

A Preliminary Study on the Art of Xin Qiji's Self-Address as "Laozi" in His Ci Poems

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Abstract. Xin Qiji frequently referred to himself as "*Laozi*"—literally, "this old man"—a self-designation that appears sixteen times in his ci poetry. This form of address runs through his later creative career and carries multiple emotional inflections, including self-mockery, arrogance, indignation, and heroic unconstraint. It functions not only as a linguistic strategy through which he withdraws from the dominant framework of socio-political judgment and affirms the self-sufficiency of his own subjectivity, but also as an externalization of his Confucian commitment to serving the world and his affinity with Lao-Zhuang thought under particular life circumstances. At the artistic level, this self-designation became a linguistic foundation of the bold and unconstrained ci style, helping to establish the technical transformation associated with "using prose methods in ci composition" and adding a distinct note of humor to the genre. Xin Qiji's use of "*Laozi*" as a self-appellation exerted a significant influence on the Xin school of ci poets in the Southern Song, as well as on later writers such as Lu You, Yuan Haowen, and Chen Weisong. It expanded the social and communicative functions of ci, established a new paradigm for the bold and unconstrained school, and became an important marker of the literati transformation of the ci genre.

Keywords: Xin Qiji, self-address as "*Laozi*", Xin Qiji's ci poems

1. Introduction

Among the self-addresses of literati in the Song Dynasty, the term "*Laozi*" naturally carries emotions such as vulgarity and arrogance. It is both a disdain for the secular world and a sharp display of self-worth [1]. Xin Qiji often referred to himself as "*Laozi*", which was often marked by a rebellious spirit. As a bold ci poet of the Southern Song Dynasty, Xin Qiji was always caught between "serving in the court" and "living in the rivers and lakes". He was eager to make contributions, yet had to accept the fate of being left idle, which laid the emotional tone of self-mockery and arrogance in his poems and ci.

In recent years, the academic circle has paid certain attention to the self-address of "*Laozi*". Some scholars, from the perspective of culturology, have systematically sorted out the cultural psychology of literati in the Song Dynasty referring to themselves as "*Laozi*", pointing out that the appearance of "*Laozi*" in Xin Qiji's ci poems often endows his works with the complex sentiment of "old but unyielding, old but grief-stricken, old and unrestrained" [1]. In addition, some scholars also mention

the self-address of "Laozi" in Xin's ci poems in different topics, taking it as an important example to analyze the poet's mentality [2,3,4]. However, previous studies by scholars either stayed at the linguistic evolution or only cited it as evidence, and have not made a systematic and rigorous analysis connecting the self-address of "Laozi" with Xin Qiji. In other words, the academic research on this self-address only remains in static emotional analysis and superficial semantics, rather than dynamically and holistically expounding the linear relationship between Jiaxuan and this self-address. Issues such as this artistic construction still need in-depth research.

This paper takes all works with the self-address of "Laozi" in Jiaxuan's poems and ci as the research object, places them in specific contexts, deeply analyzes the cultural changes of the term "Laozi", and explores how Xin Qiji generates complex emotional tension in specific linguistic communication when referring to himself as "Laozi". On this basis, it further discusses the subjective consciousness carried by the use of the term "Laozi" in Jiaxuan's ci poems and its unique role in the formation of the prose-style ci of the Xin School poets. This study not only helps to understand Xin Jiaxuan and the Xin School poets, but also provides a useful case for the interdisciplinary research of self-addresses and dialogue art in classical poems and ci.

2. Textual performance

Among the more than 600 existing poems and ci of Xin Jiaxuan, the self-address of "Laozi" appears 16 times in total, mainly concentrated in the last one-sixth of his life. It first appeared when Jiaxuan was 36 years old, and the latest when he was 63 years old. Careful sorting of these works reveals that Xin Qiji's use of the self-address of "Laozi" was an inevitable choice for the poet under specific discourse. Each use has a different emotional tone. The following lists five most representative works to analyze and elaborate the context and emotional orientation of this self-address in different environments.

Spring in the Pleasure Garden-Part Two, Stopping Drinking and Ordering the Wine Cup Not to Come Near [5] was written in the second year of the Qingyuan period (1196), shortly after Jiaxuan was demoted and moved to Piaoquan. The style of this ci is very unique. The opening line "Cup, come before me; Laozi, today, examines my body" adopts personification to converse with the wine cup. At this time, Jiaxuan stopped drinking due to illness, but referred to himself as "Laozi", making this "conversation" with the wine cup full of vigor. The first sentence sets the tone of the whole piece. He admonishes the wine cup in a commanding tone, showing his arrogant mentality. But behind this lies helplessness in self-mockery. The subtext of "Laozi, today, examines my body" is the helplessness of "suffering from thirst for years" and "feeling dizzy now". This is the alienation from the official identity and the grief over life's fate. The ending reads "The cup bows again, saying, I will leave at your command, and come when you call". On the surface, it describes the obedience of the wine cup, but in fact, it is the stubbornness of adhering to the true self. He declares his resistance to fate with a rebellious attitude.

Spring in the Pleasure Garden-Part One [5] was written in the fifteenth year of the Chunxi period (1188), when Xin Qiji was still living in seclusion at Daihu. The court gazette falsely spread that Xin Qiji had resigned due to illness. This ci is a humorous response to this false rumor and a self-revelation of his seclusion state of mind. "Laozi, all my life, have laughed at all the grudges and affections of the mortal world". Opening with the self-address of "Laozi", he looks down on the worldly grievances, responds with a chivalrous tone, and detaches himself from the court identity. "How many white-haired years can one have? I shall surely go alone; those who succeed in officialdom, they say, live long." The poet uses images such as white hair to satirize those who "succeed in officialdom" and mock himself for having no way to serve the country. The next stanza

takes a sharp turn: "But I look at my lonely figure in sorrow, grieving over past events frequently; I pray devoutly to the Buddha, wanting to ask about the cause of my fate." Beneath the laughter lies the true state of mind of "looking at my lonely figure in sorrow". "Friends in the mountains, try chanting the verses of *Chu Ci* loudly, and summon my soul again." The ending alludes to *Chu Ci*, expressing openness to his own fate amid boldness. This is Xin Qiji's self-mockery for being left idle for seven years.

The River All Red-Part Eight, Presented to Fuwen Zhao Jinchun [5] was written in the sixth year of the Qingyuan period (1200). Zhao Jinchun, namely Zhao Buyu, a member of the Zhao imperial clan of the Song Dynasty, lived in seclusion in Yanshan and had a deep friendship with Xin Qiji. The ci opens with: "*Laozi*, all my life, originally had golden plates and magnificent houses. What's more, I wanted ten thousand houses for the poor scholars, standing abruptly before my eyes." The poet looks back on the past, full of self-mockery, implying that his former glorious life has passed away. "Ten thousand houses for the poor scholars" adapts the poetic sentiment of Du Fu, reflecting the recollection of his past aspirations and the helplessness of reality. Then the tone changes: "I return on a boat as light as a leaf; the two old men face each other as pure as swans." The images of "as light as a leaf" and "as pure as swans" reflect the calmness and detachment after experiencing all the glories.

The River All Red-Laozi in Those Years [5] was probably written by the sea in Fujian in the fourth year of the Shaoxi period (1194). "*Laozi* in those years, was used to blooming seasons and drinking appointments." Opening with "*Laozi* in those years", he recalls the glory of his youth, writing all about his past romance and pride, with a touch of heroism. The next stanza suddenly turns, using two verbs "sigh" and "vain" in succession. "Holding new regrets, wandering again" forms a huge contrast with the former "wearing light fur and a sash, riding a golden-strapped embroidered horse". "*Laozi*" also changes from pride to self-mockery, all reflecting the desolation of a hero in his old age. The poet compares himself to a thin horse, writing all about the loneliness and helplessness of his later years. The boldness of "*Laozi* in those years" has turned into the helplessness of "a thin horse trotting alone".

King of Lanling-Ode to a Hill and a Ravine [5] was written in the first year of the Qingyuan period (1195). Xin Qiji was implicated in the "Qingyuan Party Prohibition". This was the beginning of the deterioration of Xin Qiji's political situation. At this time, Xin Qiji had just been demoted and moved to Piaoquan. "A hill and a ravine. *Laozi* has occupied all the romance." At this moment, his heart was full of complex emotions, but he opened with such an overbearing self-address of "*Laozi*" to declare sovereignty over the landscape, connecting romance with hills and ravines, showing a bold bearing of "heaven and earth embrace my heart". The juxtaposition of the two integrates the sorrow of demotion, and reflects a heroic spirit of "no one but me", accompanied by two meanings: indulging in landscape and swearing to fate.

Looking at these five works, the self-address of "*Laozi*" in Xin Qiji's writings, under the rebellious background, has various emotional expressions such as self-mockery, arrogance, and indignation, and endows more emotional capacity to accommodate these emotions, realizing the aesthetic improvement of "turning the vulgar into the elegant". The poet's use of "*Laozi*" is dialectically unified with the argumentative tendency of writing ci in prose style. Jiaxuan used it to construct a non-official speaking subject, freeing it from the constraints of ancient Chinese Confucianism, and providing a linguistic template for later literati to maintain dignity in adversity.

3. Ideological origin

The term "*Laozi*" is a self-address for elderly men since the Han and Wei Dynasties. The appearance of this term in Xin Qiji's ci poems is related to his thoughts. It is the externalization of his Confucian foundation and Lao-Zhuang thought in specific life situations, presenting a unique spiritual structure of "complementation between Confucianism and Taoism".

3.1. Confucian foundation

The ideological foundation of Xin Qiji is pure Confucian spirit of engaging in the world. As a native of Shandong, he was inevitably influenced by Confucian culture. He devoted his whole life to the mission of recovering the Central Plains and assisting the state, and his ci poems are filled with the fervent aspiration of "accomplishing the king's affairs of unifying the world, winning fame both in life and after death" [5]. This strong sense of social responsibility and ambition to serve the society runs through his life. For example, the line "A man carrying a hoed basket passes by, looking up to the sky and laughing, his hairpin falling off" in his seclusion cleverly alludes to the allusion of "the old man carrying a hoed basket", expressing his state of mind towards official career [5]. The root of his grief and sorrow lies in the huge psychological gap after the frustration of Confucian ideals [6]. There is often "a conflict between seclusion and unwillingness to be idle" in Xin's ci poems [7], which is exactly the embodiment of the fierce conflict between the Confucian ambition to serve the world and the reality of being left idle. Therefore, the core of Jiaxuan is still a Confucian patriot who never forgets the world.

3.2. Integration of Lao-Zhuang thought

When the path of Confucianism to benefit the world was blocked by reality, Taoism's idea of cultivating oneself alone became an important spiritual outlet for him. Xin Qiji's preference and frequent use of the term "*Laozi*" is precisely a significant signal that his thoughts are moving closer to Lao-Zhuang [6].

Zhuangzi's philosophy emphasizes "equality of all things" and "self-transformation". The image constructed in Xin's ci poems attempts to detach from social and political judgments, and instead establish a self-sufficient subjective value. For example, "A hill and a ravine. *Laozi* has occupied all the romance" [5] is a declaration that he has found a place to settle his life in the natural order of self-transformation of all things [8]. He chooses to be the master of his own self-worth, which is in line with the Taoist pursuit of individual spiritual independence. Faced with the ups and downs of personal fate, Zhuangzi advocates "acquiescing in time and following nature" [5]. The realm of "*Laozi* has no worldly desires, wandering casually, as swans fly in the sky" in Xin Qiji's ci poems is the practice of this philosophy [9]. Having no worldly desires means letting go of ingenuity and obsessions, and wandering with swans in the sky symbolizes the unity of spirit and nature, thus achieving transcendence over real sufferings. At this time, "*Laozi*" has been freed from the entanglements of social relations and integrated into the mountain forest, a symbolic field of Taoist spirit.

It is worth noting that many of Xin Qiji's ci poems containing the self-address of "*Laozi*" are responsive works titled "He" (in response to), "Da" (in reply to) or "Xie" (in thanks to). The deliberate use of this title in literati exchanges has clear dialogic and performative nature. It not only conveys to colleagues and friends a signal that he has been unrestrained and comfortable, to comfort

the other party or boast about himself, but also becomes a distinct identity marker for him in a specific literati circle.

3.3. Absence of Buddhism

In Xin Qiji's ideological spectrum, although Buddhism occasionally leaves traces, it has never become his spiritual pillar. The extreme indifference of Buddhism, which holds that all four elements are empty, is fundamentally incompatible with Xin Qiji's temperament. He cannot let go completely like a real Zen practitioner; his indifference is only an appearance, and a fire to mend the broken sky is always burning in his bones. The transcendence required by Buddhism is neither feasible nor willing for him. Although there was a trend of wild Zen such as Daoji in the Song Dynasty, it was not the mainstream thought of scholar-officials. Wild Zen could hardly become a fundamental support for scholars to settle down. Xin Qiji's grief and resistance were more suitable to be expressed in Confucianism and Taoism. The "emptiness" of Buddhism is too resolute to accommodate his contradictory emotion of "sorrowing whether advancing or retreating".

Therefore, the main structure of Xin Qiji's thought is the complementation of Confucianism and Taoism, rather than the coexistence of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism.

3.4. Causes and contradictions

However, the complexity of Xin Qiji's thought lies that Confucianism and Taoism are always in a tense dynamic balance [9]. Taoism provided a spiritual mountain forest, but failed to completely extinguish his fire of serving the world.

The cause is that he devoted his whole life to the ambition of "accomplishing the king's affairs of unifying the world", but due to the appeasement policy of the Southern Song court, identity discrimination against returned northerners, and the exclusion of the peace faction, he was left unused for most of his life. The Confucian path of serving the world was blocked, forcing him to turn to other ideological resources for a way out. Taoism provided an excellent buffer and explanatory framework for his unsolvable real contradictions, preventing him from a mental breakdown.

The contradiction is that his turning to the mountain forest was passive and forced; beneath his indifference, there was always unwillingness [8]. What he loved was not real seclusion. Therefore, great joy and great sorrow are often intertwined in his ci poems.

To sum up, Xin Qiji's self-address as "*Laozi*" is a unique life gesture formed by his wandering between Confucianism and Taoism.

4. Artistic style and functional significance

The sixteen self-addresses of "*Laozi*" in Xin Qiji's ci poems have clear artistic consciousness. This creative use has achieved important artistic functions at three levels: first, it has become the linguistic cornerstone for the establishment of the bold ci style; second, it has deeply participated in the technical reform of writing ci in prose style; and it has also injected a unique humorous tone into Xin's ci poems.

4.1. Linguistic cornerstone for establishing the bold ci style

An important reason why literati in the Song Dynasty referred to themselves as "*Laozi*" is that it affects the style of works and shows the author's personality [1]. It has almost become an iconic

vocabulary for bold ci poets. When Xin Qiji referred to himself as "*Laozi*" in his ci poems, the works often present a unique style of boldness and desolation. For example, "*Laozi*, all my life, have laughed at all the grudges and affections of the mortal world" [5] shows the image of a vicarious old man who has experienced all the ups and downs, and the contrast between "*Laozi*" and "children" further highlights the transcendence and boldness of the old man. The polysemy of this self-address endows the bold ci style with rich emotional levels. Jiaxuan referred to himself as "Weng" (old man) and "*Laozi*", showing "a gesture of uninhibited pride or expressing sentimental self-mockery" [10]. It is this rebellious background that makes "*Laozi*" the most intuitive linguistic symbol of Xin Qiji's bold ci style.

4.2. Promoting the technical reform of "writing ci in prose style"

Not avoiding vulgarity and integrating elegant and vulgar language is one of the important characteristics of writing ci in prose style. The introduction of the self-address of "*Laozi*" is a concentrated embodiment of this technical concept. It breaks the barrier between elegance and vulgarity in ci language. Since the birth of ci poems in the Tang and Song Dynasties, "elegance" has been regarded as the orthodox, and the language is mostly elegant and implicit. Xin Qiji boldly introduced the colloquial self-address of "*Laozi*" with a secular flavor into ci poems, bringing a fundamental change to the language style of ci poems, realizing the transformation of "turning the vulgar into the elegant". Moreover, this self-address is promoted synchronously with the prose tendency of writing ci in prose style. Xin Qiji adopted a large number of prose syntax in his ci poems to meet the needs of expressing content. Although it is colloquial, it can be integrated with classics, historical allusions and argumentation, with a unique linguistic tension. Xin Qiji's absorption of Taoist thought and technical innovation of writing ci in prose style were carried out simultaneously, which also strengthened the subjective consciousness of ci. In traditional ci studies, the lyrical subject is often hidden behind images. The self-address of "*Laozi*" can declare the presence of the self in the most straightforward way. The strengthening of this subjective consciousness is highly consistent with the spiritual direction of pursuing freedom of speech in writing ci in prose style.

4.3. Injecting an aesthetic tone of wit and humor

The self-address of "*Laozi*" in Xin Qiji's ci poems is often combined with a witty and humorous tone, forming a unique aesthetic effect of solemnity in humor.

The most typical example is "Cup, come before me; *Laozi*, today, examines my body" [5], calling the cup "you" and referring to himself as "*Laozi*". Through the question and answer between the poet and the cup, the whole ci humorously and euphemistically expresses the author's disappointment with the Southern Song regime and the depression in his heart. Here, the self-address of "*Laozi*" is combined with personification and prose syntax, making the serious theme of stopping drinking present a comedic color, but also implies the bitterness of a hero losing his way.

This witty and humorous tone also appears from time to time in other ci poems. For example, *Spring in the Pleasure Garden-Ode to the Stream* [5] ends with "*Laozi* lingers leisurely", which on the one hand reflects his old age, and on the other hand implies the poet's self-mockery of being old and useless, thus being abandoned. Its self-mockery allows him to maintain spiritual dignity when demoted.

To sum up, the repeated self-address of "*Laozi*" in Xin's ci poems embodies his artistic ingenuity. He used this colloquial self-address to support the bold ci style and promote the reform of writing ci

in prose style. The tone of self-mockery and banter adds a touch of humor to the ci form.

5. Conclusion

Xin Qiji's creative use of the self-address of "*Laozi*" has profoundly influenced the creation of ci poets in the Southern Song Dynasty and later generations [6]. Xin School poets such as Chen Liang and Liu Guo, although not directly using this self-address, inherited his spiritual direction of using colloquial language in ci poems and taking the self as the speaking subject. Lines such as "*Laozi* can still cross the vast desert" in Lu You's poems clearly show the influence of Jiaxuan [11]. Later generations such as Yuan Haowen and Chen Weisong often referred to themselves with this term in their ci poems, continuing this tradition. Secondly, he deeply integrated the self-address of "*Laozi*" with dialogue art, transforming the ci form from personal monologue to group dialogue, and expanding the social communicative function of ci [6]. He also communicated Confucianism and Taoism with this image, opening up a new aesthetic realm between boldness and depression. It can be said that "*Laozi*" is not only a personal spiritual symbol of Xin Qiji, but also one of the important signs of the maturity and literatization of the ci form in the Song Dynasty [6].

The "*Laozi*" in Xin Qiji's writings integrates individual temperament, Taoist thought and artistic innovation, and at the same time carries the grief of a hero losing his way, the self-mockery of unfulfilled aspirations and the openness of retiring to landscape, which is a true projection of his complex personality [8]. In addition, he transformed philosophical concepts such as the equality of all things into perceptible literary images through it, completing the aesthetic expression of Taoist thought [6]. Taking this as a fulcrum, he promoted the comprehensive innovation of the ci form in language, style and function, and established a new paradigm for the bold ci school.

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