



On the Similarities and Differences in the Poetic Pursuits of Yang Tianshi and Wan Junren—Also on the Contemporary Dilemmas of Classical Chinese Poetry Creation

Qingqing Gao

Institute of Ancient History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing 100101, China.

How to cite this paper: Qingqing Gao. (2026) On the Similarities and Differences in the Poetic Pursuits of Yang Tianshi and Wan Junren—Also on the Contemporary Dilemmas of Classical Chinese Poetry Creation. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 10(5), 554-559. DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2026.05.008

Received: March 23, 2026

Accepted: April 25, 2026

Published: May 28, 2026

***Corresponding author:** Qingqing Gao, Institute of Ancient History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing 100101, China.

© 2026 by the author(s).

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives (CC BY-NC-ND) license, which permits non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not modified or adapted.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Abstract

Mr. Yang Tianshi and Mr. Wan Junren are distinguished contemporary Chinese scholars, both having made fruitful contributions in their respective research fields. Beyond academic research, they have composed a considerable number of classical Chinese poems. Their poetic creations share common features: a keen concern for reality, the expression of lofty aspirations, and adeptness at occasional and social verse. Meanwhile, each demonstrates unique attainments and stylistic characteristics in the thematic content related to their academic expertise and individual writing styles. Their poems reflect profound thinking and carry distinctive humanistic warmth, naturally blending traditional poetic charm with modern spiritual connotations. They also serve as fine models of contemporary scholars' poetry, offering us a window into the current state of its creation. As a precious treasure and indispensable component of Chinese culture, classical Chinese poetry currently faces contemporary dilemmas, including insufficient creators and a lack of high-quality works. The creative endeavors of the two scholars have infused new vitality into the inheritance and development of classical Chinese poetry.

Keywords

Yang Tianshi; Wan Junren; classical Chinese poetry; contemporary dilemmas

1. Introduction

Yang Tianshi, born in February 1936, is currently an Honorary Member of the Academic Divisions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Wan Junren, born in July 1958, is one of the first Senior Professors of Humanities at Tsinghua University. Both are distinguished contemporary Chinese scholars of literature and history who have achieved a series of important academic accomplishments in their respective research fields. Less known to the public is that they have also made remarkable achievements in the creation of classical Chinese poetry. Up to now, Professor Yang has published his poetry collection *Selected Poems from the Half-New and Half-Old Studio*, and Professor Wan has released his poetry anthology *Quiet Chanting of You Studio*.

2. Similarities in Poetic Creative Pursuits

2.1 Keen Concern for Reality

“It is fitting for writings to be composed for the times, and for poems to be written in response to current affairs” (Bai, 1979). This poetic theory was put forward by Bai Juyi, a great poet of the Tang Dynasty. It advocates that poetic creation should be rooted in reality and draw themes from real-life events. Among all realistic concerns, nothing matters more than the living people and the nation. The two scholars write poems mostly for this purpose.

Professor Yang’s poem *Reflections on the Southern Great Wall* closes with two lines: “The stars shift, the world transforms; Miao and Han dance and sing in high spirits” (Yang, 2019). In the Ming Dynasty, this Great Wall was constructed to guard against the Miao, Yao, and other ethnic groups. Today, the wall still stands, while Miao and Han people sing and dance together, embodying the current harmony of ethnic unity in China and the superiority of the nation’s ethnic policies. The closing lines of his *Climbing the Yangtze River Bridge at Night, Reminiscing on the Wuchang Uprising* run: “I urge historians to take up their brushes; To portray the heroes of Chu with rich, bold colors” (Yang, 2019). The lines encourage historians to research and praise those heroic figures who advanced the course of history and rendered outstanding service to the nation. In his poem *Impromptu Ode on the 2017 Staff Assembly of Tsinghua University*, Professor Wan Junren writes in the second couplet: “The dream of Tsinghua blends into the Chinese nation’s dream; The glory of the ancient land radiates the splendour of a great modern nation” (Wan, 2021). His ci poem *Man Jiang Hong: Following the Original Rhyme of Master Shiyi (Fan Zeng, courtesy name Shiyi) in Response to Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the Victory of the World Anti-Fascist War* speaks out directly for the living people and sings praises for righteousness, with lines reading: “I ask heaven: who can ignore the loss of hundreds of millions of lives? ... How can universal righteousness in the world be slighted in the slightest” (Wan, 2021)?

2.2 Expression of Lofty Aspirations

Professor Yang is over eighty years old, and Professor Wan is past sixty, yet they still keep composing classical poems to express their aspirations. Though both have entered their twilight years, this period has proven to be a fruitful phase of their poetic creation. They maintain a youthful mental state revealed in their verses. Their lofty ideals win admiration among the younger generation, and their positive outlook on life can inspire later learners. As the saying goes, “An old steed in the stable still aspires to gallop a thousand miles” (Cao, 2012).

In previous years, Professor Yang composed *My Academic Autobiography*. At the end of the work, he quoted his short poem *Self-Mockery on My Birthday*, reflecting on his academic journey from literary studies to historical research. The poem contains the lines: “I dispel the mist to behold hills and valleys; And ride surging waves into historical chapters” (Yang, 2019). Written on his sixty-ninth birthday, the first line implies that as a historian, he strives to clear away the fog shrouding historical events so as to explore historical truths. The second line shows that he devotes himself to historical research with sincere passion and strides into a broader academic realm. He once visited the Hoover Institution at Stanford University in the United States to excerpt and study Chiang Kai-shek’s diaries. In his poem *Three Visits to the Hoover Institution*, he writes the verse: “Again I sail across vast oceans for distant travels; In old age, I still keep the spirit of my youthful days” (Yang, 2019). The lines convey that though advanced in years, his resolve to pursue historical truth abroad remains as vigorous and passionate as that of a young man. In the third couplet of his poem *Reflections on My Fifty-Eighth Birthday*, Professor Wan Junren writes, “Three thousand volumes of history follow Sima Qian’s lead; Seventy-two sages console Confucius’s soul” (Wan, 2021). He aspires to accomplish enduring scholarly achievements following the model of Sima Qian and takes Confucius as his paradigm in teaching disciples, revealing that his pursuit of academia and professional mission has reached the highest realm. The closing line of his ci poem *Shui Diao Ge Tou: Thoughts on Teachers’ Day* runs: “Without being a true knight of the mind; How dare one take the lead and forge ahead” (Wan, 2021)? It fully expresses his aspirations and self-confidence in academic research and educational teaching.

2.3 Adeptness at Occasional and Social Verse

Humans are social beings and cannot exist independently apart from society. As Marx put it, “The individual is a social being” (Marx, 2014). Interpersonal communication and interaction cater to people’s inherent needs. In ancient times, people often exchanged poems during social visits and interactions to deepen friendship. By contrast, few

modern people are capable of composing classical poems, and even fewer take the initiative to inherit the traditional poetic correspondence custom. The two scholars practice what they preach and devote themselves to traditional, elegant culture, subtly influencing people around them and making solid contributions to the promotion of fine traditional Chinese culture.

In his youth, Professor Yang composed a poem titled *Encouraging a Friend*. The last two lines go: “The roc should spread its wings reaching the sky; Gazing afar, the firmament stretches clear for thousands of miles” (Yang, 2019). The lines encourage his friend to set lofty aspirations and resolve to fulfill them with determination. When delivering lectures in Hualien, Taiwan, he composed the verse: “Fair mountains and rivers nurture outstanding talents; Profound talent and insight are innate gifts” (*A Poem Composed While Lecturing in Taiwan as a Gift*, Yang, 2019). He pays tribute to Taiwanese scholars from both geographical and humanistic perspectives. Most of Professor Wan’s poems for social engagements are written in matching rhyme patterns. Such a composition restricts rhymes and requires identical rhyme sequence with the original work, which is extremely difficult to accomplish. For example, the second couplet of his poem *Replying to Master Shiyi in the Original Rhyme* highly praises Master Shiyi: “The winding river keeps its central course forever; Profound thoughts linger in the quiet night with lucid insight” (Wan, 2021). The lines imply that though the great river twists and turns, it never deviates from its mainstream. Similarly, Master Shiyi meditates quietly at night and distinguishes truth from worldly affairs with remarkable discernment. His *Prompt Response to Fellow Feng Qingcheng’s Ode to Qu Yuan on Dragon Boat Festival in Original Rhyme* contains the lines: “As seasons come and go, he stands as a pioneer; Who can write a tenth chapter to continue the *Nine Chapters*” (Wan, 2021)? Qu Yuan was the first virtuous scholar who sacrificed himself by drowning in the Miluo River. He wrote *Nine Chapters* to express his ideals and integrity. By yearning for a successor to compose the tenth chapter, Professor Wan conveys his high regard and sincere admiration for the virtuous and wise intellectuals of the present era.

3. Differences in Poetic Creative Pursuits

3.1 Thematic Content Related to Their Academic Expertise

Both scholars possess profound insights and in-depth research into traditional Chinese culture. They are interlinked in their broad academic fields and solid literary foundations, especially a sound mastery of classical Chinese. These endow them with the ability to compose exquisite classical poems. Nevertheless, due to their different specialized research directions, their poetic creations also feature distinctive emphases.

Professor Yang is proficient in the studies of the history of the Republic of China, the history of the Kuomintang, and Chiang Kai-shek. He has also visited many historical relics of the Republican era in person, and often expressed his feelings and insights about those places through classical poetry. For instance, the last two lines of his poem *Visiting the Secluded Residence of General Zhang Xueliang in Yuanling* read: “Full of will to defeat the invaders yet all in vain; He wanders along the riverbank amid partridge cries” (Yang, 2019). Ending with a scenery depiction, the verse leaves a lasting aftertaste and vividly conveys Zhang Xueliang’s regret and unwillingness to readers. The closing couplet of *Inscription on the Former Residence of the Chiang Family in Xikou* goes: “Time sweeps away the past and great figures fade away; Historians still endlessly debate their merits and demerits” (Yang, 2019). The Chiang Family Former Residence in Xikou was once the home of Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo. The line about endless debates chiefly refers to Chiang Kai-shek. For a long time, public perceptions of Chiang Kai-shek have tended to be stereotyped and simplistic. Based on in-depth research on Chiang Kai-shek’s diaries, Professor Yang has offered a realistic and objective evaluation, restoring his complicated historical image. Professor Wan’s academic expertise lies in ethics and political philosophy. He is fond of integrating Confucian and Buddhist philosophical ideas into his classical poems. For example, the third couplet of his poem *Trying to Follow the Original Rhyme in Reply to Dr. Tang Yunke’s Climbing Yueyang Tower* reads: “Lotus blooms in the Great ultimate, revealing profound new principle; Oars ride the rolling waves to ferry the evening boat” (Wan, 2021). Zhou Dunyi was the founding master of Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty. He authored *Ode to the Lotus* and transmitted the Diagram of the Great Ultimate. This allusion is used here to praise the profound conception of Dr. Tang’s writings. It is common sense that oars can propel boats forward, yet vessels cannot sail without the momentum of rolling waves. By analogy, principle generates all things in the universe, which still rely on the subtle convergence and interaction of Yin and Yang vital energy to take form. The second couplet in his poem *Morning Ode on the Lunar New Year of Dingyou* goes: “Amid worldly fervor, the essence of Samadhi is lacking; Supreme serenity abides only at Mount Wutai” (Wan, 2021). The lines are

imbued with Zen wisdom and subtly express the overwhelming weight of homesickness. Samadhi, a Buddhist term, means eliminating distracting thoughts and concentrating the mind on a single spiritual state. By adding the word “lacking”, the poet implies that homesickness is irrepressible and prevents him from attaining such mental concentration. “Supreme serenity” derives from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. It signifies the transcendental state of extinguishing worldly afflictions and attaining spiritual peace through cultivation. The poet remarks that this serene realm resides at the sacred Buddhist site of Mount Wutai rather than in his immediate surroundings, suggesting that he is overcome by homesickness and cannot enter the tranquil spiritual state he longs for.

3.2 Individual Writing Styles

Due to differences in personal temperament and creative philosophy, the two scholars present a striking contrast in their writing styles, standing like two lofty peaks side by side, each possessing its own distinctive charm. Such stylistic differences not only inject unique charm into their poetry creation but also bring a rich and colorful aesthetic experience to readers.

Professor Yang attaches great importance to poetic sentiment and artistic conception, striving to create timeless imagery with concise language while rarely employing literary allusions. Numerous allusions have originated from the Yellow Crane Tower, an age-old, renowned pavilion, and its surrounding areas. In his poem *Yellow Crane Tower*, he adopts an almost plain descriptive style for lyrical depiction: “Climb the tower and find Chu sky low beneath my sight; The endless Yangtze veils my gazing eye. Curtains roll up to greet Xiaoxiang and two Yue lands; Windows open to hills like watching chess in hands” (Yang, 2019). By contrast, Professor Wan prefers to employ literary allusions, and his overall linguistic style leans toward classical simplicity. In the middle two couplets of his poem *Visiting the Yellow Crane Tower in Late Autumn*, he writes, “Cui and Li vied in composing quatrains; Tortoise and Snake Hills face each other, murmuring parting sorrow. How could Hanyang nurture the dream of the imperial court? Wuchang rose to uphold righteous aspirations and lofty designs” (Wan, 2021). He draws on the allusion of Cui Hao and Li Bai competing in poetic composition, as well as the historical events of the 1911 Wuchang Uprising in the late Qing Dynasty, embodying the historical profundity of the Yellow Crane Tower.

4. Contemporary Dilemmas of Classical Chinese Poetry Creation

China is a nation of poetry. From a long historical perspective, the term “poetry” here chiefly refers to classical Chinese poetry rather than modern poetry. Classical poetry consists of ancient-style poetry and regulated verse. The former features flexible forms while the latter is restricted by strict metrical rules. Ci poetry, also known as poetic remainder, is likewise a poetic genre. As Wen Yiduo pointed out, “Fu, ci, and qu are tributaries of poetry” (Wen, 2006). Classical poetry and ci poetry occupy a pivotal position in ancient Chinese literature and even traditional Chinese culture. Even during the Ming and Qing dynasties, an era celebrated for novels, numerous distinguished poets and ci poets emerged, including Tang Yin, Yang Shen, Nalan Xingde, Zheng Banqiao, and Yuan Mei. In modern and contemporary times, classical poetry has been overshadowed by the rise of modern poetry, yet its radiance has never faded, nor has its composition ever ceased. It possesses tenacious vitality and enduring charm. The renowned writer Wang Meng remarks, “Classical Chinese poetry is a precious literary treasure. It fully displays the glamour of the Chinese language and characters, and serves as an indispensable part of the cohesion of Chinese culture and the Chinese nation” (Wang, 2005). Classical poetry has deeply integrated into the spiritual world of the Chinese people, subtly shaping their inner life. Nearly every Chinese person can recite several lines of classical poems. However, an unavoidable problem remains: although many people enjoy reading classical Chinese poems, far fewer are capable of writing them. Even among humanities researchers, the proportion of those capable of writing classical poems remains low. It has become a common, regrettable phenomenon that many professors teaching ancient literary studies can only analyze classical poems but not create them. Nearly all great scholars in modern times were accomplished poets themselves. Figures such as Wang Guowei, Chen Yinke, Qian Mu, Feng Youlan, and Qian Zhongshu did not specialize in literature, yet all excelled at composing refined classical poems. In contemporary society, people live at a fast pace. The general public is busy pursuing economic gains, while university teachers are preoccupied with professional title promotion. They pay little attention to spiritual cultivation and gradually abandon the poetic culture once engraved deep in the national soul. Both Professor Yang and Professor Wan have expressed varying degrees of loss and anxiety about this phenomenon.

Apart from the shortage of creators, classical Chinese poetry faces another predicament: the scarcity of high-quality works. Fueled by the boom in traditional culture in past years, poetry societies and writing communities have gained

growing influence, and an increasing number of journals publish classical Chinese poems, showing apparent signs of their revival. Wang Yaping states, “Classical Chinese poetry has undergone twists and turns since the 20th century, and a revival has finally emerged in the new era” (Wang, 2015). Yet this revival remains limited and unpromising in terms of relative quantity. Meanwhile, numerous problems have emerged amid the revival. Contemporary Ci poet Cai Shiping points out, “The prominent problems with current poetic works lie chiefly in stale and lifeless language, hackneyed and vapid imagery, rigid and monotonous conception, and dull aesthetic appeal that fails to inspire. Many classical poems strike readers as stereotyped and grow tedious with repeated reading” (Cai, 2019). Having joined several poetry societies, the author has found through years of observation that practitioners of classical poetry come from diverse occupational backgrounds, including some outstanding talents. Nevertheless, most of their works are mediocre, lacking profound insight and artistic appeal while merely conforming to metrical rules. Too many such poems are easily forgotten after reading, without any emotional resonance, lasting impression, or lingering charm for further reflection. They indeed “strike readers as stereotyped and grow tedious with repeated reading”. Professors Yang and Wan are both erudite scholars. Their classical poems reflect personal sentiments and features of the times, while being imbued with profound cultural connotations and artistic charm. In particular, their works, integrated with professional knowledge, guide readers to engage in in-depth thinking. It is probably a common feature of scholars’ poetry to have both brilliant talent and extensive knowledge. As a special humanistic phenomenon, scholars’ poetry has also attracted the attention of some literary researchers. Chen Youkang summarizes the characteristics of scholars’ poetry of the 20th century as popularization, self-entertainment, professionalism, and elegance. In terms of text content, professionalism refers to the fact that the author brings his own academic background into poetry, which makes a scholar’s poetry show a certain professional quality (Chen, 2003). The poems composed by the two scholars undoubtedly conform to this characteristic.

5. Conclusion

In an era when modern poetry remains the mainstream of poetic development, both Professor Yang and Professor Wan are fond of expressing their temperament and sentiments through classical Chinese poetry. This inclination runs counter to the prevailing literary trend, yet it is highly praiseworthy from the perspective of inheriting and promoting traditional poetic culture. They maintain a passionate devotion to composing classical poetry, putting their enthusiasm into creative practice, thereby attaining remarkable literary achievements. The preceding discussion has mainly explored three similarities and two differences in their poetic aspirations and creative pursuits. Such thematic similarities are hardly unfamiliar: a keen concern for reality, the expression of lofty aspirations, and adeptness at occasional and social verse are common themes in classical Chinese poetry. Their creative practice offers valuable enlightenment for beginners and points out the general orientation of poetic composition. The two distinctive differences lie in the academic expertise and individual writing styles, demonstrating that poetic creation ought to retain unique personal characteristics. Traditional poetic culture remains an important medium for preserving historical memory and literary aesthetics in contemporary Chinese society. Moreover, it embodies the unique charm and essence of Chinese civilization and serves as a vital force for enhancing national cohesion and cultural confidence. It deserves a proper place in the contemporary literary world and even in modern literary history. Benefiting from the boom of traditional culture in recent years, classical poetry has been revived to some extent. Even so, there remains considerable room for improvement in both the number of creators and the overall quality of works. Writers, humanities scholars, and poetry enthusiasts alike ought to strive to inherit and develop the splendid, time-honored traditional poetic culture. It should keep pace with the trends of the new era and radiate new vitality. This is surely also the expectation of the two distinguished scholars.

References

- Bai, J. Y. (1979). Letter to Yuan Jiu. In *Collected Works of Bai Juyi*. Zhonghua Book Company.
- Cai, S. P. (2019, July 3). The revival of Chinese poetry facing the challenges of the times. *China Arts News*.
- Cao, C. (2012). Ode to the tortoise. In *Collected Works of Cao Cao*. Zhonghua Book Company.
- Chen, Y. K. (2003). On scholar’s poetry of the 20th century. *Social Sciences in Yunnan*, (3), 105-109.
- Marx, K. H. (2014). *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. People’s Publishing House.

- Wan, J. R. (2021). *Quiet Chanting of You Studio*. Zhonghua Book Company.
- Wang, M. (2005). The charm of classical poetry. In *Wang Meng on reading*. Fudan University Press.
- Wang, Y. P. (2015). *The Contemporary Breakthrough of Classical Ci Poetry*. China Youth Press.
- Wen, Y. D. (2006). The historical trend of literature. In *Myths and Poems*. Shanghai People's Publishing House.
- Yang, T. S. (2019). *Selected Poems from the Half-New and Half-Old Studio*. Yuelu Press.