Exploring the Three Spirits Embodied in the Frontier Poems of the Tang Dynasty from Cen Shen's "Song of White Snow"

Yao Wang, Lina Luo

Qinghai Vocational College of Police Officers Xining Qinghai 810000

Abstract: Cen Shen's "Song of White Snow in Farewell to Secretary Wu Going Back to the Capital" stands as one of the most celebrated frontier poems of the Tang Dynasty. It not only depicts the snowy landscapes of the frontier and the poignant emotions of bidding farewell to a friend but also embodies three defining spirits of Tang frontier poetry: the spirit of enduring harshness, the spirit of martial valor, and the spirit of relentless campaigning. These spiritual dimensions, refined and expressed over millennia, find full articulation in the frontier poetic tradition.

Keywords: Tang Dynasty; frontier poetry; spiritual connotation

DOI:10.12417/3029-2344.25.09.016

Cen Shen's life and literary career can be divided into three distinct phases. The early phase was marked by travel and imperial examination pursuits, the middle phase by military service on the frontier, and the late phase by his years in Chang'an and Shu. His poetic style evolved accordingly: elegant and novel in the early years, grand and solemn during his middle period, and uniquely desolate in his later works. "Song of White Snow" belongs to his middle period, composed during his second expedition beyond the frontier while serving as a secretary to Feng Changqing, military governor of Anxi and Beiting. Highly regarded by Feng, Cen Shen's frontier poems from this period are characterized by their majestic tone, imaginative richness, and a profound sense of ambition to achieve merit and serve the nation.

1.The Spirit of Enduring Harshness

"The north wind scours the land, the white grasses break; / In the eighth month the northern sky is filled with snow. / As if a night of spring wind swept past, adorning / Thousands of pear trees with blossoms white and bright." The poem opens with a vivid portrayal of a heavy frontier snowfall, notably employing the character for "wind" (风) twice. Further, the line "The frozen red flag in the wind will not flap" reinforces the motif, using "wind" as a unifying element throughout. The first challenge facing the garrison troops was the severe natural environment of the frontier. Thus, Tang frontier poetry frequently depicted winds of various kinds to emphasize the region's distinctive character. Some verses specify the wind's direction—such as northern winds or barbarian gales—as seen in Gao Shi's "Farewell to Dong Da": "The setting sun dyes yellow clouds for miles and miles; / The north wind drives away wild geese and brings down snow," or Li Bai's "The Ballad of Yuzhang": "The northern wind blows with steeds from foreign lands, / Guarding the Luyang Pass in the north." Others describe the wind's intensity—fierce, violent, or swift winds—as in Chen Shubao's "Longtou": "Startling winds rouse neighing steeds; / Bitter dust mingles with flying sands," or Emperor Taizong of Tang's "To Xiao Yu": "In fierce winds the tough grass is known; / In chaotic times, true hearts are shown." Still others convey the wind's emotional impact—chilling, cold, bitter, or sorrowful winds—as in Li Yi's "Army Life—Joy and Sorrow": "The borderlands are often swept by gloomy winds; / Plants and trees stand bleak and drear," or Wang Changling's "Song of the Frontier (II)": "We water our horses as we cross the autumn stream; / The wind cuts like a knife through the icy cold."

The wind, in turn, brings physical cold. The lines "Snow enters the pearl-adorned blinds, dampening silken curtains; / Fox fur feels no warmth, brocade quilts are too thin" and "The general cannot draw his horn-adorned bow; / The commander's iron armor is too cold to don" illustrate how even fox-fur coats and brocade-covered quilts are insufficient against the frontier's cold, let alone the soldiers clad in iron armor. By evoking this bone-chilling cold,

Author Introduction:

1 Wang Yao, employed at Qinghai Police Vocational College. Research interests include ancient Chinese literature, police education, and higher education.

2 Luo Lina，employed at Qinghai Police Vocational College.Research interests include Chinese Philology.

the poem reveals the harsh and severe natural conditions of the frontier. Thus, the cold of the frontier became the deepest fear for every poet who experienced a winter there. Wang Changling's "Song of the Frontier" writes: "We water our horses as we cross the autumn stream; / The wind cuts like a knife through the icy cold." Similarly, Cen Shen's "Song of Running Horse River in Farewell to General Feng on His Western Expedition" describes: "The horse's mane, snow-laden, steams with sweat; / Its dappled coat turns instantly to ice. / Ink freezes as we draft war proclamations in the tent." Lu Rupi's "Lament of the Four Seasons at the Frontier, in Response to a Scholar" also notes: "The northern wind pierces through sword scars with snow; / The waters of the Great Wall's wells grow colder still."

Therefore, depictions of "cold" in Tang frontier poetry can be divided into two categories: one describing the cold itself, the other describing objects made cold. In his work The Poetics of Han and Tang Frontier Poetry, Yan Fuling provides a rough count of imagery related to "wind" and "cold": in the High Tang period alone, there are approximately 150 instances of "wind" imagery and 65 instances of "cold" imagery.

2.The Spirit of Martial Valor

Beyond the harsh natural environment, the frontier was also a place of incessant warfare. This resilience stemmed not only from their spirit of enduring harshness but also from the heroic ethos of the Qin-Han civilization—a legacy of courage, fearlessness in the face of death, and a life goal centered on achieving merit and serving the nation. This spirit was inherited and further exalted by the Li dynasty of the Tang.

Traditional Han culture tended to prioritize civil virtues over martial prowess. As an agrarian society dating back to the Shang Dynasty, China's settled, farming lifestyle fostered a gentle and peaceable disposition among its people. Moreover, Confucianism, influential for nearly three millennia and still relevant today, advocates moderation, harmony, and the primacy of peace. However, during the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, frequent border conflicts led to the convergence of Central Plains and nomadic cultures. Through the upheavals of the Warring States period and the Qin unification, the more martial Qin-Han civilization emerged. This civilization was characterized by three key developments: first, a major shift in combat tactics from chariot warfare to more agile cavalry; second, an enhancement of the national character, adding martial vigor and valor to the existing emphasis on virtue and ritual; and third, a transformation in values from prioritizing civil virtues to celebrating martial prowess and the way of the warrior.

It is against this backdrop that the story of Ban Chao abandoning his brush for the sword emerged. The term "Heroic Han and Prosperous Tang"（雄汉盛唐） is often used to describe the stature of these two dynasties in Chinese history—eras marked by virile vitality and youthful vigor, unparalleled economic prosperity and military might, extensive political influence, and far-reaching cultural radiation.

A key factor behind this prosperity was ethnic integration. Emperor Wu of Han, addressing the Xiongnu threat, reformed the military system, expanded the army, enhanced combat capabilities, established the office of Grand Marshal, implemented a commandery-kingdom parallel system, strengthened weapon and equipment production, and appointed capable ministers and generals. Consequently, he successfully divided the Xiongnu into northern and southern branches, with the Southern Xiongnu gradually assimilating into Han culture. Additionally, Emperor Wu reclaimed the Hexi Corridor and opened the Silk Road, spurring economic growth along the route and, more importantly, creating a channel for East-West cultural exchange. The Tang Dynasty, in turn, benefited from ethnic fusion. The Sui and Tang rulers originated from the Guanlong political bloc, itself a product of ethnic integration. Emperor Yang of Sui's mother, Emperor Gaozu of Tang's mother (Lady Dugu), Empress Dou, and Emperor Taizong's Empress Zhangsun were of Xianbei descent. The Sui and Tang imperial families thus possessed varying degrees of non-Han ancestry. Scholar Chen Yinke, in his Postscript to conjectures on the Li-Tang Clan, also argued that the extensive ethnic fusion during the Northern and Southern Dynasties laid the foundation for the Tang's flourishing.

The fusion of martial spirit with traditional Han ethos manifested in several ways: First, the integration of martial spirit and self-sacrifice. For instance, Luo Binwang's "I seek not to return alive from the frontier, / Only to repay my lord with death" expresses his resolve to dedicate his life on the battlefield. Yu Shinan's "I'd lightly die for one who knows my worth, / Not for my own gain" speaks of a knight-errant's willingness to die for a confidant, not for personal fame. Second, the combination of martial spirit with the scholar-official consciousness, which intensified the celebration of merit and ideals in frontier poetry. For example, Kong Shao'an's "If I can bring peace to the three frontiers, / I shall be enfeoffed as a Marquis of Ten Thousand Households," and Chen Zi'ang's "Let not the Mount Yanran / Bear only the Han generals' feats" urge that Tang achievements should match those of the Han. Third, the blending of martial spirit with the chivalric tradition, which reinforced the Chinese nation's resolute and courageous character. While Han agrarian civilization lacked the nomadic martial ethos, this does not imply an absence of fortitude and perseverance. From the early Confucian advocacy of "sacrificing oneself to preserve virtue" and "giving up life for righteousness" to the Neo-Confucian spirit of "resisting power with principle," and from the chivalrous abhorrence of evil to the resilient, heroic integrity of the Han people, Han culture possesses its own unique heroism. The incursions of nomadic peoples and their martial spirit further intensified this inherent valor, achieved significantly through the fusion with the chivalric ethos. The New Book of Tang describes Li Bai as "fond of the art of diplomacy, practicing swordsmanship and chivalry, generous with wealth and helping others", reflecting his youthful identification with knight-errants. Du Fu's "My Feelings" also expresses this spirit: "Drawing my blade against injustice, / Scattering gold without regret; / Cutting down foes in the bustling world, / Repaying favors in an instant."

This martial spirit, evolving over millennia, remains an integral part of our contemporary culture, manifesting primarily in the following: First, a deep love for the country and unwavering loyalty. The martial spirit embodies a readiness to sacrifice for the nation, defending its dignity and interests. Second, the celebration of courage and a willingness to take responsibility. It emphasizes stepping forward in the face of difficulty and embracing challenges. Third, the emphasis on skill and the pursuit of excellence. Whether in martial arts or other combat skills, it strives for mastery and perfection. Fourth, perseverance and an indomitable will. Those imbued with this spirit remain steadfast in adversity, never yielding or accepting defeat.

3.The Spirit of Campaigning

Although "Song of White Snow" contains no direct battle scenes, it is permeated with the troops' heroic and dauntless spirit. The opening lines—"The north wind scours the land, the white grasses break; / In the eighth month the northern sky is filled with snow. / As if a night of spring wind swept past, adorning / Thousands of pear trees with blossoms white and bright"—transform the bone-chilling snowfall into a scene of springtime splendor. The subsequent lines use hyperbolic realism to depict the bitter cold, yet within the tent, a warm and solemn farewell unfolds. This stark contrast sets the stage for "At dusk, snow falls thick at the camp gate; / The frozen red flag in the wind will not flap." The departing guest steps out into the twilight snow; this line, with its exaggerated realism, portrays the frozen, brilliant banner standing vivid against the white expanse—commanding reverence. The poet uses the military standard, unyielding in the bitter wind, as a metaphor for the frontier soldiers' tenacity and unbreakable spirit. The two lines—one dynamic, one static; one white, one red—complement each other, creating a vivid, colorful, and seamlessly flowing image. "We see him off at the eastern gate of Wheel Tower; / As he leaves, snow blankets the Heavenly Mountain road. / Where the path turns, his figure disappears from sight, / Leaving only hoofprints on the snowy ground." These concluding lines, in plain yet evocative language, express the soldiers' genuine affection for their comrade.

From its founding, the Tang Dynasty relied on military campaigns to protect its borders, defend its territory, and expand its influence, making armed conflict the primary means of resolving frontier disputes. From Li Yuan's uprising in Jinyang in 617 to the Hedong Campaign in 902, nearly 300 years, historical records document over 319

significant wars. The frequency and severity of Tang warfare meant that depictions of brutal battles and soldiers' sacrifices became central themes in frontier poetry. Li He's "Song of the Governor of Yanmen" illustrates: "The dark clouds press down on the city, the walls may crumble; / Armor gleams like golden scales in the sun. / The horn-calls fill the sky in the autumn hues; / At the frontier, the rouge-stained earth congeals to purple at night." The first line intensifies the tension and peril of the enemy at the gates, while the sunlight highlights the defenders' majesty. The second line amplifies the battlefield's tragic atmosphere and the combat's cruelty through sound and sight. Many interpret "the rouge-stained earth congeals to purple at night" superficially, as the frontier soil resembling rouge congealed to purple. However, "rouge" (燕脂) refers to the bright red cosmetic used by women; thus, the line should be understood as: "The soldiers' blood saturates the earth, turning it deep purple by night." Similarly, Yao He's "Song of the Sword's Aura" states: "Corpses pile up, submerging the riverbanks; / Blood flows, leaving no dust in the wilderness"—evoking mountains of the dead and rivers of blood, a battlefield drenched and cleansed of dust.

Tang frontier poetry, largely realistic, serves as a historical silhouette, offering an alternative perspective on Tang warfare that complements official historical records. The Old Book of Tang records in its annals that from Emperor Taizong to Emperor Dezong, the total number of enemy heads taken reached 112,800. Moreover, in Han and Tang frontier poetry, the character for "death" (死) appears over 170 times, "bone" (骨) 113 times—including "white bones" (白骨) 23 times, "battle bones" (战骨) 12 times, and "dry bones" (枯骨) 7 times. "Blood" (血) appears 73 times, and "weeping" (哭) 55 times. These chilling images constantly remind us of the countless soldiers who gave their lives for the nation. Yet, through relentless combat, they upheld the fighting spirit: "When the nation is in peril, take up arms and don armor; when others are endangered, be the first to step forward." Without frontline sacrifice, there would be no magnificent land. These harrowing depictions of war underscore the imperative to defend the homeland, ensure the people's safety and happiness, and protect the inviolability of territorial sovereignty. Thus, frontier poetry abounds with lines that fully embody the spirit of campaigning. For example, the opening of Yang Jiong's "Marching Song": "Beacon fires blaze, lighting the western capital; / Our hearts within are restless, stirred to action. / With tally in hand, we leave the Phoenix Tower; / Our armored cavalry besiege the Dragon City." It describes how border alarms reach Chang'an, stirring the soldiers' hearts. They bid farewell to kin and homeland, as generals lead elite troops to besiege the enemy with fierce courage. Li Bai's "Six Songs of the Frontier" declares: "By day we fight to the beat of drums; / By night we sleep cradling our saddles. / I would draw the sword at my waist / To slay the Loulan chieftain!" And Wang Changling's "On the Frontier": "The moon still shines on mountain passes as of yore. / How many guardsmen of the Great Wall are no more! / If the flying general were still there in command, / No hostile steeds would have ventured to invade our land." Such poems vividly illustrate the positive attitude toward frontier conflict in a segment of Tang frontier poetry and the boundless hope placed in the dynasty's magnificent landscape.

4.Conclusion

Cen Shen's Song of White Snow in Farewell to Secretary Wu Going Back to the Capital vividly embodies the three core spirits of Tang frontier poetry—the spirit of enduring harshness (reflected in depictions of bitter frontier winds and cold, testifying to soldiers' resilience against extreme nature), the spirit of martial valor (rooted in Qin-Han martial traditions, Sui-Tang ethnic fusion, and the integration of patriotism, scholar-official merit pursuit, and chivalric ethics), and the spirit of campaigning (conveyed through symbolic and realistic portrayals of frontier defense, balancing heroism with recognition of war's cost). These spirits are not mere literary themes but mirrors of the Tang Dynasty's historical context, cultural vitality, and commitment to safeguarding borders and sovereignty, forming an integral part of the "Heroic Han and Prosperous Tang" legacy. As a cultural treasure, Tang frontier poetry, with its timeless connotations of perseverance, loyalty, and longing for peace, not only enriches Chinese literary history but also offers lasting insights into values still relevant today—while also laying a foundation for further research on regional variations or cross-dynasty comparisons of frontier poetic spirits.

Reference:

[1] Yan,F.L.(2014).A study of frontier poems in the Han and Tang dynasties.Zhonghua Book Company.

[2] Yan,F.L.(2004).A study on the themes of frontier poems in the Han and Tang dynasties(Doctoral dissertation).Nanjing Normal University,p.54.

[3] Chen,Y.K.(2001).Jinmingguan cong gao er bian(Collected Essays from the Jinmingguan Studio,Volume Two).SDX Joint Publishing Company.

[4] Ouyang,X.,&Song,Q.(1975).New book of Tang:Biography of Li Bai.Zhonghua Book Company.

[5] Liu,X.(1975).Old book of Tang.Zhonghua Book Company.

[6] Yan,F.L.(2004).A study on the themes of frontier poems in the Han and Tang dynasties(Doctoral dissertation).Nanjing Normal University,p.83.