



On the Sense of Life and the Implicative Significance in "Nineteen Ancient Poems"

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Abstract. At the turn of the Han and Wei dynasties, "Nineteen Ancient Poems", as the pinnacle of literati's five-character poems, with its tender and lingering diction, expressions rich in life philosophy, sorrowful and sentimental emotional tone, and simple and unadorned language style, profoundly depicts the circumstances and choices of individuals when facing many major life issues such as survival, death, separation, and the meaning and value of life's existence. It fully demonstrates the profound perception and strong awareness of life among the literati at the end of the Han Dynasty.

Keywords: "Nineteen Ancient Poems", Sense of Life, Implicative Significance

1 Introduction

Previous studies on "Nineteen Ancient Poems" had two main traditions. One, led by Li Shan who annotated "Wen Xuan", focused on explaining allusions and events in the poems, sorting out characters, words, and meanings. It was rigorous, laying a foundation for understanding ancient poems. The other, represented by Liu Lü's work in the Yuan Dynasty, emphasized analyzing the ideas and emotions, but sometimes misinterpreted due to the "metaphor and association" approach.[1] In recent years, the research on "Nineteen Ancient Poems" has mostly focused on the emotions of wandering scholars and their wives, expressing their lovesickness and parting sorrows, their laments on the fleeting time and the transience of life, their homesickness while traveling, and their complaints and affections within the boudoir. These studies conducted a close reading of the "Nineteen Ancient Poems" from the perspective of "emphasizing emotions". This thesis, instead, explores the cultural background, connotations, and emotions of the poems from the "sense of life" perspective, examining it from the spiritual history of late Han scholars, Laozi and Zhuangzi's thoughts, and the beauty of tragedy, including laments for life changes and the desolate era.

2 The Spiritual History of the Scholars in the Late Han Dynasty and the Implicative Flavor of “Nineteen Ancient Poems”

“Nineteen Ancient Poems” is a collection of late Han Dynasty poems, first included in “Wen Xuan” by Crown Prince Zhaoming, Xiao Tong. He picked 19 from anonymous ancient poems and put them at the start of the “Miscellaneous Poems” section. Since then, it’s been the name for this group. “The Nineteen Ancient Poems” deeply and authentically reproduces the experiences of the literati during the great social and ideological changes of the late Han Dynasty. It portrays the shattered pursuits, moral degradation, as well as the spiritual awakening and profound suffering they endured. The sincerity and spontaneous expression of emotions, the profound reflections on the philosophy of life, and the deep meditations on the meaning of life constitute the enduring charm of this poetry collection, which remains highly esteemed by people even after thousands of years. These poems fully demonstrate the keen interest and profound reflection of the late Han literati on the value of individual existence.

The phrase “Life is like a sojourn” dates back to Cao Pi’s “Shan Zai Xing”. “Shuo Wen Jie Zi” defines “ji” as “entrusting”, similar to “ke” and “yu”. So, “Life is like a sojourn” is like “Life is like a guest” or “lodging”, as Qian Zhongshu noted. It reveals life’s uncertainty and people’s philosophical musings. The poems depict the sojourning state from time and space, using “wandering men” and “lovesick women” to express this feeling.

In lyrical imagery, the poems have three deep aspects. First, using fleeting things like dust and dew to compare life’s fragility and brevity, lamenting time’s passage. Second, personifying small creatures like crickets to sigh over autumn’s bleakness. Third, using suburban graves to hint at humanity’s inescapable fate. Short-lived things warn poets of time, and their decay saddens poets about their own fate.

In these poems, poets used time changes to express lovesickness and aging fears. Through nature scenes, they showed humans’ transience, triggering readers’ resonance. The poems reflect lower-class literati’s bitterness, covering career concerns, travel woes, homesickness, and women’s longing for husbands. Shen Deqian said they often depict demoted ministers, abandoned wives, and those facing life changes. In “The Year Is Drawing to a Close in the Bitter Cold”, the wintry scene magnifies a wanderer’s sorrow, making him sigh. Poets’ moods darken with the scene, filling their view with sadness.

When individuals are plunged into despondency and pain, they often engage in deep introspection, reflecting on the meaning and value of life. “The Nineteen Ancient Poems” frequently adopts the female perspective, utilizing women’s delicate and sensitive emotional fluctuations to exhibit the mental anguish endured by women in their boudoirs due to missing their beloved ones. Through the women’s words, deeds, and psychological activities, these poems convey a rebellious consciousness towards established norms and advocate for personal independence. The poems dedicated to lovesick women in “The Nineteen Ancient Poems” transcend the mere level of mutual affections

between men and women, no longer pursuing the traditional idyllic vision of men farming and women weaving. Instead, they profoundly reveal the intricate and complex inner worlds of women, focusing on the awakening of their life consciousness. Emotionally unsupported, as independent individuals, they constantly face the relentless erosion of time, with their fate and future resembling a lingering fog that's difficult to disperse. Thus, they embark on a quest for spiritual independence, exploring their own value in life, as a means to counteract their lonely and dependent mental world and the elusive nature of life itself.

Moreover, the poems' space descriptions highlight individual sadness in the vast world. Time and space are intertwined, vividly portraying literati's lives. Landscapes and buildings are emotional carriers, guiding readers to ponder life's meaning between finite and infinite. This makes the poems not just nature praises but life reflections. In a turbulent era, poets felt life's impermanence, giving rise to "Life is like a sojourn", reflecting on individual and literati fates. Through this, the poems show personal emotions and era style, making them important for studying late Han literati.

In "Green Cypress on the Mound", seeing the evergreen and rocks, the poet said, "Born between heaven and earth, one is suddenly like a traveler from afar", comparing life to a journey, hinting at unfulfilled ideals. In "Today's Fine Banquet", hearing music at a banquet, the poet lamented life's brevity and fate's twists, wanting to seize opportunities. Liu Lü saw this as ironic venting of anger. Such works show lower-class literati's career pain. In "Bright Moon Shining on the White Moonlight", the poet bemoaned being abandoned by friends after they rose, feeling the world's coldness. On a silent autumn night, he paced under the moon, lamenting.

When focus shifted to self, people faced life's reality, seeing time pass and life's brevity but feeling lost about survival value. This pain is in the poems. Yu Ying-shih said from the post-Partisans era to Wei, scholar-officials' group spirit shrank and personal spirit grew, leading to the Han Dynasty's decline. [2]

3 Lao-Zhuang Thoughts and "Carpe Diem" in the Late Han Thought Trends

In the late Eastern Han, society was in chaos. The old order crumbled, paving the way for new ideas. After Confucianism dominated, ideological diversity waned. But the unrest shook its foundation, and Taoist thought revived, meeting people's spiritual needs.

During the Han, Confucianism's "unity of heaven and man" reigned, with Dong Zhongshu making it orthodox. It justified imperial power. By the late Han, its social clout and moral-laden literary ideas weakened. Zhuangzi's ideas of individual freedom and inaction suited the troubled times.[3]

Post the "Disaster of the Proscription of the Partisans", literati lost political zeal and turned to Lao-Zhuang's nature teachings.[4] Political collapse eroded faith in Confucianism, while Taoism's simplicity and focus on personal spirit gained popularity.

During the late Han Dynasty, following the guidance of Taoist ideology, a trend of taking elixirs to seek immortality gradually emerged among the populace. The ancient poem "Driving a Carriage to the Upper East Gate" states, "Seeking immortality through

elixirs, yet often misled by the medicines." This line profoundly reveals that when people realized human lifespan was far less enduring than stones and metals, they embarked on the path of seeking immortality, eagerly hoping to expand the boundaries of their own lives. If we delve into the psychological motivations behind this, it is not difficult to discover that the fundamental goal is to prolong lifespan. Given the finiteness of life, people living in troubled times valued life even more and spared no effort to seek various ways to extend the length of their own lives. The concluding line of the poem "Life Is Less Than a Hundred Years" reads, "The immortal Wang Ziqiao, difficult to be compared with." This line deeply reveals the poet's recognition of the illusionary path to immortality, clearly pointing out the behavioral limitations of individual life, and that ordinary people cannot achieve the freedom and ease of immortals. This also reflects the poet's enhanced self-awareness, indicating that in the process of exploring the meaning of life, the poet has realized that the path to pursue immortality is unfeasible.

In "The East City Wall Is High and Long", the poet deftly employed the vicissitudes of the seasons and self-metaphorical devices to bemoan the passage of time and the pangs of loneliness, thereby delving into profound reflections on life. The pervasive fear of death and an ardent love for life impelled scholars to cast aside their former restraints. Opting for "carpe diem", they immersed themselves in worldly pleasures, forsaking the once-pursued lofty ideals. Seemingly decadent on the surface, this choice, in fact, represented a profoundly contemplative life stance.

"Nineteen Ancient Poems" reveals literati's complex tie to society through "life is like a sojourn". Facing life's brevity and death, they proposed "carpe diem", seen in "Driving a Carriage to the Upper East Gate". The poem depicts a lower-class literati's despair, from tomb sight to life's transience. Unable to extend life, they embraced present pleasures, a seemingly negative but life-affirming choice.

In these poems, life's brevity-induced sentimentality and hedonism coexist. Chen Zuoming noted this as a search for meaning. In the late Han, scholars' "applying knowledge to practical use" ideal failed, breeding anxiety that morphed into "carpe diem", as in "Life Is Less Than a Hundred Years".

With feudal ethics weakening, late Han literati pursued love boldly. Yet, poverty and political setbacks left them adrift, longing for belonging. Even at banquets, as in "Today's Fine Banquet", poets felt life's brevity beneath gaiety. Their self-comfort was a veil for helplessness.

Ultimately, death is an inescapable fate. Amid the chaos of the late Han Dynasty, people came to cherish their finite lives all the more. Abandoning the elusive pursuit of immortality, they instead embraced the principle of "carpe diem" as a means to alleviate their existential pain. This mindset, characterized by a blend of helplessness and longing, found its poignant expression in the line "It is better to drink fine wine and wear silk and satin".

4 The Beauty of Tragedy and the Depiction of Life in “Nineteen Ancient Poems”

The sense of life means an individual's conscious exploration of survival, death, and life's meaning and value, covering survival, death, and safety awareness. In “Nineteen Ancient Poems”, laments about life's brevity and impermanence, sorrows over friendship and career setbacks, and pursuits of fame and pleasure, all reveal the authors' concern for life, marking the awakening of life consciousness and “human awakening” in the late Han Dynasty.

Poetry's tragedy is an aesthetic element. The authors of these poems created tragic power by depicting life's hardships like fleeting life, friendless solitude, career twists, separation, and death, letting readers feel tragic beauty.

Li Zehou noted that from “The Songs of Chu” to the Wei and Jin period, works on life and death deepened ancient traditions. The late Han to Wei and Jin was a period of great changes, and concerns about survival and death were reflected in “Nineteen Ancient Poems”.

Zhong Rong praised the poem's gentle yet gorgeous diction, desolate and profound conception, saying each word was precious. Its desolate style lies in portraying tragic themes. Not only are external pursuits like moral writings, fame, and wealth undependable, but life itself is also fraught with uncertainty. “The flow of yin and yang is vast and boundless, yet human lifespan is as fleeting as the morning dew. Life is like a temporary sojourn, and our lifespan is far less enduring than gold or stone.” Authors found life short, the universe infinite, and external pursuits unreliable. “Yin and yang changes are vast, human life is like morning dew, transient and fragile.”

“Nineteen Ancient Poems” focused on life's impermanence and brevity. The late Han literati often lamented, e.g., “Born between heaven and earth, one is suddenly like a traveler from afar.” Time's infinity and life's finiteness contrast sharply. Trying to transcend time is feeble but tragic.

Many poems depict life's helplessness and pain. In “Green Cypress on the Mound”, the permanence of cypress and stones contrasts with life's brevity, triggering thoughts like “Life is like a traveler.” The poet then reflects on his smallness against the vast world and the differences between rich and poor, feeling life's desolation.

Friendship woes also feature. “I don't care about the singer's pain, but the rarity of a bosom friend saddens me.” and “Once my friends soared and forgot me.” show the pain of friendless and betrayal, adding to life's tragedy.

Death is a frequent theme, reflecting people's cherish of life. In “The Departed Are Getting More and More Sparse”, the scene of ruined tombs and cut cypresses is moving. Cold wind stirs homesickness and death fear, making one extremely sad. Similar scenes in other poems also highlight life's preciousness. Due to career setbacks, scholars' pursuits dropped, seeking compensation. Despite seeming optimism, deep sadness remains.

The late Han literati tried but failed to change hardships, highlighting the tragic consciousness of these poems. They resonate across time for caring about life and death.[5]

Compared with Han fu and yuefu poems, “Nineteen Ancient Poems” has unique life consciousness. Han fu focused on cosmic life, neglecting individuals; yuefu had strong

life and death feelings but lacked reflection on individual life value. Jian'an literati cared for group life and hoped to extend life value through achievements. In contrast, "Nineteen Ancient Poems" used gentle, philosophical, and sad language to write about individuals facing life issues, revealing the late Han literati's strong life emotions.

5 Conclusion

"Nineteen Ancient Poems" reflects late Han literati's life consciousness. Using tender language, it explores survival, death, separation, and meaning - seeking in a changing world, mirroring their emotional and philosophical struggles during social unrest.

Influenced by Laozi and Zhuangzi, the poems shift from collective to individual thinking. The "life as a sojourn" theme highlights life's fragility, inspiring a "carpe diem" attitude. The poems' tragic beauty lies in portraying suffering like unfulfilled ambitions while celebrating life's fleeting moments. Their universal themes resonate, offering insights into human dilemmas. Compared to Han fu and yuefu, these poems mark a step in expressing individual life consciousness. Their introspection and depth make them a Chinese literary cornerstone.

In short, "Nineteen Ancient Poems" reflects the late Han context and offers insights into life, death, and meaning - seeking. Its exploration of individual existence still resonates, making it vital for understanding human life.

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