silk Road provided new perspectives, content, and experiences for the creation of frontier poetry, resulting in the production of a large number of frontier poems influenced by the unique geographical environment.

Keywords: frontier poetry · the Silk Road · literary geography

1 Introduction

For centuries, scholars have been interested in the relationship between geographical environments and regional cultures. The study of how natural geography affects human culture and society has been a significant topic throughout history, with ancient Chinese literati being skilled at summarizing the characteristics of regional cultures.

Correspondingly, contemporary scholarship has given rise to new disciplines, such as literary geography, which explores the influence of natural geography on writers' temperaments, personalities, and literary compositions. This subfield of literary studies examines how different geographical factors, such as climate, topography, and natural resources, affect the literary output of writers living in different regions. As Saunders [1] wrote, "Geography pervades the content, practice and meaning of creative writing; it is simultaneously intrinsic to, while weaving its way into, the very interstices of the written word." Pocock [2] also emphasized, "The interface between geography and literature goes deeper than any spatial correlation. Literature recounts a story in the telling of which we are, directly or indirectly, privy to characters' innermost thoughts, feelings and experiences."

In China, the vast territory and diverse natural resources provide a fertile ground for exploring the impact of geographical environments on literary creativity. Traditional Chinese literature is rich in regional cultural characteristics that reflect the natural environments in which they were created. The poetry of the Tang Dynasty, for example, is

known for its lyrical beauty and emotional depth, with many poets drawing inspiration from the natural world around them.

During the Tang Dynasty, a cultural trend was taking shape and infecting the Silk Road in the northwest region. The peak of political and economic development gave rise to literary forms of unprecedented excellence, and the emergence and development of Tang poetry represented the highest artistic level of Chinese literature in the medieval period. Meanwhile, the geographical and social landscape along the Silk Road, different from that of Chang'an in the Central Plains, provided new materials for Tang poets, inspiring their creativity and giving rise to unique poetry of the Silk Road. During this period, many works depicting the social and cultural aspects of the Silk Road were produced, and through examining the cultural and geographical factors in the poems and the descriptions by the poets, we can see a more rounded, three-dimensional, and diverse picture of the Silk Road in the Tang Dynasty.

This study seeks to combine traditional literary regional conclusions with scientific methods to examine how various geographical factors affect the creative power of Tang Dynasty poets in the Silk Road. While traditional methods of summarizing cultural characteristics have been useful, this study will employ data collection and regression analysis to examine the impact of geographical environments on poets' literary compositions in a more objective and rigorous way.

To answer this research question, we will identify various geographical factors that may have influenced the poetry of Tang Dynasty poets. These factors may include topography, climate, natural resources, and other environmental factors [3]. We will then collect and analyze data from a range of sources, including historical texts, biographies of poets, and studies of regional culture and geography, to examine how these factors may have influenced the poetic output of Tang Dynasty poets.

By combining traditional literary regional conclusions with scientific methods, we aim to prove the reliability of these conclusions and question some subjective views. Although the study may not provide a conclusive result, we believe that this approach will offer valuable insights into the impact of geographical environments on Tang Dynasty poets and pave the way for further research in literary geography.

In conclusion, this study aims to explore the impact of geographical environments on the creative power of Tang Dynasty poets in ancient China in the Silk Road. By combining traditional literary regional conclusions with scientific methods, we hope to provide new insights into the relationship between natural geography and literary composition. The study has the potential to contribute to the field of literary geography and provide a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between natural environments and human creativity.

2 The Silk Road in Tang Dynast's Frontier Poetry

According to Volume 130 of the Tang Dynasty's "Collection of Decrees and Edicts" during the Zhenguan period, "the tributes from the countries to the east of Persia, right to Yiwu, were uninterrupted and the commerce and trade were thriving." [4]. The Tang Dynasty during the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties maintained close contact with the countries in the Western Regions. The prosperity of the Silk Road also

demonstrated the strength of the country. The Silk Road had experienced a prosperous stage since the Western Han Dynasty. As the center of cultural exchange and the gateway for foreign envoys, the Western countries had established close political, economic, and cultural relationships with the Tang Dynasty through the Silk Road. The full prosperity of the Silk Road also had an impact on the creation of Tang poetry. The literary flourishing period often coincides with a nation's great achievements in history, and the Tang poems reflected the grandeur of the era. The prosperity of the Silk Road was both a result of its smooth passage and a direct reflection of the social and economic conditions. The main theme of poetry during this period was the heroic ideals and patriotic fervor of Li Bai's "Wishing to take my sword from my waist and cut off Loulan." [5]. The changes in the temperament and concepts of Tang poets, as well as the style of Tang poetry nurtured during the prosperous era of the Silk Road, can be seen in the following aspects:

Firstly, the broad vision of the world that is encompassed in Tang poetry. Due to the frequent exchange of Western merchants and envoys in the capital city of Chang'an, the Tang people had a global perspective and a macrocosmic understanding of the world. They viewed society from the standpoint of global citizens with the confidence of being part of the most prosperous civilization in the world [6].

Secondly, Tang poets often drew inspiration from ancient music and poetry [7]. Like the literary works of the Han Dynasty, Tang poetry was renowned for its colorful and vivid style. The strong national power of the Tang Dynasty gave their literary works a unique appeal. Many Tang poems expressed the aspirations of individuals to achieve greatness, such as the "Song of the Cavalry" by Luo Binwang and Yang Jiong, which borrowed the old topic of the "Song of the Cavalry" to express their patriotism in defending the country. In addition, many other poems, such as "Song of the Frontier", "Moon over the Mountain Pass", borrowed ancient themes from folk songs to express the themes of life on the Silk Road.

Lastly, the influence of Western music on Tang poetry cannot be ignored. The vibrant and colorful exotic melodies inspired Tang poets to explore new rhythms and tonalities [8]. There are approximately 22 surviving Tang poems with titles that include "Liangzhou" or "Liangzhou Songs" [including "Five Songs of Liangzhou" by Li He, "Two Songs of Liangzhou" by Wang Han, "Two Songs of Jingzhou" by Meng Haoran, "Two Songs of Liangzhou" by Wang Zhihuan, "Three Songs () Liangzhou" by Zhang Ji, "Three Songs of Liangzhou" by Xue Feng, and "Liangzhou Song". Moreover, there are many other poems that describe and portray "Western Liang music" and "Liangzhou songs". This is a unique phenomenon in the history of Chinese poetry, where a particular music style and theme became a popular and fashionable topic for an entire era of poetry.

The Silk Road greatly facilitated the exchange between the Tang Dynasty and various countries in the Western Regions, and it also contributed to the emergence of a new theme in poetry - frontier poetry. According to statistics, the Tang Dynasty fought nearly 100 battles on the Silk Road. The Zizhi Tongjian recorded that in just 29 years of the Kaiyuan era, there were as many as 24 military expeditions along the Silk Road. Out of the over 1800 frontier poems in the entire Tang poetry, nearly 1500 of them are related to the Silk Road, accounting for more than 80% of all frontier poetry. This is a reflection of the reality of that time [9].

During the Tang dynasty, the frontier wars were driven by a wave of national integration led by the Tang Dynasty's advanced civilization, which gradually radiated to surrounding countries. Therefore, the frontier poetry created by the Tang people was not the same as general war poetry, but rather carried strong nationalistic features and macrocosmic concerns. The heroism and aspirations for achievements and passion were particularly prominent. The Silk Road countries merged peacefully with the Tang economy, politics, culture, and art, and the Silk Road trade reached a prosperous stage, making the frontier poetry flourish during this period.

Meanwhile, many frontier poets keenly perceived the turbulence of the Silk Road and the social unrest it portended, and expressed their patriotic and people-oriented emotions with complex feelings. After the mid to late Tang Dynasty, such emotions were even more prevalent in frontier poetry. The style of frontier poetry in the mid to late Tang Dynasty was characterized by a mournful and heavy tone due to the decline of the Tang Dynasty after the An Lushan Rebellion, the rise of the Tubo, the Khitans, and the Xixia, and the blockage of the Silk Road, which not only led to the annexation of the western Qinling Mountains by the Abbasid Caliphate but also resulted in the prolonged occupation of Anxi Four Garrisons and Helong region by the Tubo since the first year of Emperor Dezong of Tang (763 AD). The prosperity of the ancient Silk Road had vanished, leaving the poets with endless sadness and emotions.

3 The Influence of Geographical Factors on Frontier Poetry

From a macroscopic perspective, Zhang Qian's mission to the Western Regions in the 2nd century BC completed the exploration and development of the geography of the Western Regions and Central Asia, and opened up the Silk Road. As a great geographical discovery, it brought about significant changes to world history and brought about a climax of economic development and cultural exchange among different countries and regions. China has a vast territory with complex natural geographical environments. Significant differences and regional characteristics have formed in terms of terrain, climate, plants, and biology. This has resulted in complex cultural environments in different regions, with unique customs, social cultures, and more, grown on different soils. The frontier poetry of the Silk Road was born in the unique geographical environment of northwest China.

From a geographical perspective, the Hexi Corridor region holds great significance due to its location as a crucial transportation hub connecting the Silk Road between China and the West. It has served as a convenient passage for trade, cultural exchange, and travel, making it a strategically important region that has been highly valued by rulers and local warlords throughout history. Additionally, it played an important role in isolating the Qiang and Hu people, safeguarding the capital, and managing the Western Regions. As the center of China's rise and fall, its geographical, transportation, and strategic importance cannot be overstated. The unique geographical context of the Tang Dynasty's frontier poetry also emerged and prospered in this region's specific geographical historical background.

From a natural geographical perspective, the Hexi Corridor, which is an essential part of the Silk Road, is located in the western part of Gansu province in a semi-arid and

arid region, presenting extremely strong continental climate characteristics. However, the Qilian Mountains have a high altitude, with mountain peaks covered by perennial snow and glaciers. When spring arrives in the southern foothills, the melting of snow and glaciers results in an abundant water source. The melting of ice and snow in the Qilian Mountains has irrigated vast green oases in the flat and fertile hinterland of the Hexi Corridor, making it highly favorable for the development of agriculture and animal husbandry, and earning the nickname “the Jiangnan of the North.” This region has been heavily involved in animal husbandry since ancient times, and it has been a land of competition for nomadic tribes who migrate to follow water and grass.

At the same time, there are more than 50 inland rivers of various sizes in this area, all of which originate from the melting snow and ice on the top of the Qilian Mountains. The detailed information is showed in Fig. 1. The formation of the Shiyang River (known as the Gushui River in Han), Heihe (also known as Zhangye River and formerly known as Ruo River), and Shule River, the three major water systems in the corridor, have created a plain surrounding them that stretches from east to west, including the Wuwei-Yongchang Plain, Zhangye-Jiuquan Plain, and Yumen-Dunhuang Plain. In history, the Hexi region was also home to many lakes and ponds, such as Zhuyeze, Xiutuze, Juyanhai, Mingze, and Wowachi. Irrigation agriculture has been well-developed here since ancient times, and it remains a prosperous agricultural region. The forest and pasture resources in Hexi are abundant, with forests covering the Qilian Mountains, Yanzhishan, Longshoushan, and vast grasslands. The unique natural geography has given the Hexi Corridor of the Silk Road a distinctive appearance for survival and development. This unique geographical environment has also had a significant impact on the creation of the border poets who traveled to this area [10].

Based on this foundation, the specific historical context of the time also contributed to the emergence, development, and prosperity of frontier poetry. The strong national power of the Tang Dynasty, active management of the frontier, and the intense pursuit of frontier achievements by scholars brought an unprecedented potential for development, resulting in the proliferation of frontier poetry during the Tang Dynasty. The poetry

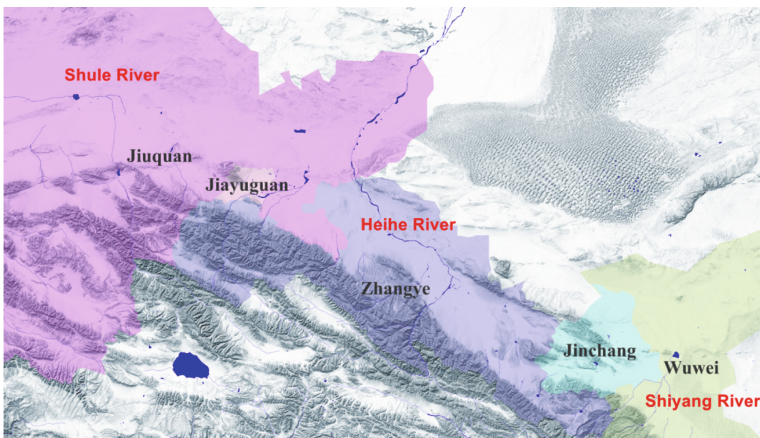


Fig. 1. The hydrological situation in the border areas

of the Tang frontier reflects the geographical and territorial awareness of Tang poets, revealing the natural and geographical environment of the entire Tang frontier. This includes natural landscapes such as mountains, rivers, deserts, vegetation, and climate characteristics, as well as customs and cultural landscapes unique to the geographical background, such as ethnic food, marriage, funeral customs, festivals, religions, and culture, as well as the expression of patriotic sentiment for the protection of the border and the country. For example, the recognition and suggestions of specific frontier policies, the real experiences of frontier troubles, the feelings towards the customs and folkways of the frontier, and the deep understanding of the natural and geographical environment of the frontier.

During the early flourishing period of the Tang Dynasty, the nation was prosperous and the martial spirit was strong, leading the Tang Dynasty to take an active role in defending its borders. In the eyes of the Tang people, the border regions were not only harsh and cold, but also a place to achieve great success. The vigorous development of the northwest border regions by the Tang Dynasty also drew their attention to Hexi, and some even traveled there in person. In their eyes, Hexi was first and foremost a distant border region, with a harsh climate and difficult conditions for soldiers stationed there, and it was challenging to recruit soldiers and maintain their morale. However, Hexi's important geographic location and strategic importance made it a key frontier for defending against invasions from foreign tribes, and a place for Tang people to establish their achievements, fulfill their lifelong aspirations, and realize their dreams. Therefore, Tang Dynasty border poems, especially those about the Hexi region during the early Tang Dynasty, were often strong, generous, simple, and vigorous, expressing grievances without being mournful, and being heroic without being sorrowful.

Based on the chronological map of Tang and Song literature and data analysis, it can be observed that throughout the entire Tang dynasty, from the early period to the end, poets showed a high degree of attention to borderland poetry, and there were always relevant themes being created. The detailed information is showed in Fig. 2. The northwest region was the most significant area for the creation of borderland poetry, and poets wrote a vast number of poems about the theme of borderland wars, receiving relatively high attention. In terms of the transmission of poetry, it belongs to the most influential type of poetry.

Due to the limitations of the geographic environment, Tang dynasty frontier poetry not only depicted the natural geographic environment such as mountains, rivers, and valleys, but also often turned to the understanding of the cultural environment such as the border situation and folk customs. An important part of this is the recognition of important passes on the frontier, such as Yumen Pass and Yangguan, which frequently appear in Tang dynasty frontier poetry. As a military and transportation pass and an important garrison town in history, Yumen Pass holds significant historical significance for poets to project their historical sentiments and emotions. Tang dynasty frontier poetry showcases the natural geography and cultural atmosphere of the frontier, as well as the deep historical emotions conveyed within it.

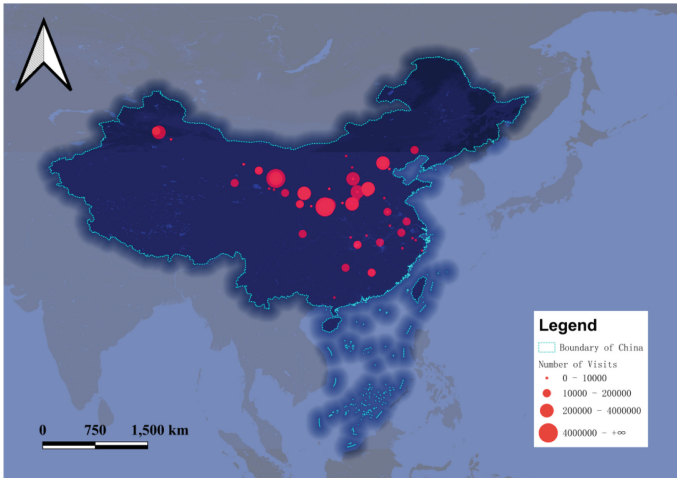


Fig. 2. The extent of the dissemination of frontier poetry.

Numerous poets have documented the hardships of the lives of frontier soldiers, the vastness of the landscape in the Hexi Corridor, and the aspirations of making contributions in their works. The natural and cultural geography of the Hexi Corridor has had a profound influence on the creation of frontier poets.

4 Conclusions

The climate and geography of Northwest China are harsh, but the Hexi Corridor region, nourished by glacier meltwater and inland lake water, still harbors unique cultural resources. Poets in the Tang dynasty who traveled to the borderlands created a large number of poems based on this distinctive cultural and geographical background. Looking back on Tang poetry today, we can see that borderland poetry had the highest contemporary circulation and attention of all types of poetry. As an important reflection of the Tang dynasty's exploration of the northwest frontier and ethnic integration, the creation of Tang borderland poetry set against the backdrop of the Silk Road's geographical environment vividly and accurately showcased the social landscape of the Tang dynasty and the Silk Road. By examining the borderland poetry that emerged from the Hexi Corridor, readers can revisit the historical culture and geographical landscape of the Tang dynasty, and they should also pay more attention to the geographical factors that influenced the creation of borderland poetry.

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