SYNOPSIS

In the history of Chinese Ci poetry, the two schools are "subtle and concise" (Wan-Yue) and "powerful and free" (Hao-fang) styles. Of the two, the "subtle and concise" style is considered the original characteristic style of Ci. Within this style, Wen Ting-yun (温庭筠), Liu Yong (柳 永), Zhou Bang-yan (周邦彦) and Jiang Bai-shi (姜 白 石) have been recognised as four of the most distinguished poets.

Wen Ting-yun was a successful pioneer in the realm of Ci poetry which was first created by the masses of the people of the Tang dynasty. Liu Yong was the first scholar in the Sung dynasty who enlarged the artistic conception of Ci poetry to enable a larger scope of themes to be written in Ci. Zhou Bang-yan was a famous poet of the Sung dynasty who epitomized the style of this school; and Jiang Bai-shi carried forward the good traditions of these scholars with his elegant style and matured skill which later enabled him to establish himself as a distinguished poet of the Sung era.

This thesis is a complete comparative study of the similarities and the differences amongst these four distinguished poets based on their original works and comments or criticisms from the past scholars and modern critics. It is the intention of the writer to give readers a clearer picture of the extent of the contributions and influences of these poets in the history of Ci poetry.

The steps employed in this thesis incorporate 3 areas concerning the four above-mentioned Ci poets:

1. the historical perspective;
2. their biographies and
3. the literary criticisms of their works.

(i)
There are four parts in this thesis. The first part covers the factors that influenced the then historical era; the literary environment: the trend of philosophical thinking and the poets' life experiences.

The second part attempts at an intensive comparative study of the contents of their works. It contains ten areas pertaining to the feelings of neglected women, love, solitude in a foreign province, festive moods, natural scenery, specific creations of nature, weariness and frustrations with life, a sense of forlornness for their invaded homeland, nostalgia for the past and poems dedicated to the emperor and court officials.

In the third part, an intensive comparative study of their writing skills is explored. It also contains ten areas relating to the use of meters, rhyming words, tone patterns, metaphors, literal descriptions, choice of words, repeated words, writing style, contrasting phrases and historical episodes in the poems.

The concluding part covers an overview of their contributions towards Ci poetry and the influences of their works during their respective era and the future Ci poets.