

Relegation and Literati Spirit: A Study of Liu Zongyuan as an Example

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Abstract: Relegation, as a common phenomenon in ancient times, not only had a certain impact on the official career of literati, but also profoundly affected their spiritual perception and creative style. Liu Zongyuan, as an outstanding writer in the Middle Tang Dynasty, lived in exile all his life, especially he was banished to Yongzhou, Liuzhou and other remote areas twice, which had a great and profound impact on his thought and literary creation. This paper investigates the change of Liu Zongyuan's mentality during the period of relegation and the spiritual characteristics of this change in his literary works, and probes into how the relegation shaped the inner world and literary style of the literati.

Keywords: Literature; Literati spirit; Eight records of Yongzhou

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1. Introduction

In the broad landscape of ancient Chinese cultural history, relegation, as a unique political and cultural phenomenon, has a profound impact on the spiritual world of literati. The relegated writers were often forced to leave the familiar environment and exiled to remote or wild lands, which undoubtedly had a severe impact on their mentality and creation. In this group of literati who suffered from relegation, Liu Zongyuan is undoubtedly a typical representative worthy of in-depth study.

Liu Zongyuan was a writer and thinker in the Middle Tang Dynasty^[1]. Because of his failure in the struggle of Erwangba Sima incident, he was banished, first to Shaozhou, and then on his way to Yongzhou, a wild land far away from the political center. The change of such a contrasting living environment and the resulting psychological gap made Liu Zongyuan's spiritual world experience many changes. Then, how did Liu Zongyuan enrich his inner world by using landscape travel and literary creation, and how did he embody his own thoughts? These are all questions to be studied carefully.

In fact, after Liu Zongyuan came to Yongzhou, his spirit was not based on decadence^[2]. The works he created during this period showed a unique aesthetic and rich connotation to a great extent. His poems not only expressed his feelings but also reflected the complexity of contemporary society. Through the depiction of the

natural landscape and the combination of his philosophical thoughts, Liu Zongyuan's literary works built a unique spirit of relegated literati.

Despite the marginalization of his status and the dual torture of his body and mind, Liu was able to extract universal aesthetic experience and philosophical thinking from the suffering. His love for nature, pursuit of an ideal society and profound reflection on his fate in his works constitute his unique spiritual map as a banished literati ^[3]. Therefore, the study of the relationship between Liu Zongyuan's banished life in Yongzhou and Liuzhou and his spiritual world will help us to understand the ancient literati sticking to their ideas in the face of adversity, rebuilding their minds and saving themselves in the situation of marginalization. This is not only a case study of historical figures, but also an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of relegation in ancient China and its spiritual consequences ^[4].

2. Local scholars' opinions

From multiple angles and dimensions, this paper comprehensively uses literature, psychology, history, sociology and other multidisciplinary perspectives to study Liu Zongyuan's unique mental state during the period of relegation, and makes an in-depth interpretation of his works. This study hopes to provide a vivid and profound case for understanding the complex interaction between relegation and the literati spirit. In the vast field of Chinese literature research, Liu Zongyuan, as a literary giant in the Middle Tang Dynasty, his relegation experience and the literary works it gave birth to have been the focus of academic attention. In recent years, the research has explored the spiritual interaction between Liu Zongyuan and the banished life from various angles, revealing the mind course of the scholar in the process of political marginalization and his unique contribution to literature.

Through close reading and comparative analysis of the texts, scholars have made an in-depth interpretation of Liu Zongyuan aesthetic view of landscape. Tang (2024) points out that Liu Zongyuan constructed his aesthetic view of landscape based on rebuilding the relationship between heaven and man, and embodied the aesthetic style of interweaving sorrow and joy in his poems and prose ^[1]. Chen (2024) reinterprets Eight Records of Yongzhou from the perspective of space, revealing how the spatial writing of the work reflects Liu Zongyuan's inner world ^[2]. Ding (2023) further explores the connection between the spatial writing in the Eight Chapters of Yongzhou and his spiritual predicament and emphasizes the value of the work in revealing one's mental state ^[3]. Scholars such as Luo (2022) and Liang (2022) turn their perspectives to the comparative study of Liu Zongyuan and other relegated literati ^[6,7]. By comparing Liu's and Liu Yuxi's relegated poems, Liang (2022) reveals the different attitudes and artistic styles of the two scholars under similar circumstances ^[7]. Luo (2022) focuses on the exotic reconstruction of landscape images in Eight Stories of Yongzhou, and discusses how Liu Zongyuan found spiritual sustenance in a foreign land ^[8].

In addition, Li Wenyue, Liu Cheng and other researchers focus on Liu Zongyuan's mental state and analyze his spiritual course during the period of relegation. Li (2023) regarded Eight Records of Yongzhou as the embodiment of Liu Zongyuan's micro-spiritual history ^[5], while Liu (2020) focused on the unexpected scenes in the work and the emotional expression of the banished official ^[8]. By discussing the songs and poems of Liu Zongyuan and Liu Yuxi, Zhang (2018) shows the mutual comfort between the two literati in the difficult years ^[9]. Cheng (2015) and Cheng (2014) investigate the influence of relegation on the literati's spiritual world. Cheng (2015) believes that Liu Zongyuan's works have deep resentment ^[10]. By comparing Su Shi's and Liu Zongyuan's landscape travels, Cheng (2014) analyzes the different experiences of literati with different personality situations

when they faced the relegation life ^[11].

To sum up, the research of relevant scholars in this aspect not only reveals the change of Liu Zongyuan's psychological trajectory in the period of relegation but also greatly enriches and expands the understanding of Tang literature, especially the middle Tang literature. It not only provides valuable wealth for us to understand Liu Zongyuan's literary world but also provides important reference value for exploring the phenomenon of ancient literati's hesitation, struggle and compromise between politics and literature.

3. Foreign scholars' opinions

In foreign countries, Western scholars have closely linked Liu Zongyuan's relegation experience with his literary creation and analyzed the interaction between the description of nature and the reflection on life in his works, which reflects the study's deep reflection on the relationship between personal fate and natural life. In Liu Zongyuan's poems, the natural landscape is not only a description of the external environment but also a reflection of his inner world and his tireless search for philosophy.

Liu Zongyuan's "Eight Records of Yongzhou" has attracted the attention of foreign scholars. This series of works reveals the poet's criticism of politics and reality, reflection on personal experiences, yearning for an ideal society, and redefinition and evaluation of traditional culture. In these studies, "Eight Records of Yongzhou" is regarded as a key text for understanding the cultural transformation and literati mentality of the Middle Tang Dynasty ^[12].

It is worth noting that some Western studies also compare Liu Zongyuan with the relegated literati in other countries, such as Pushkin in Russia or other suffering poets, to examine the impact of relegation on the literati spirit and literary creation from a cross-cultural perspective. Through this comparison, researchers try to explore how literati deal with the tension between individual and society, nature and transcendence through their literary works under different cultural backgrounds. Although these studies of Liu Zongyuan and his works provide us with new perspectives and ways of interpreting them, they need to be translated and interpreted in different linguistic and cultural contexts ^[13]. Because Liu Zongyuan's literary works are deeply rooted in the unique historical and cultural soil of China, the complexity and many dimensions of their connotations require us to maintain keen senses and meticulous understanding when appreciating and analyzing them.

The literary value and ideological connotation of Liu Zongyuan and his works have been fully recognized and continuously explored. The research angle of the relegation of Chinese literati and its spirit has also aroused attention and reflection abroad, which has added more understanding to our understanding of Liu Zongyuan from the level and perspective. When discussing the relationship between relegation and literati spirit, Liu Zongyuan as a literary giant in the Middle Tang Dynasty, undoubtedly provides a profound case study for his experience and works. According to the literature, Liu Zongyuan's relegation life is not only a turning point in his personal history, but also an important period in which his literary creation and thought depth were expanded. Through the review of the existing studies, we can observe that there are several development trends in the academic research on this topic.

The impact of relegation on the spiritual world of literati is one of the key points of the study. The literary works created by Liu Zongyuan when he was demoted to Yongzhou fully reflect his spiritual predicament after being excluded from the political center, and the profound perception of natural landscape that resulted from it ^[14]. This sentiment is not the expression of escaping from reality, but through the close contact with the nature of the mountains and rivers, he attempted to achieve a realm of exploring spiritual freedom and achieving

transcendence. Scholars have also paid attention to how the pursuit of this realm was reflected in Liu's literary works and how these works influenced the thinking of later scholars.

Using the perspective of comparative literature and relevant methods, Liu Zongyuan is compared and analyzed with other literati who experienced relegation. For example, comparing Liu Zongyuan's works with those of Liu Yuxi, Bai Juyi and Su Shi during the period of relegation reveals the similarities and differences between their psychological states of acceptance and resistance when facing relegation. This not only enriches our understanding of the literati's spiritual world but also helps us to grasp the behavior pattern of the ancient literati in the face of life frustration^[15].

In addition, scholars exert importance on the shaping role of history and culture in the mentality of literati. The social changes and political turmoil in the Middle Tang Dynasty, when Liu Zongyuan was demoted, had a very important impact on the mentality of the literati. How these factors permeated and affected Liu Zongyuan's literary creation and how his works reflected the cultural psychology of the society at that time have also become the focus of scholars' attention. Finally, the perspective of cultural studies has gradually broadened, and scholars have gradually paid attention to the regional characteristics in Liu Zongyuan's literary creation. The description of the landscape of Yongzhou in Liu Zongyuan's *Eight Records of Yongzhou* in Hunan Province not only shows his in-depth and delicate observation of the natural environment but also reflects his absorption and deconstruction of regional culture. This indicates that future research may dig deeper into the significance of regional culture in literati's creation.

The research of relegation and literati spirit is developing to a deeper and further level, a larger and broader perspective. Scholars not only pay attention to Liu Zongyuan's personal experience and psychological state but also investigate and study it in a larger and grand social and cultural background, hoping to obtain a more comprehensive and profound understanding and perception of Liu Zongyuan and even more literati spiritual world.

A common problem is how to deal with the relationship between relegation experience and literati creation. Although existing literature provides a rich analysis of Liu Zongyuan's poetry and prose during his demotion, it remains a challenge to distill the deep impact of demotion on his spiritual world from these works. In particular, considering that Liu's works may have been influenced by his philosophy, political stance, and the cultural atmosphere of his time, researchers are required to be able to distinguish the interweaving of these different factors in their analysis.

A comparative study of Liu Zongyuan and other literati who were also relegated. Comparing Liu Zongyuan's demotion process with those of the same period or different times can reveal the personality and commonness of the literati spirit, but in the process of comparison, how to ensure fairness and justice in a range or dimension and avoid simplistic comparison or perfunctory generalization and generalization is a problem that should and must be faced in the study.

Relegation was a common phenomenon in that era, and its influence on the mentality and creation of the literati could not be viewed separately. Therefore, when analyzing Liu Zongyuan, researchers should examine extensively the political ecology, social conditions and cultural traditions of the Tang Dynasty, which are likely to have different shaping effects on literati's reaction and state in the face of relegation in different ranges and degrees. This requires the researchers to have an interdisciplinary vision. Finally, when evaluating the influence of relegation on the literati's spirit, it is important to pay attention to the spatiotemporal differences between modern values and ancient culture. Contemporary research perspectives often carry modernity presuppositions, which can lead to misreading or over-interpretation of historical materials. On the basis of respecting the

objectivity of history, researchers need to find appropriate theoretical and critical tools to get close to the real life and inner world of the literati at that time.

4. Discussion

The study of relegation and literati spirit is a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary subject. The in-depth analysis of Liu Zongyuan's specific case can not only enrich our understanding of the literati but also provide an important perspective for exploring the spiritual outlook of literati groups in the Tang Dynasty and even Chinese history.

When discussing the relationship between relegation and literati spirit, the study of Liu Zongyuan as an example provides a unique perspective. Liu Zongyuan's relegation experience was not an isolated event, but an important part of his life course, which profoundly influenced his literary creation and thought development. To deeply understand how relegation shaped the literati spirit, this study puts forward the following solutions:

- (1) Deeply analyze Liu Zongyuan's literary works during the period of relegation, and dig out the psychological changes and spiritual struggles contained therein. Through the interpretation of his different literary styles such as poems, essays and novels, it is found that the poet's depression and unwillingness in his life of relegation, as well as his deep reflection on the conflict between ideal and reality. For example, *The Eight Records of Yongzhou* not only recorded Liu Zongyuan's description of the natural landscape but also reflected his deep thoughts on the frustration of the official position and his profound reflection on his life circumstances.
- (2) Combined with the historical and cultural background, this paper analyzes the influence of the relegation system on the mentality and social concepts of scholars. Liu Zongyuan's relegation is not only a personal tragedy, but also a social phenomenon under the background of the era. By examining the political environment, cultural tradition, and the social function of the relegation system in the Tang Dynasty, ways the literati transformed their spiritual pursuits in the relegation, and ways this experience was reflected in their literary works can be revealed.
- (3) Use social psychology and other theories to explain how the poet's demotion experience shaped his spiritual world and creative motivation. This includes exploring the impact of relegation on the poet's cognition and self-identity, the sense of social belonging, and the organization and reconstruction of prospects. Multi-dimensional and multi-angle analysis can understand more comprehensively the far-reaching impact of relegation on the spirit of literati.
- (4) Compare the experience and works of Liu Zongyuan and other demoted literati in the same period or different periods, and explore the general influence and individual differences of relegation on literati spirit. The horizontal and vertical comparison can find the different responses and coping strategies of different literati to relegation, as well as their similarities and innovations in literary creation. This will not only help to deepen the understanding of Liu Zongyuan's case but also enrich the overall understanding of the relationship between relegation and literati's spirit.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, through the in-depth interpretation of Liu Zongyuan's demotion experience, combined with the investigation of historical and cultural background, and the comparative study of the same experience and

different circumstances as other scholars, the application of interdisciplinary theory is strengthened, aiming to build a comprehensive framework to discuss the relationship between relegation and literati spirit to provide a new perspective and profound insight for understanding the life experience and literary creation of ancient literati. In the investigation of relegation and literati spirit, especially the analysis of Liu Zongyuan as an example, he is not only a period of political exile, but also a sublimation of spiritual process and literary achievements. Although Liu Zongyuan's banished life in Yongzhou period was in the marginal zone, he did not sink into despair but showed his unique spiritual style and profound literary background.

By combining the relevant literature, the scholars have discussed the relationship between Liu Zongyuan's mentality and his poetry creation from many angles. On the one hand, Liu Zongyuan's relegation experience is regarded as an important opportunity for the transformation of his literary concept and writing style. Under the double pressure of political frustration and regional borderlands, his literary works showed a trend of transcending material desire and seeking spiritual freedom. Liu Zongyuan's natural aesthetic of mountains and rivers, especially reflected in *Eight Stories of Yongzhou*, not only enriched the treasure house of Chinese landscape prose, but also reflected his tough character and attitude of maintaining the subject consciousness of scholar-officialship in the face of adversity. Liu Zongyuan's inheritance and development of the *Book of Songs* and the tradition of Chu poetry during his relegation highlights his profound statements and strong cultural confidence in a difficult and difficult environment. At the same time, his banished life in Yongzhou and Liuzhou also provided the poet with a rich natural landscape. These factors make his landscape poems have a broader humanistic vision background and deeper philosophical thinking.

The similarities and differences between Liu Zongyuan's relegation experience and that of other literati, such as the comparative study with Liu Yuxi, reveal the personality and commonness of their literary creation after being relegated. In addition, Liu Zongyuan's influence on later literati is also one of the focuses of the study. Comparative study can reveal how Liu Zongyuan affected the literary expression and mental adjustment of later generations.

To sum up, as the representative of the banished literati, Liu Zongyuan's spiritual style and literary creation during the period of his relegation not only reflect the strength of his will but also show the mentality and coping methods of the ancient Chinese literati when they suffered setbacks in life. Through the in-depth analysis of Liu Zongyuan's works during the period of relegation, the study can more deeply understand that the system of relegation has become an important phenomenon of literati's spirit tempering and literature promotion.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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