

The Evolution of Jueju Verse

Daniel Hsieh

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Abbreviations

With the exception of "Lu Qinli," which is used in the text and notes, the following abbreviations are used in the notes only. For full citations, see the Bibliography.

"Ji ping"	Fu Shousun and Liu Baishan, comps., "Tangren jueju jiping"
Lu Qinli	Lu Qinli, comp., Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi
Qts	Cao Yin et al., comps., Quan Tang shi
Sbck	Sibu congkan
Yfsj	Guo Maoqian, comp., Yuefu shi ji
Ytxy	Xu Ling, comp., Yutai xinyong jian zhu

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Form and Genre

Two diversely different lyrics may help illustrate the distinction between metrical form and literary genre:

Roses red, Violets blue, Darling sweet I love you.¹

I sat drinking and did not notice the dusk,
Till falling petals filled the folds of my dress.
Drunken I rose and walked to the moonlit stream;
The birds were gone, and men also few.
"Self-abandonment"2

The first "poem" quoted above is a children's rhyme long popular in England and America. The second piece is a work by the Tang (618–907) poet, Li Bo (701–762), one of China's two greatest poets. There is a vast difference between these two pieces, but there is also a simple yet important similarity: they are both quatrains. Li Bo's poem would be classified by the Chinese as a jueju, a distinct genre in the Chinese poetic tradition that in addition to being comprised of four lines is also subject to a variety of prosodic rules defining meter, tones, and rhyme. Just as important, a jueju is a poem that belongs to a genre that had evolved over a long period of time and attained a certain maturity and consistency of style, language, tone, and had developed a set of established approaches, themes, and occasions or subgenres. In short, the jueju is a true literary genre that utilizes and evolved from a basic form, the quatrain.

This evolution from form to genre offers a fascinating picture of literary history. We can see how poems such as Li Bo's had their origins in simple songs and lyrics that at times, show similarities to, and in structure were only slightly more sophisticated than, children's rhymes. The rhyme quoted above, for example, is one of thousands of pieces that have been made up by children to a basic formula in which the first couplet, "Roses are red, / Violets are blue," is re-

peated, and the second couplet is improvised with the last line (always ending with "you" to rhyme with blue) serving as a sort of punch line.

Roses are red, Violets are blue, I like pecans, Nuts to you.³

The structure of this children's ditty can be compared to a favorite quatrain title of the Six Dynasties (third- through sixth-century), "Ever Since You Left" ("Zi jun zhi chu vi"):4

Ever since you left, My ornaments of gold and kingfisher have darkened and dulled. But my love for you is like the sun and moon; Over and over, night and day, born and reborn.⁵

This piece by Liu Jun (430–464), Emperor Xiaowu of the Liu Song dynasty (420–479), is the earliest surviving example of this title. Turning to Guo Maoqian's (twelfth-century) Yuefu shi ji we see twenty other pieces with this title by poets of various dynasties up to and through the Tang.⁶ All but three of these pieces are quatrains. Ordinarily each of the quatrains follows a formula in which the first couplet opens with the line "Ever since you left" and the second couplet opens with the phrase "My love for you is like." As with "Roses are Red," the piece is based upon a standard formula with the burden of the improvisation on the second couplet. The poet will open it with a simile, often consisting of an unusual, striking image (along with the sun and the moon we also see love compared to form and shadow, swirling snow, a bright candle, etc.) that is then resolved or explained in the fourth and last line.

Along with their similarities in approach and structure, "Roses are Red" and "Ever Since You Left" also appear to share a path of development that in one aspect is curiously similar. The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes gives several variations of "Roses are Red." The earliest example quoted (from a collection dated 1784) is not a quatrain, but a longer love poem that opens with the quatrain formula described above. The last piece recorded, "I like pecans, Nuts to you," is described as a New York children's street rhyme from 1937.7 The formula for "Ever Since You Left" also was taken from a longer original poem, Xu Gan's (170–217) "Boudoir Thoughts" ("Shi si"). It is based upon the last four lines of the third stanza (each stanza consisting of ten lines):

Ever since you left,
My bright mirror, unpolished, has darkened.
My love for you is like the water's flow;
How can it ever end?
(Lu Oinli 376)8

I have juxtaposed a children's ditty and Li Bo's masterpiece as a way of showing a simple, basic form in its most primitive and most advanced states. They would seem to have nothing in common except for the fact that they are both made up of four lines. Yet the example of "Ever Since You Left" (representative of the middle stages of the development of the Chinese quatrain into the genre of the *jueju*), with its similarities of structure and approach to the children's ditty, suggests that there are some basic qualities to be found in at least certain kinds of quatrains be they nonsense rhymes or great poetry. The contrast of the quatrain form at its most primitive and most sophisticated, as well as the suggestion that there are certain fundamental qualities that link them, raise one of the questions that lies at the heart of this study. How does a basic form used for the simplest of rhymes and songs evolve into a literary genre practiced by masters such as Li Bo?

Before preceding I should briefly introduce what is meant by the term jueju. As I have explained above, it is best to think of jueju as a genre rather than a pure form. It can be and has been translated into English as quatrain, but this term is limited since it only conveys the fact that the jueju consists of four lines and ignores all the other factors that have made the jueju a literary genre. Traditionally, jueju refers to the genre that was first perfected and flourished during the Tang Dynasty. The four lines of the jueju were composed in a meter of either five or seven syllables per line. There are a few examples of six-syllable line quatrains. Wang Wei (701-761), for example, has written in this meter. But they are extremely rare and inconsequential from the point of literary history. One of the major steps marking the maturity of the jueju was the development of rules of tonal prosody and rhyme. Parallel events were taking place in the eight-line regulated poem, or lüshi. There was one major difference however. Though most *iueiu* of the Tang adhered to the newly perfected rules of tonal prosody, unlike the lüshi, adherence to these rules was not required. One could compose guti (old style) or non-regulated jueju, and in fact many of the most famous jueju of the Tang are guti. Aside from these rules of prosody and form, the jueju is also marked by a maturity of style, language, and approach difficult to define but easy to recognize. This maturity was the result of a long period of evolution and refinement. For all these reasons modern and traditional scholars have distinguished the jueju of the Tang from the pre-Tang quatrains that were the origins of this genre, and have often referred to the latter by terms other than jueju, for example, wuyan siju (five-syllable quatrain), qiyan siju (seven-syllable quatrain), or simply xiaoshi (little poem).

The Place of Jueju in the Poetic Tradition

Marveling at the extraordinary poetry that could be encompassed within the four lines of the *jueju*, traditional Chinese critics and poets have regarded this genre with wonder and a special affection. Again and again, while reading through traditional criticism, one encounters the most unrestrained praise:

Literature is the essence of language, poetry is the essence of literature, and *jueju* are the essence of poetry. (Yang Shen [1488–1559])⁹

When poetry evolved to the five-syllable *jueju*, it attained the purity of the voice of nature. Within its mere twenty words, there is not a trace of display of learning or effort, yet it was now that the true nature and feeling of poetry, the true character of poetry emerged. (Yang Shounan [b. 1867])¹⁰

When poetry evolved to the seven-syllable *jueju*, poetry became perfectly good and perfectly beautiful. Emperors and princes, dukes and ministers, the famous and the "outsiders" (i.e. Buddhists and Daoists), even down to women and girls, masterpieces came forth in profusion from them all. (Song Luo [1634–1713])¹¹

Though the critics have been extravagant in their comments, when one looks to the *jueju* and its history, one begins to understand their enthusiasm and awe. It can be argued that the *jueju* is the single most important genre in the Chinese poetic tradition. No other genre can rival it in terms of longevity, vitality, or popularity. In its most primitive form it can be traced back at least as far as the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220). Following a long period of development and refinement it was perfected during the Tang, the great age of Chinese poetry, and, along with the eight-line *lüshi*, was one of the two most important genres of this age.¹²

To those familiar with the Western poetic tradition it may at first seem striking that this most important of Chinese genres should turn out to be a kind of quatrain. The very scale of these quatrains would seem to limit the depth and significance of the poetry of the *jueju*. In the English tradition the quatrain has generally been a minor form often used for amusement and as an exercise of wit. It is, for example, a favorite form for the epigram. However, when we look to the greatest poets of the greatest age of Chinese poetry—the High Tang—we find that the jueju was probably the most popular genre of that age. There is no major Tang poet who did not excel at it. Wang Wei is known largely for his jueju, as is Wang Changling (ca. 698-ca. 756). Li Bo had a much wider range of course, yet the *jueju* was also a crucial part of his achievements as a poet, and he is generally recognized as the greatest master of this form. While the jueju did not have quite the same place in the corpus of Du Fu (712–770), Du Fu was a far greater master of this form than has been traditionally recognized. It was a form that he turned to increasingly in his old age, and it can even be suggested that it was Du Fu's late quatrains that helped to transform and save the genre, enabling it to make the transition into the Middle and Late Tang. 13

The immense popularity of the *jueju* during the Tang dynasty is also reflected by the fact that it was not limited to the poetry of the literati. Song Luo

has mentioned how it was practiced at all levels of society, from emperors to Buddhists to females. The *jueju* was a popular form in the most literal sense of the word. As it was being perfected by masters such as Wang Wei and Li Bo, it also flourished among classes of people that were traditionally regarded as the lower strata of society. The huge anthology, *Wan shou Tangren jueju*, has devoted three *juan* (a total of 707 poems) to the works of Buddhists, Daoists, immortals, women, palace ladies, ghosts, and other supernatural entities. ¹⁴ One Qing (1644–1911) critic, Wu Qiao (ca. 1611–after 1670), has gone so far as to say that the five-syllable *jueju* of boys and girls were superior to those of the literati and scholars, and those of immortals and ghosts surpassed those of boys and girls. ¹⁵ This is an unusual statement to say the least, but it does show how deeply this genre had permeated society at all levels.

Much of the popularity of the *jueju* is explained by the fact that besides being a literary genre, *jueju* were easily adapted as lyrics and set to music. Wang Wei's famous poem, "Sending Off Yuan the Second on His Mission to Anxi" ("Song Yuan Er shi Anxi"), became a favorite parting song, and is included in the *Yuefu shi ji* in the category of "Recent Lyrics" ("Jindai quci"). \(^{16}\) According to Zhou Xiaotian over 70% of the Sui and Tang lyrics in this category are *jueju* (the majority being seven-syllable pieces). \(^{17}\) The story (apparently apocryphal) of the well known poets, Wang Changling, Gao Shi, and Wang Zhihuan (688–742), who gathered in a tavern, secretly listening as a group of singing girls and imperial musicians performed their *jueju*, is another example of the *jueju* serving as both literary poem and musical lyric. \(^{18}\) The Qing critic, Wang Shizhen (1634–1711), described the *jueju* as the *yuefu* (song lyrics) of the Tang. \(^{19}\)

The jueju continued to develop and evolve throughout the Tang. Each period added its own character and touch to the genre. Again and again we see it being renewed as the poets of each generation experimented and expanded its limits. Looking back on the jueju of the Tang it is difficult to identify a topic or theme it did not treat. Landscape, love, protest, parting, travel, and history were all common topics in jueju verse. Major subgenres such as guiyuan (boudoir laments), biansai (border verse), and various types of yuefu style verse made up a major portion of the jueju of the Tang, but one also finds youxian (verse on Daoist roamings) and even the beginnings of a new subgenre that would be associated exclusively with jueju, the lun shi jueju (jueju that discuss poetry).²⁰

Jueju continued to flourish during the Song dynasty (960–1279), and even though in later periods, along with other classical genres, it was eclipsed by popular, vernacular forms, it still retained a degree of vitality that, for example, the *lüshi* had long lost.²¹ Traditional critics have long been struck by this longevity. The Ming and Qing critics looked back upon a poetic tradition that extended for over two thousand years. They were very conscious of the development, rise, and fall of various styles, forms, and genres through different periods and dynasties. What amazed them in the case of the jueju was the extraordinary vitality of this genre. The great Ming critic, Hu Yinglin, devoted the first six

chapters of the *Shi sou* to the study of the forms and genres of the *shi* tradition. The last of these chapters is on the *jueju*. In the opening paragraph he described its evolution:

Coming to the masters of the Tang there was a transformation. The sounds and tones became harmonious, the patterns of the lines steady and smooth. Though in length it amounted to no more than one half of a *jinti* (i.e. an eight-line *lüshi*), in depth of meaning it far surpassed it. Though its rhythms were quicker than those of *gexing* (song-style verse), in feeling and longing it greatly exceeded it. It then became the genre that would not alter through a hundred generations.²²

Scope and Purpose of This Study

Although we ordinarily associate jueju with the Tang, and indeed this is when the form was perfected and flourished, it is necessary to trace the origins and history of this genre if we are to understand the extraordinary subtlety, richness, and depth that it was capable of communicating. The jueju underwent a long period of development during which techniques, form, and content were gradually refined, expanded, and deepened until it became a seemingly inexhaustible genre that poets would turn to again and again not only during the Tang but in later periods as well. The purpose of this study is to trace the origins of the jueju from its earliest beginnings, which may go as far back as the Shi jing, through the Six Dynasties, up to and through the Early Tang. By the end of this period the basic foundations of the genre were established, and one begins to see mature works only a step away from the masterpieces of the High Tang.

The story of this development is a fascinating one and not yet fully understood. It will take us from the most primitive children's rhymes and ditties to courtship songs, popular song lyric, court poetry, and the eventual beginnings of acceptance by the literati in the late Six Dynasties, when such major poets as Xie Tiao (464–499) and Yu Xin (514–581) successfully used and developed this form. This study then will be the first chapter in the story of the *jueju*. By going back to the beginnings and early stages of this genre, we will show the basis of its special character and greatness. We shall stop with the Early Tang, when the first classical examples of Tang *jueju* appear, since to go any further would be the subject of another study.

In tracing the evolution of the *jueju*, we will also discover that there is much fine poetry to be found in the pre-Tang quatrains. At times they may have their own special beauty and magic, and need not bow down before the Tang. There are a number of fine quatrains by Six Dynasties literati, but even among the simpler folk and popular song lyrics one can find excellent examples. Hu Yinglin, discussing the anonymous quatrains of the Southern Dynasties *yuefu*, wrote:

As for songs such as "Zi ye," "Qianxi," "Huan wen," and "Tuanshan," though their language could be extremely extravagant, in tone they still preserved the ancient quality. As to the skill with which they expressed their ideas, and the beauty and subtlety with which they expressed their feelings, there were men of the Tang who, try as they might, could not follow in their footsteps.²³

Hu Yinglin's statement is startling but acute. It reminds us that though the jueju was perfected and reached its height during the Tang, we should not forget the poetry of other periods. Indeed, there are times when one feels that the verse of the Tang has become too refined, too sophisticated, too perfect, and one longs for the naturalness and directness of the past. The search to trace the origins and early history of the jueju will not only help us to understand this genre, but will also introduce us to the appreciation of an earlier, simpler, less recognized poetry.

A study that traces the evolution of a form over a period of roughly 1500 years will naturally touch upon a variety of topics and issues. In attempting to answer the specific question of how and why a form evolves into a genre, I soon found myself confronting a host of issues that have often been left unexplored by earlier scholarship: What is a quatrain—why is it such a fundamental unit of verse not only in the Chinese tradition, but other verse traditions as well? What was the role of women in the shaping of the jueju? What is the nature of the relationship between the folk and popular verse tradition and the literary verse tradition? Although scholars have often noted the interaction of the two traditions, the exact mechanisms and processes of this interaction are still not fully understood. I cannot say that these and other issues will all be solved, but they will be raised and explored to varying degrees. Evidence offered in this study will provide starting points for further research that will help us to understand some of the basic rules and patterns that have shaped not only the Chinese poetic tradition, but in some instances the lyric traditions of other cultures as well. For example, it is clear that women played a crucial role in the creation of the jueju. In fact, women were the primary composers and performers of the quatrain love songs that Hu Yinglin so highly praised. The contributions of women singers to the development of the jueju is later repeated by what was most likely their similar role in the development of ci poetry.²⁴ The evidence provided by the history of the jueju helps show that the role of women in the Chinese poetic tradition was far more fundamental than has been generally recognized. Moreover, this role is paralleled in other cultures where women, as singers and performers, have shaped lyric traditions in important ways.²⁵

It is hoped then that a detailed examination of the evolution of the jueju will be more than a simple example of genre study. The concrete history of a form moving from one level of society to another, from one medium to the next (e.g. from children's rhyme, to popular song, to literary poem), and the issues and

topics it raises can serve as a model that may contribute to a better general understanding of poetry in its various guises and the place and functions it may take in society.

Traditional Criticism

The jueju, being one of the most important genres in the Chinese lyric tradition, has naturally been the subject of much traditional criticism. Traditional Chinese scholars have identified and discussed most of the important problems in jueju scholarship, and it is largely upon the foundations that they have erected and from the issues that they have raised that this study will proceed. Having relied heavily upon this criticism, I would like to briefly review the nature and content of the traditional scholarship.

Traditional literary criticism on the *jueju* (like other genres of poetry) is found scattered in prefaces to anthologies, commentaries to collections of poetry, letters, handbooks of composition, and most importantly in the peculiarly Chinese form of criticism known as *shihua* (poetry talk). In these sources one will not find any sustained, systematic monographs on the *jueju*. The reader instead will encounter a mass of notes, comments, pronouncements, and inspirations on a variety of aspects of the *jueju*. The organization of these notes will be very rough, if there is any order at all.

At first glance this approach to criticism can be daunting to the Western student. Statements can be extremely cryptic. Pronouncements are often made without any attempts of explanation or offers of evidence. There is a statement by Hu Yinglin about the seven-syllable *jueju* that I still puzzle over:

Coming to the Tang, the seven-syllable *jueju* was no longer limited to *yuefu* style verse. Yet the poets of the High Tang had quite a bit of trouble grasping it. The Late Tang poets, on the other hand, found it to be extremely easy. Now if you can understand the superiority of the High Tang works and the inferiority of the Late Tang, then we can talk [poetry].²⁶

Sometimes I think I understand what Hu Yinglin is saying. And when I think about it, there does not seem to be a better, more precise way of putting it.

As one becomes familiar with the style of this criticism, one appreciates the treasury of insight and knowledge that the traditional scholars have to offer. There are weaknesses and flaws, but they have left a heritage that should not be underestimated or overlooked. In the case of the *jueju* there is a very rich tradition of criticism, a kind of ongoing dialogue that has spanned centuries. We can see traditional scholars arguing back and forth on certain problems and issues peculiar to the *jueju*, but also discussing *jueju* poems and poets in the same ways they have approached poetry in general.

Their efforts have focused on several major topics and approaches: the search for origins; the tracing of the evolution of the genre and the identification of various styles and schools; the evaluation and ranking of individual poems, poets, and periods; and the description and analysis of the structure, technique, and aesthetic of the genre. All these concerns are deeply rooted in the critical tradition. It is automatic for a Chinese scholar to look for the earliest origins of the phenomena he is studying; one could say it is an ingrained part of his intellectual background. This is also true of his desire to trace the evolution of the phenomenon and identify its ancestry and lineages. In the case of the jueju these concerns have led to centuries of speculation and debate that have continued to this day. The very question of what the term jueju actually means and the significance it may have in solving the problem of the origins of the genre is still unsettled and continues to be argued. Traditionally it has been the single most controversial issue in jueju scholarship. This question is of course crucial to this study and will be examined in detail in the following chapter.

The question of the early stages of the evolution of the jueju has also been a major concern of traditional critics. This being the topic of my study, I have looked at their efforts with special interest. In this area, in particular, both the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional critics are especially visible. One sees their great knowledge of the past and the insight this has given them into the history of literature. For example, when I first began studying the lyrics of the Southern Dynasties yuefu, I began to wonder if there was any link between these quatrains and the jueju of the Tang. Later I discovered that a number of traditional scholars had pointed out the importance of the Southern yuefu centuries ago. In fact, by critically reviewing, sorting, and picking through the ideas and statements of the traditional scholarship, one can obtain a remarkably accurate outline of the early stages of development of the jueju. In a sense much of this study will consist of assembling and filling in this outline.

It is in the filling in of the outline that traditional scholarship has been at its weakest. Many crucial questions and details have been ignored. The traditional critic tends to point rather than explain. Much of the traditional account of the early evolution consists of singling out important individual works and poets. Thus debates have focused on what is the earliest example of a seven-syllable quatrain. Especially fine examples of advanced, Tang-like quatrains are pointed out and praised. In essence, the traditional critics have left behind a set of "landmarks" to guide us. Nevertheless, the precise paths by which the *jueju* evolved from form to genre have yet to be traced.

On occasion one does see a critic attempting to be more systematic, but then other traditional factors have limited the value of his work. The Ming critic, Xu Xueyi (1563–1633), for example, attempted to identify the different stages and schools of the *jueju* from its earliest beginnings. Though his remarks are scattered throughout the various chapters of his *Shiyuan bianti*, he has taken care to label the entries that are concerned with the development of the *jueju* (he dis-

tinguishes the five- and seven-syllable forms and treats them separately). His first three entries serve as typical examples of his approach:

Old-style five-syllable quatrains such as "Pick the Mallow But Do Not Hurt the Roots" ("Cai kui mo shang gen") and "On Southern Mountain There Is a Cassia" ("Nanshan yi shu gui") have a style that is lofty and ancient. The language is full and plain, their natural quality is wondrous. They are the beginnings of the five-syllable *jueju* (down to the five-syllable quatrains of Cao Zijian).

Comparing Zijian's (Cao Zhi [192–232]) five-syllable quatrains such as "Roaming About Lotus Lake" ("Xiaoyao Furongchi") and "Felicitous Clouds Have Not Risen in Season" ("Qing yun wei shi xing") to the works of the Han, we begin to see traces of conscious craft (from the anonymous five-syllable quatrains of the Han to the five-syllable quatrains of Zhang Mengyang).

Comparing Zhang Mengyang's (Zhang Zai [fl. end of third-century]) five-syllable quatrains such as "Spirit and Strength Have Gradually Faltered" ("Qi li jian shuai sun") to the works of Zijian, we see that there has been a decline in spirit and character (down to the five-syllable quatrains of Lingyun [Xie Lingyun (385–433)] and Yannian [Yan Yanzhi (384–456)]).²⁷

Though one can admire Xu Xueyi for his attempts to outline the stages of the evolution of the jueju, the weaknesses of his approach are obvious: there are large gaps between his "landmark" poets, he has concentrated almost exclusively on major literati poets, and there is no attempt to explain how one stage leads to another. There are reasons for Xue Xueyi's approach and they have led him to a description that is at times very distorted. In essence, he has been influenced by certain ideas about the patterns and nature of literary change, lineages, and evolution, and has let these ideas guide him rather than the details of empirical evidence. Cao Zhi and Zhang Zai almost certainly had little or no role in the development of the jueju. The pieces that Xu Xueyi attributes to them are most probably fragments.²⁸ The roles of Xie Lingyun and Yan Yanzhi also appear to be negligible. But Xu Xueyi seems to have been determined to identify the lineages and ancestry of the jueju in the "high" literary tradition and was forced to exaggerate his evidence. On the other hand, he virtually ignored the important evidence offered by lesser figures and popular traditions. For example, among the poems in Xie Lingyun's extant corpus, there are only a few pieces that are true, independent quatrains. Two of them are folk-style love songs.²⁹ Xu Xueyi, however, passed over these pieces. As an example of a Xie Lingyun quatrain he instead cites a piece entitled "Starting Out, Entering Nancheng" ("Chu fa ru