ABSTRACT

Based on a comparative study of the poems that were written to imperial command (应制诗) by Zhang Yue (张说) and Zhang Jiu Ling (张九龄), this academic exercise attempts to explore the merits of this subgenre of poetry that has otherwise received little attention.

Since these poems were written under imperial order, they were often thought to be pieces of eulogy for the emperor and thus dismissed as insignificant. However, it was the norm for poets in the Early Tang to compose these poems in celebration of imperial occasions. Court poetry in general had also played an important role in the development of regulated verse. Often done impromptu, it was a type of poetry contest among the courtiers, in which the emperor would either designate the themes or have his courtiers accompany (和) his compositions with works of their own. In fact, they should be seen as true reflections of the literary life in the Tang courts.

Given constraints such as types of social occasions and topics, the concept of “occasion context” is being employed as a basis for analysis. Thus changes to elements of the occasion, which include the occasion for composition, the relationship between the emperor and his ministers, would often result in subsequent changes to the content of the poems.

Through this, the thesis first traces the origins of such court activities to the Han rhyme prose (赋), and also to the chang-he poetry (唱和诗) in the courts of the Six Dynasties, before going into their developments in the various stages of Early Tang.
Following which, the study focuses on Zhang Yue and Zhang Jiu Ling, two influential statesmen and writers during the reign of Tang Xuan Zong. Their active participation in such group compositions and the type of content that was found in their poems not only showed their prominence as literary figures, and also more importantly their political status. A comparative study is done on various themes such as giving praise to the emperor’s achievements, celebrating of royal banquets, going on royal excursions and sending off courtiers, with the thematic emphasis of the Zangs noted and analysed. A further examination of the structure and usage of allusions in their poems also shows that Zhang Yue and Zhang Jiu Ling tended towards different approaches to show the imperial theme or to evoke political and moral reasoning in the emperor.

It should be clear then that the Zangs were not merely court poets. This comparative study of their works presented a more solemn and meaningful aspect of this much neglected subgenre, thus showing the uniqueness and significance of poems that were written to imperial command.