

The Portrayal of Character Images in the “*Book of Songs*” through the Eight-Legged Essays in the Ming Dynasty Imperial Examinations

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Abstract: The depiction of character images from the “*Book of Songs*” in the Ming Dynasty’s eight-legged essays (“baguwen”) served as an essential method for analyzing classical meanings and showcasing literary talent. This paper examines the Ming Dynasty provincial and metropolitan examination essays to identify two primary techniques used in shaping character images: first, the use of imagery from the “*Book of Songs*” to reflect the inner states of characters, including the interaction between objects and characters in “direct exposition” (“Fu”), the symbolic representation of characters’ inner states through “analogy” (“Bi”), and the reinforcement of the relationship between objects and characters through “evocative imagery” (“Xing”); second, the direct portrayal of characters through their speech. The study reveals that Ming Dynasty essayists, while adhering to the strict conventions of the imperial examinations, skillfully employed literary techniques to recreate the character images from the “*Book of Songs*”, demonstrating a high level of literary creativity.

Keywords: “*Book of Songs*”; Eight-legged essays; Character images; Ming Dynasty

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1. Introduction

The eight-legged essays of the Ming Dynasty evolved from the classical exegesis essays (“jingyiwen”) of the Song and Yuan Dynasties. During the Song Dynasty, the imperial examination system underwent two major reforms, known as the Xining and Yuanyou reforms, which divided the examination into two streams: the poetry and prose stream (“shifu jinshi”) and the classical studies stream (“zhuanjing jinshi”). Both streams required candidates to demonstrate their understanding of classical texts, but the emphasis shifted from rote memorization to the ability to articulate the meanings of the classics with clarity and literary flair. The Ming Dynasty’s eight-legged essays further refined this tradition. According to the “Ming Shi” (History of the Ming Dynasty), “The essays were modeled after the Song Dynasty’s classical exegesis, but they were written in the voice of ancient sages, with a strict parallel structure, hence the name ‘eight-legged essays’”^[1, p. 1131]. This indicates that writing eight-legged essays required not only a deep understanding of classical texts but also the ability to mimic the voices of ancient sages and adhere to a rigid structural format.

The Ming Dynasty government strictly regulated the reference materials for the imperial examinations. The primary texts included the “Four Books” and the “Five Classics”, with specific commentaries designated as authoritative. For example, the “*Book of Songs*” was to be interpreted according to Zhu Xi’s “Collected Commentaries on the *Book of Songs*” (“Shi Ji Zhuan”). This left little room for innovation in classical interpretation, so candidates focused on demonstrating their literary skills within the constraints of the eight-legged essay format. The “*Book of Songs*”, being one of the most literary of the Confucian classics, offered rich material for literary interpretation. The portrayal of character images in the “*Book of Songs*” was particularly important, as it reflected both the candidate’s understanding of classical meanings and their literary creativity. This paper will analyze the methods used in Ming Dynasty eight-legged essays to depict character images from the “*Book of Songs*”, focusing on essays from the provincial and metropolitan examinations recorded in the “Tianyi Ge Collection of Ming Dynasty Examination Records”^[2, 3].

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2. Using Imagery in “Direct exposition”(“Fu”) to Reflect Character Images

The *“Book of Songs”* contains numerous scenes of ancient life, often depicted through the “direct exposition”(“Fu”) technique, which involves direct description. As Zhu Xi explained, “direct exposition is the straightforward recounting of events”^[4, p. 4]. Ye Jiaying further elaborated that “direct exposition” involves direct narration, while Li Guikui described it as “simultaneously depicting objects and inner states”^[5, p. 167]. In other words, “direct exposition” presents both the external scene and the inner emotions of the characters in a single layer. When the examination question was based on a passage using the “Direct exposition” technique, candidates had to use the imagery in the text to reflect the characters’ inner states, thereby bringing the characters to life.

For example, in the poem “Shuo Ren” from the “Airs of Wei”, the first stanza describes the noble status of Lady Zhuang, while the second stanza portrays her beauty. If the poem ended here, readers would only see a static image of a noblewoman. However, the subsequent stanzas describe the solemnity of her carriage and the prosperity of her homeland, elevating her image from a beautiful noblewoman to a virtuous lady from a prosperous and cultured state. This demonstrates the importance of scene-setting in shaping character images and conveying poetic meaning.

In the Ming Dynasty examinations, questions often focused on descriptive passages from the *“Book of Songs”*. For instance, the 1519 Guangdong provincial examination used a passage from “Ge Tan” describing lush vines and singing birds, while the 1462 Shandong provincial examination used a passage from “Hu Ye” depicting a banquet scene. When the examination question was based on a single stanza or a few lines, candidates had to use the “linking” technique (“qianshang daxia”) to connect the given lines to the broader context of the poem. This required a deep understanding of the poem’s structure and meaning, as well as the ability to weave the imagery into a coherent portrayal of the characters.

A notable example is Deng Zhiqing’s essay on the “Ge Tan” passage in the 1519 Guangdong provincial examination. Deng began by identifying the scene as a recollection by a noble consort, using the imagery of the vines and birds to reflect her industrious and virtuous character. The examiners praised Deng’s ability to connect the imagery to the character’s inner qualities, noting that his essay captured the essence of the poem.

3. Using Imagery in “Analogy”(Bi) and “Evocative imagery”(Xing) to Reflect Character Images

The *“Book of Songs”* frequently employs the “analogy”(Bi) and “evocative imagery”(Xing) techniques to convey character images. “Analogy” involves using one object to represent another, while “evocative imagery” uses an initial image to evoke a related idea or emotion. These techniques allow for a more nuanced portrayal of characters, as the imagery serves as a metaphor or symbol for the characters’ qualities.

(1) Using imagery in “analogy” to reflect inner states

In “analogy,” the imagery is entirely subservient to the character, serving as an external representation of their inner qualities. Ming Dynasty essayists often focused on describing the imagery in detail before revealing its connection to the character.

For example, Yao Lian’s essay on the “Zhong Si” poem in the 1523 metropolitan examination used the imagery of locusts to represent the noble consort’s fertility and virtue. Yao began by explaining the metaphorical nature of the poem, then described the locusts’ behavior in detail before connecting it to the consort’s virtuous character. This approach was widely recognized as a standard technique in Ming Dynasty eight-legged essays.

(2) Using imagery in “evocative imagery” to reflect character images

In “evocative imagery,” the imagery serves as a catalyst for the poet’s reflections on a particular subject. Ming Dynasty essayists often added a mediating perspective to connect the imagery to the character.

For example, Zhang Houjia's essay on the "Guan Ju" poem in the 1576 Jiangsu provincial examination used the imagery of ospreys to reflect the harmonious relationship between King Wen and his consort. Zhang introduced the perspective of a palace attendant, who observed the ospreys and reflected on the virtues of the royal couple. This mediating perspective allowed for a smooth transition from the imagery to the characters, creating a more vivid portrayal.

(3) Summary

The "direct exposition," "analogy," and "evocative imagery" techniques in the *"Book of Songs"* offer rich material for the portrayal of character images. Ming Dynasty essayists used these techniques to create vivid and nuanced depictions of characters, demonstrating their literary skill within the constraints of the eight-legged essay format.

4. Using Direct Speech to Construct Character Images

In eight-legged essays, mimicking the speech of ancient characters was not only a way to construct character images but also a requirement of the examination format. Candidates had to demonstrate their familiarity with the classical texts by accurately reproducing the voices of the characters.

For example, Xue Hui's essay on the Qi Yuepoem in the 1513 Jiangsu provincial examination used the speech of the Duke of Zhou to reflect his concern for the people's welfare. By mimicking the Duke's voice, Xue created a vivid portrayal of a benevolent and diligent ruler.

Similarly, Lu Guangzu's essay on the "Nü Yue Ji Ming" poem in the 1513 Shanxi provincial examination used the speech of a virtuous wife to reflect her devotion to her husband's moral development. The examiners praised Lu's ability to create a lifelike portrayal of the character through her speech.

5. Conclusion

The eight-legged essays of the Ming Dynasty were a tool for selecting officials who could uphold Confucian values and stabilize the state. While the format was highly regulated, it also allowed for significant literary creativity. As this paper has shown, Ming Dynasty essayists used the "direct exposition," "analogy," and "evocative imagery" techniques from the *"Book of Songs"* to create vivid and nuanced portrayals of character images. They also demonstrated their literary skill by mimicking the speech of ancient characters and adding supplementary details to enhance the portrayal. Despite the rigid constraints of the eight-legged essay format, Ming Dynasty writers were able to infuse their essays with literary value, making them a rich subject for further study.

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