

# On the Implication of Spirituality Theory in Yuan Mei's Poems

Yusu Wang

College of Literature, Liaoning Normal University, Dalian, China

835998978@qq.com

**Abstract.** As a representative poet and essayist in the Qianjia period of the Qing Dynasty, Yuan Mei who styled himself Zikai with Jianzhai as his courtesy name was a scholar at the beginning and had a good reputation in his official career. However, he resigned and lived in seclusion in the 14<sup>th</sup> year of the Qianlong period after witnessing some challenges. Advocating the “spirituality” (Spirituality theory is an idea of poetry inditement and comment in ancient Chinese poetics, which is advocated most strongly by Yuan Mei in Qing Dynasty. It is one of the four major schools of poetry theory in the early Qing Dynasty, together with verve theory, style theory, and texture theory) of poetry inditement, Yuan Mei paid attention to expressing the author's true emotion and personality. “Spirituality” put forward by him attacked the popular retro-ism and formalism in poetry at that time, which was of progressive significance, although it had limitations due to its overemphasis on subjective emotion. This paper will analyze Yuan Mei's spirituality theory from the image and emotion of Yuan Mei's poetry inditement.

**Keywords:** Yuan Mei; Poetry; Spirituality.

## 1. Introduction

Yuan Mei was productive in his works, including *Essays of Suiyuan on Poetry* (*Essays of Suiyuan on Poetry* is a work of poetry aesthetics and theory created by Yuan Mei, a writer in Qing Dynasty.), *Collected Poems and Writing from the Studio of Mt. Xiaocang*, etc. With unique poetry inditement, he is accomplished in aesthetic theory, especially his “spirituality theory” which has the most extensive and far-reaching influence. As for the current research, the number of studies related to Yuan Mei is limited, and the research focuses on the discussions pertinent to *Essays of Suiyuan on Poetry* and spirituality theory. Research on spirituality theory is to study the theory in general and its application to Yuan Mei's literary works. However, there is not much explicit research on spirituality theory in Yuan Mei's poetry inditement. This paper will supplement and analyze his spirituality theory based on Yuan Mei's literary thought and poetry spirituality theory.

## 2. Origin of the Spirituality Theory

As for its early development, the word “spirituality” can be traced in Liu Xie's *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* is a literary theory work created by Liu Xie, a literary theorist in the Southern Dynasty, from 501 to 502 in the Southern Dynasty.) that “the people between heaven and earth cooperate with each other and condense the heaven-earth spirit, which is what Taoism calls ‘San Cai’. Man is the primate above all and the essence of heaven and earth. People have thoughts and feelings, thus producing language and articles, which is also the law between nature.” It has already shown that people are spiritual, and the phrase “language stems from the emotions” even manifests that people have thoughts before language appears, which also reflects the importance attached to emotions. In the Tang Dynasty, according to the *Dedicated to Intendant of the Capital of Xiang Guo* written by Li Shangyin, “Inheriting the beauty of the five elements and embracing the complexity of the seven emotions, one will inevitably produce praises and sighs, to communicate with the essence of nature and spirit.” It advocates the writing to reveal subjective emotion and spirit. Yang Wanli in Song Dynasty was also an admirer of spirituality theory, which originated in the early days and experienced continuous development.

During the Qianlong period, the society was stable and the economy was prosperous, with agriculture, handicraft industry, and commerce all in good development. Besides, people's life was

relatively steady and rich, and the autocratic imperial power was strengthened, for which people's thoughts were controlled in various ways ideologically, and the literary inquisition became a nightmare for scholars. Neo-Confucianism of Cheng and Zhu was a tool to brainwash literati and officials to demand their complete obedience. Under such circumstances, the "verve theory" and "style theory" of poetry inditement flourished to avoid further obstacles, and textual research became the most respectable ology. Poetry inditement with the superficial form became a political tool in a backwater. Thus, the spirituality theory proposed by Yuan Mei was born in such an era. He tried to break through the ideological barriers, called for the expression of true emotions, and emphasized the "self" in his poetry inditement to pursue "the joy of being a human". In addition, Yuan Mei lived in fertile land, which stimulated him to reflect on poetry inditement. Moreover, family education and personal official career were all important factors for the formation and development of his spirituality theory. "Childishness theory" put forward by Li Zhi also had a certain influence on the spirituality theory.

### 3. Spirituality of Poetry Inditement

Spirituality theory advocated by Yuan Mei can also be regarded as temperament theory, which can be roughly divided into truth, talent, and living. Firstly, Yuan Mei respected the originality of poetry inditement and independent innovation, instead of imitating others. Secondly, poetry inditement needs "poetic talent" with certain literary accumulation and imagination, rather than casual writing. Finally, poetry inditement should be vivid and poems should be "alive" with Yuan Mei's superb techniques to animate simple poems. The image usage and emotional expression vitally manifest Yuan Mei's advocacy of spirituality theory in poetry inditement, which is analyzed below.

#### 3.1 Image

According to *Yizhuan* (*Yi Zhuan* is an ancient philosophical and ethical classic to interpret the *Book of Changes*. It belongs to the collection of essays explaining the *Book of Changes* in Warring States Period.), "Words cannot fully express thoughts, while thoughts cannot fully encompass meaning. The sage creates symbols to convey the depth of meaning." Image has been a significant tool for poets to express their feelings in poetry inditement since ancient times. Yuan Mei's spirituality theory can also be perceived from his poetic images.

##### 1. Image of Flowers and Plants

Yuan Mei can notice the relatively tiny scenery in nature and observe it minutely. Moreover, Yuan Mei's poems are spiritual, where people's thinking and emotion are given to natural images in poems, thus animating a poem. The nature in Yuan Mei's poems is always full of interest, which is also embodied by his poetic talent. Yuan Mei holds that poets should be erudite with literary accumulation before inditement. *The Preface to Jiang Xinyu's Miscellaneous Treasury Garden Poems* mentions that "poets without talent cannot transport classics to their hearts". Some moments in nature brought him the impulse of creation, so he recorded it in the form of poetry and produced new inspiration in poetry inditement. Combined with natural images, Yuan Mei output wonderful effects and the whole poem was full of spirituality.

"Where there's no sunshine, On its own green moss thrives fine. Though as tiny as a grain is its flower, It learns from peony to bloom with power." (*Moss*)

This poem is one of Yuan Mei's famous works. Choosing the image of a moss flower, Yuan Mei used simple and bright words. The word "learns" endows moss flowers with spirituality, as if they have human thinking despite their smallness, which imitates the peony and manages to bloom, breaking the boundary between nature and human beings in poetry.

"Spring breeze, like an honored guest, brings prosperity as soon as it arrives. It sweeps away the snow from a thousand mountains and leaves behind the flowers that bloom across the world." (*Spring Breeze*)

In this poem, Yuan Mei endowed the spring breeze with spirituality, comparing the spring breeze to a distinguished guest. The picture of “prosperity as soon as you arrive” is intense with simple language. However, the spring breeze was alive, which made people feel the quick revival of everything in spring.

“With their respective mood, they follow their love for warmth or coolness. The green moss asks the red leaves, ‘What is that thing called the setting sun?’” (*Moss*)

The first line holds that everything has its characteristics, whether it loves warmth or coolness. “Mood” can reflect Yuan Mei’s subconscious emphasis on subjective emotion and all in nature has “mood”. The third and fourth lines directly manifest spirituality theory. Moss and red leaves in the poem are endowed with vivid lives through their communication about the setting sun, which presents the vitality of the whole poem.

## 2. Image of Mountains and Rivers

In addition to tiny images such as flowers and plants, Yuan Mei also wrote images of mountains and rivers in magnificent scenes. Born to seek a free and easy life, he was a lover of landscapes and achieved a lot in his poems featuring mountains and rivers. The spirituality theory in this type of poem is mainly reflected in the stronger subjective consciousness and emotion as well as more emphasis on the echo and connection between the poet himself and nature. Moreover, the poet’s imagination is often bolder with more magnificent expressions in such poems.

“There is no trace of its origin or history, suddenly a peak thrusts into the Sagittarius. The landscape in Guilin is extraordinarily distinctive, with numerous wonders, yet the Peak of Unique Beauty stands out above all. Climbing its 360 steps to its summit, a city of mist and rivers unfolds before your eyes. Even the green mountains stand as straight as strings. In life, to stand alone, what harm does it bring?” (*Peak of Unique Beauty*)

This poem is a representative image of mountains and rivers. “Suddenly a peak thrusts into the Sagittarius” well presents the mountain rising from the ground and towering into the clouds. In this poem, the poet’s subjective consciousness is intense, which incorporates his personal emotions. The last line “In life, to stand alone, what harm does it bring?” expresses that it is not worthy of lamenting loneliness in life. Yuan Mei’s spirituality theory stirred controversy and disputes at that time, so he generated some loneliness. However, he who was free and easy didn’t care about it with detachment.

“A solitary peak stands tall, long secluded from the world, with winds and rains swirling around it, imbued with divine essence. In this remote place that reaches the heavens, with just a single stroke of the pen, behold the figure it leans upon, revealing whose work it is!” (*Lofty Straight Peak*)

This poem is also about the image of mountains. The poet used his strange imagination to compare the straight mountain to a pen that reaches the sky, which is unique and punning with a clever transformation. This poem also demonstrates the poet’s subjective emotion. With the help of the last line, the poet expressed that he did not depend on others to indite poetry but set his own style to release his true feelings.

## 3.2 Emotion

The emotional expression of Yuan Mei’s poems is an imperative demonstration of his thought on spirituality theory. We can feel his personality and attitude in his poems.

### 1. Free and Easy, Self-Originated Emotion

Yuan Mei never relied on others to write poems but pursued true personality and self. He clarified said in *Essays of Suiyuan on Poetry* that “Poetry cannot be indited without the self”. There are some similarities between Yuan Mei and Su Shi who is also free and easy without dwelling on the past. As for Su Shi, he held that “Sandals outdo saddles, cane as your aid, Who’s afraid? A cape against mist and rain, come what may.” Yuan Mei believed “Even the green mountains stand as straight as strings. In life, to stand alone, what harm does it bring?” Some people don’t understand that the bumpy road of life is not a bother and the self-happiness matters, which is an awakening of individual consciousness.

“For nearly half a year, I have not worn an official uniform. Deep in the misty clouds, I embrace sleep among the flowers. I have always cherished a leisurely life without official positions. The most prideful moment for me is in the glorious June sky.” (*Summer Poetry*)

This poem was created after Yuan Mei resigned and lived in seclusion in the garden. From the poem, we can see that the poet lived leisurely and falls asleep by the flowers in the depths of the misty cloud every day. The weather and scenery in June are the first pleasure after getting rid of feudalism. Without complicated rhetoric, Yuan Mei expressed his life and feelings into the poem directly.

“In February, the flowers bloom on Ge Ridge; travelers come and go, praising the wonders of immortals. But my heart differs from those travelers, I do not envy immortals, but rather, I envy the youth.” (*Miscellaneous Poems on the Lake*)

This poem records a poet’s travel experience. Flowers in Ge Ridge are in full bloom and tourists are numerous. They all say that they want to be immortals, but the poet is different from them. He does not envy immortals but the youth. Yuan Mei still expressed his lament about the fleeting time in a concise way and felt that the time of youth is worth recollection and cherish, which is simple to arouse empathy.

## 2. Advance New Ideas and Show the Self

The representative poems in this respect are Yuan Mei’s poems on history with his distinctive pursuit. He refused to follow the rigid rules of others, which is also the embodiment of spirituality theory. Besides, he demanded a “new meaning”, that is, a deep understanding of historical events, a profound literary accumulation, imagination, and a reflection on poetry expressions, which should own a long aftertaste. He followed this principle when he indited and commented on poems in most cases.

“Do not sing the Song of Everlasting Regret of the past, for there is also a river of tears in the mortal world. In the village of Shihao, a husband and wife bid farewell, shedding tears more abundant than those in the Palace of Eternal Life.” (*At Ma Wei*)

This poem is one of Yuan Mei’s famous works that chant the story of Emperor Xuanzong of Imperial Noble Consort Yang. In the view of Yuan Mei, there is no need to sing the story of Emperor Xuanzong of Imperial Noble Consort Yang, because we also have a similar story in the mortal world with countless parting between husband and wife in Shihao Village. The couple’s tears are much higher than those in the Palace of Eternal Life. In this poem, allusions such as the Palace of Eternal Life are used to endow the poem with more charms. Meanwhile, it can reflect that Yuan Mei was familiar with the people and his creation is not a castle in the air or distant from current politics.

“On one side hosts a million troops with the east wind, the spot here was once settled and divided into a three-way split. The Han's fire ultimately burned away the bandits, and the dragon beneath the lake finally found its clouds. The river flows on, vast and hazy in autumn, while the fisherman's lamp still illuminates the swaying reeds. I, as a guest who does not play the flute in the company, hear the cold cry of magpies in the tranquil night.” (*Red Cliffs*)

This poem can reflect the poet’s rich imagination and feelings through the time-honored place of the Battle of Red Cliffs, where the war determined the pattern of the country into three parts. Yuan Mei compared Liu Bei’s burning of Red Cliff to repelling Cao Cao to the dragon in the lake soaring into the cloud. The last line also uses an allusion to *Ode on the Red Cliffs* written by Su Shi, “One friend, who was a good flutist, played an accompaniment to this song”. In this poem, there are no people who play the flute around him and Yuan Mei can only hear the cries of birds in the silent night, which also has the charm of “the moon is bright, the few stars are scattered and the crows fly southward”.

“By the water’s edge, songs cease, and a thousand glasses of wine are drained. I, as a warrior, face dangers head-on, but now my life is offered to the tiger and the wolf. My strength is spent, and I’m worthy of being rewarded by the Crown Prince, but how can my soul bear to witness Tian Guang’s sorrow? My heroic ancestors bid farewell with tears in their eyes, and from now on the attire of passers-by is touched by the frost of the day. Don’t mock the blind dagger, for even chaotic and arrow-like mountains once pierced Xianyang in ancient times.” (*Jing Qing Li*)

This poem is mainly about allusions related to Jing Ke. Yuan Mei imagined the scene before Jing Ke's departure that people marched for him at the edge of the Yi River, and Jing Ke went to the State of Qin determinedly in disregard of sacrifice. With the device of exaggeration, people's tears when they saw off Jing Ke can still be sensed now, and those who passed by here can still be stained with frost on their clothes. The last line that even chaotic and arrow-like mountains once pierced Xianyang in ancient times comforted Jing Ke. Although the whole poem portrays Jing Ke, "I" can be seen everywhere with subjectivity in each line, which is an important embodiment of Yuan Mei's "new meaning" in his poetry on history.

### 3.3 Exceptions

Although Yuan Mei advocated spirituality theory with many excellent works came out, some exceptions deviating from this theory can still be found.

"The path of sages and saints seems clear, but when I try to follow, I cannot reach its end. Who would have known that the grand picture affects the smallest detail? A sore appears suddenly on my right foot, and I can not leap and bounce with my left foot. Even with a strong pillar as support, a lone oar is difficult to wield. I gaze at the mountains but can't climb them at will, and at the sound of wine, I refuse the invitation. I yearn to plant flowers near my bed, and envy those fishing with their rods." (*Ailing Foot*)

Although this poem is very realistic is in line with Yuan Mei's pursuit of the true self, it has lost its aesthetic feeling without considering words and phrases, which disobeys his pursuit of spirituality theory.

"Four decades have passed in a century, aging seems to come all at once. I hope to endure no hardships, letting deafness and blindness take their course. Only these two rows of teeth remain, awaiting your nourishment day and night. Even mice still have teeth, how can birds be without a crop? Arranged in thirty-two, they are meticulously set like morning stars. When a gap appears, the whole formation wavers, shifting left and right without stability." (*Toothache*)

Basically the same as the previous one, the lines of this poem are used casually without too much delicacy and artistic techniques, which is straightforward and lacks aesthetic feeling.

Although some of Yuan Mei's poems do not conform to his pursuit of spirituality theory, their flaws do not hide their merits, which does not affect his representative as a poet in the "spirituality school" in Qing Dynasty.

## 4. Development of Spirituality Theory

### 4.1 Transcendence

Before Yuan Mei advocated the spirituality theory of poetry inditement and called for the expression of true feelings, the poetry of the Qing Dynasty was dominated by several major poetry schools, either distant from politics or a mere formality. The "verve theory" (Verve theory refers to a poetry inditement and criticism in ancient Chinese poetics, which was advocated by Wang Shizhen in the early Qing Dynasty, ruling poetry for hundreds of years at that time.) advocated by Wang Shizhen in the early Qing Dynasty ruled poetry at that time for hundreds of years. The poems of this school were far away from real life and pursued a superficial and empty realm. Yuan Mei described him "fake joys, anger, and sorrows" with hollowness. In addition, the "style theory" (Style theory is an ancient Chinese idea of poetry, which was advocated by the former seven sons and the latter seven sons of Ming Dynasty and Shen Deqian of Qing Dynasty, emphasizing the role of style in poetry.) put forward by Shen Deqian was also popular in poetry at that time, which also belonged to retro poetics. The poetry of this school was relatively conservative and emphasized the role of style in poetry, which formulated a series of rules for the style, form, emotion, and tone of poetry, restricting the free development of poetry. Yuan Mei criticized it fiercely and debated with Shen Deqian. It is under such circumstances that Yuan Mei generated the spirituality theory, which was like spring rain falling on dry land for a long time. At that time, countless literati seemed to rediscover hope, and the

spirituality poetry set off a new trend. Zhao Yi, Zhang Wentao, and other spirituality representatives made great contributions to poetry creation. In addition to saving the poetry of the Qing Dynasty to a certain extent and promoting poetry development then, spirituality theory increased the poetry creation and strongly attacked the retro-ism, formalism, and superficially empty poetry divorced from reality, which had an intense transcendence of the times.

#### 4.2 Disadvantages

In the final analysis, Yuan Mei's spirituality theory belongs to idealism. Although the creation of this school has realistic considerations, it is still based on subjective emotion. After continuous development, it has not been able to get out of idealism and even went to extremes. Because spirituality theory advocates true temperament without moral restrictions, it firmly believes that poetry expressing true emotion is good, which leads to many obscene and vulgar works in poetry, leaving some negative impacts on poetry inditement to a certain degree.

### 5. Conclusion

As a representative poet in the Qianjia period of the Qing Dynasty, Yuan Mei brought new hope to poetry by himself in the era of ideological imprisonment. His spirituality theory revived the poetry of the Qing Dynasty and his unique literary criticism thought also influenced several generations. *Moss, What I See, At Mawei*, etc. are famous in history and are relished by countless people. Although it has many shortcomings, its progressiveness and transcendence of the times can not be annihilated.

### References

- [1] Zou, H. X. (2006). Studies of aesthetic on Xingling theory of Yuan Mei. Changsha: Master's Dissertation of Hunan Normal University.
- [2] Tang, J. H. (2017). Aesthetic spirit of Yuan Mei's Xingling Theory. Chengdu: Doctoral Dissertation of Sichuan Normal University.
- [3] Shen, L. (2005). On Yuan Mei's poetic thought. Yangzhou: Doctoral Dissertation of Yangzhou University.
- [4] Li, R. (2005). Poetic comparison of the three great poets in the period of Qianlong. Shanghai: Doctoral Dissertation of East China Normal University.
- [5] Li, M. J. (2019). On the cultural connotation of the times of Yuan Mei's poetics of natural disposition: A current study on the typical significance of his life selection. *Yinshan Academic Journal*, 32(01), 24-34. DOI:10.13388/j.cnki.ysaj.2019.01.003.
- [6] Tang, Y. Y. (2021). Profound meaning in simple words: The characteristics and presentation of Yuan Mei's Xingling theory. *Qinghai Social Sciences*, (01), 111-118.
- [7] Jia, H. J. (2014). The coincidence and inconsistency between poetry practice and spirituality theory of Yuan Mei. Changsha: Master's Dissertation of Hunan Normal University.
- [8] Zhang, S. H. (2007). Poem of the poet: Soul subject and Yuan Mei's poetry aesthetic characteristics. Wuhu: Master's Dissertation of Anhui Normal University.