ABSTRACT

Chen Zi Ang (658-699), an eminent poet of the early Tang dynasty, is much celebrated for his thirty-eight Gan Yu poems. His works are still the object of study to this present day.

This Honours thesis consists of five chapters. The first chapter traces the poetic tradition of the Gan Yu poems to Ruan Ji's pentasyllabic Yong Huai poetry. Chen inherits Ruan's literary techniques, such as the use of allusions and specific imagery. In terms of theme, both poets lament their helpless situation and yearn for seclusion to avoid tragedy. However, Chen's poems express concern for the well-being of society; whereas the Yong Huai tend to convey Ruan's personal sentiments in light of his precarious political position.

Most scholars adopt a historical reading of the Gan Yu cycle, i.e. they interpret the poems as a direct reflection of the life and times of Chen Zi Ang. However, it is impossible to determine the exact date of each poem. Their approach also neglects the poetic tradition and literary techniques of the poetry, and overlooks what the poems are trying to convey on their own. Thus I have chosen to adopt a literary perspective instead, viewing the poems as literary works rather than political allegories. Nonetheless, I am not wholly against a historical reading of the text as long as it is not
overdone, in cases when certain poems make obvious political insinuations and a historical reading is mandatory.

The second chapter introduces Chen Zi Ang’s life: his family background, political career, retirement, and investigates his eventual death. The third chapter examines the contextual circumstances in which the *Gan Yu* poems were written. This was during the reign of Empress Wu, where Buddhism was an instrument for legitimizing the credibility of the regime and cruel officials were extensively employed to crush potential political dissidents. The fourth chapter seeks to understand the *Gan Yu* series. Many of the poems criticize the ruler and her government, with regard to the implementation of injudicious military policies, employing harsh and incompetent officials, extravagant expenditure on lavish Buddhist sculptures, and wanton lifestyle to the neglect of affairs of state. Another group of poems follows the *Chu Ci* tradition and laments the poet’s unpropitious times. The last group advocates seclusion and immortality, both elements of Taoist thought. Of these, poem eleven reveals a positive outlook, waiting in anticipation for a more worthy government to serve. The rest reveal a tone of pessimism, whereby the poet’s grief is evoked by the waning of nature. These poems shed light upon the possible reasons for the poet’s seclusion,
namely: seclusion as a means to seek solace from political setbacks, to shun political danger and to preserve purity in character.