

Creation Dilemmas Faced by Early Ming Ci Writers amid the Canonization of Song Ci

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ABSTRACT

Song Ci(宋词) gradually evolved into an authoritative creative template for post-Song literati, yet its original melodic frameworks and vocal performance traditions vanished over time. No unified, definitive standards governing cipai(词牌) metrical structures and rhyming conventions survived into the Ming Dynasty. Though early Ming creators held profound admiration for Song Ci masterpieces, they failed to replicate the genre's authentic creative logic. Direct mechanical imitation prevailed across most Ming Ci writing: practitioners arbitrarily adjusted character counts within fixed cipaitemplates, adopted lax rhyming systems, and blurred stylistic boundaries between Ci and northern Qu(曲). Three interwoven historical factors lie at the root of such compositional chaos: the extinction of Ci's accompanying musical heritage, major phonetic shifts separating Song and Ming vernacular speech, and inconsistent variant editions of transmitted Song Ci anthologies. Centering on Yang Shen's poetic output as a core case, this paper dissects how mid-Ming literati reconstructed standardized, refined Ci aesthetics. Drawing artistic nourishment from Song canonical texts, these scholars clarified the stylistic divide between Ci and Qu, consolidated unified metrical regulations, refined delicate lyrical diction, and expanded the thematic spectrum accessible to Ci composition—points that form the core analysis of this research.

Keywords: Canonization of Song Ci, Early Ming Ci practitioners, Standardized Ci composition.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Song Ci Turned into Canonical Reading Texts from Yuan to Ming

Every historical phase carries its dominant literary genre, and Ci secured this dominant status across the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties. Song literati built relatively mature stylistic norms for Ci creation, without forming one rigid universal rule to restrict line length and rhyming choices.

Song-era Ci composition was rooted in vocal melody, a creation method known as filling lyrics to match existing tunes. Writers needed to craft lines that fit musical tempo, vocal rhythm and the performance logic of banquet stages. Each cipai(词牌) carried fixed character limits and line partitions, while still reserving room for flexible adaptation. Different authors, regional customs and performance scenarios all brought minor variations to the same cipai framework. Song creators

frequently added or omitted characters, swapped rhyme words to fit their expressive demands.

After the fall of the Song regime, the original musical scores for Ci slowly fell out of use. Yuan and Ming literati could only access Song Ci through printed anthologies, cut off from the live vocal tradition that once defined this genre. Ci transformed step by step from performative vocal works into silent reading texts. Audiences and creators began to value its literary charm above all else, neglecting its foundational ties to music. Early Ming scholars had full access to all landmark Song Ci collections, yet they lost the complete operational rules required to compose authentic Ci works.

This paper first sorts out the formation process of Song Ci's canonical status during Yuan and Ming rule, untangling the internal correlation between Ci rhyme, metrical layout and lost ancient melodies. It generalizes mainstream rhyming and metrical habits visible in early Ming Ci works, and

finally adopts Yang Shen's writings as a sample to interpret how mid-Ming literati restored refined, complete aesthetic standards to Ci creation.

1.2 The Shaping of Song Ci's Canonical Identity

Thriving urban commerce, flourishing banquet entertainment culture and active literary participation collectively fueled the unprecedented prosperity of Song Ci. Far from static written verses locked on paper, Ci existed first and foremost as vocal art tightly bound to instrumental melody. Every rhythmic cadence, line partition, tonal matching and emotional undertone had to conform strictly to the constraints of its accompanying tune.

The Song Dynasty fostered a diverse gallery of canonical Ci masters whose distinct artistic pursuits constructed a multi-dimensional literary tradition—this diversity forms a key reference when analyzing Ming imitative flaws in my research.

Cipai themselves became a core component of Song Ci's lasting canonical value. Most tune names originated from banquet musical scores; each cipai stipulated fixed character counts, melodic speed and inherent emotional tone. These emotional associations were never mandatory legal rules, yet generations of readers formed consistent aesthetic perceptions linked to each individual cipai.

The Yuan Dynasty brought a transformative shift to the inheritance of Song Ci. With the collapse of the Song court, the living performance space for Ci's traditional melodies vanished.

Northern Qu rose to enormous popularity during the same period, creating an obvious stylistic divide between the two lyrical forms. San Qu (散曲) relied on colloquial daily language, written for stage performances and mass audiences, while Ci remained tied to Song elite literati, granting it an aura of greater refinement. This refined positioning never severed Ci's connection to civilian life. Ci prioritized neat structural layout, implicit emotional expression and deliberate diction far more than Qu.

Woodblock printing technology matured dramatically throughout the Ming Dynasty, greatly lowering barriers for copying, circulating and collecting Ci anthologies. Mass compilation of selected Ci collections further solidified Song Ci's unshakable canonical position among literati. Caotang Shiyu (草堂诗余), one of the most widely circulated Ci anthologies of the era, granted broad access to Song masterpieces for Ming literary

practitioners. Yet such curated compilations inadvertently distorted mainstream perceptions of the Ci genre. Most editors categorized collected works merely by narrow emotional motifs: romantic longing, spring melancholy, banquet leisure and longing for distant relatives. This oversimplified classification led early Ming creators to mislabel Ci as a form limited exclusively to tender romantic expression, which made them overlook the full breadth of artistic and thematic value embedded within Song canonical works.

Song Ci's established canonical status exerted two-sided influence on Ming creation. On the positive side, Ming writers obtained complete refined templates to draw from for elegant Ci composition. On the negative side, they only engaged with Ci through printed text and polished vocabulary, stripped of the full melodic and performative logic that shaped original Song Ci. Ming literati could read Song masterpieces, yet they could not replicate the lost vocal traditions, performance techniques and rhythmic logic behind these ancient texts.

2. RHYME, METRICAL LAYOUT AND THE VANISHED MELODIC FOUNDATION OF SONG CI

All creative dilemmas plaguing early Ming Ci creation stem from three interconnected dimensions: rhyming standards, cipaimetrical frameworks and extinct traditional melodies. Later compiled Ci manuals derived fixed metrical rules solely from surviving Song printed texts, standardizing character quantities, line breaks, tonal sequence and rhyme placement. If researchers judge original Song Ci using these late artificial standards, they cannot grasp the flexible, adaptive essence of Song-era composition.

Metrical rules for Song Ci were originally designed to serve vocal melody. Song writers did not rigidly follow static character tables; their writing centered on matching real musical scores, a core logic of filling lyrics for existing tunes. Every cipai contained baseline character limits and rhyme positions, all calibrated for live singing. For this reason, Song creators routinely produced multiple variant forms under a single tune name: standard, shortened, extended and revised iterations. Later Ci anthologies split these variations into separate categories to guide novice writers, while Song-era composers never drew hard dividing lines between these formats. Minor formal shifts came from

corrupted copied musical scores, localized stage performance adjustments or spontaneous personal creation. Once the original melodies disappeared, Ming writers lost the ability to distinguish between officially permitted variations and scribal errors.

Rhyming systems created a second major compositional barrier. Ci rhyme shares partial overlaps with classical shi rhyme, yet the two systems are not fully interchangeable. Phonetic pronunciation underwent massive shifts between the Song and Ming-Qing periods; word groups that rhymed naturally in Song speech lost tonal consistency centuries later. Song Ci also widely adopted adjacent rhyme, shifting rhyme and mixed level-oblique tones. Long-form Ci frequently switched rhyme groups to align with emotional transitions and musical segments. Level-tone rhymes generate soft, rounded reading rhythm, while oblique-tone rhymes deliver tight, urgent sentiment. These were never non-negotiable regulations, yet rhyme configuration directly altered the reading cadence and emotional core of any Ci piece.

Entering-tone rhymes posed the greatest obstacle for early Ming practitioners. Song Ci made extensive use of entering-tone characters, which create short, staccato rhythmic beats. Daily spoken phonetics shifted drastically across Yuan and Ming: northern dialects absorbed entering tones into other tonal divisions, while southern dialects retained a clear distinction for this sound category. This regional phonetic gap drove inconsistent rhyming habits among Ming Ci writers.

The disappearance of Ci's traditional melodies across Yuan and Ming marks the fundamental reason Ming literati struggled to master authentic Song compositional logic. Song Ci maintained intimate ties to court music, professional vocalists, private banquet culture and urban civilian life, jointly developed and spread by elite literati and professional singers. This complete musical transmission system collapsed after the Song Dynasty fell. Northern Qu grew popular yet could not replace Ci's unique melodic heritage. Early Ming writers still adopted classic tune names, yet nearly no living performer could sing these works using their original accompanying scores.

As a result, most early Ming creators relied entirely on direct transcription of complete Song Ci texts to craft new lyrical pieces. They copied line length, pause markers, rhyme positions and tonal sequence from famous Song works. This imitation method carried low technical barriers, yet bore

obvious defects. A single surviving Song work could never represent all variant formats of one cipai. Printed anthologies contained abundant scribal errors, and blind mechanical copying made creators lose sight of Ci's inherent emotional core. Static written text could never fully convey the melodic logic that shaped original Song Ci.

Early Ming Ci occupied an awkward middle ground between classical shi poetry and northern Qu. Regulated shi poetry carried fully fixed compositional rules, while Qu had complete compiled manuals and unified rhyme tables. Ci could not fully align with either literary form. The blurred stylistic boundary between poem, Ci and Qu triggered frequent compositional errors: some works blend Ci and Qu writing techniques, others structure Ci strictly following poem conventions, and many adopt extremely loose rhyming frameworks. The compilation of later Ming Ci manuals and rhyme tables, which clarified clear dividing lines between Ci and Qu, emerged entirely as a response to these widespread creative difficulties.

3. COMMON RHYMING AND METRICAL HABITS IN EARLY MING CI CREATION

This research sorts through dozens of Ci anthologies and ancient literary records, analyzing surviving works from over 180 early Ming Ci authors. Four dominant creative tendencies emerge from textual collation: exclusive reliance on widely recognized cipai templates, mechanical copying of Song masterpieces, loose, flexible rhyming and cross-blending of Ci and Qu stylistic skills. A small number of surviving works carry anonymous authorship, conflicting printed variants or damaged tune name labels, so these observations reflect broad developmental trends rather than rigid quantitative conclusions.

3.1 *Cipai Selection Preferences*

Early Ming writers leaned heavily toward short and medium-length cipai. These compact Ci structures carry abundant exemplary Song works and suit casual literary exchange at private gatherings. Long-form cipai enjoyed far less popularity.

Creators favored short cipai to minimize compositional risk. Compact tunes feature clear structural frameworks easy to replicate from Song reference texts. Long-form Ci demand precise

control over paragraph layout, rhyme shifts and emotional transitions. Without accessible Ci manuals and intact melodic knowledge, crafting high-quality long Ci proved extremely challenging for Ming practitioners.

3.2 Three Primary Modes of Following Cipai Metrical Rules

The first method centers on full transcription of one canonical Song Ci work. Writers selected a widely recognized masterpiece and duplicated its line length, character quantity, rhyme placement and reading rhythm. This practice preserved basic metrical norms, yet creators often treated one minor variant printing as the sole official standard format.

The second approach retains the general framework of a cipai while introducing minor formal adjustments. Writers grasped the core structural layout of a tune name, adding or removing characters, shifting pause points and rearranging rhyme positions to fit personal expressive intent. Some adjustments correspond to officially permitted Song-era variants, while others stem from incomplete mastery of metrical rules. The Ming court never released unified official Ci manuals, leaving creators unable to distinguish legitimate flexible revisions from scribal mistakes.

The third mode borrows compositional techniques from shi or Qu entirely. Though labeled with standard cipai names, these pieces adopt diction, reading rhythm, auxiliary particles and rhyme systems belonging to shi or northern Qu. Some split five-character and seven-character shi lines into fragmented Ci phrasing; others introduce colloquial auxiliary vocabulary and fully adopt Qu rhyming standards. All these phenomena reflect Ci's undefined stylistic positioning in the early Ming, with writers repeatedly crossing genre boundaries in their lyrical experiments.

3.3 Loose Rhyming Conventions in Daily Creation

Early Ming creators understood Ci required consistent rhyme groups within a single piece: level-rhyme cipai maintained level tone throughout, and oblique-rhyme tunes retained oblique tone consistently. When selecting specific rhyme characters, however, writers blended distinct rhyme divisions, utilized adjacent rhymes and merged Song-era phonetic standards with Ming daily vernacular pronunciation. Some practices inherited the loose rhyming tradition of Song Ci, while others

directly followed Ming spoken dialect and northern Qu rhyme regulations.

Within level-rhyme formats writers sustained one unified rhyme group across the full text, yet selected rhyme characters from broad, loosely connected phonetic divisions. Certain rhyme choices appear non-compliant when judged against later shi rhyme manuals, yet sounded natural within Ming local spoken language. Many creators failed to draw a strict separation between Ci rhyme and classical shi rhyme. Oblique-rhyme cipai generated more compositional confusion, particularly regarding rising, falling and entering tone rhyme characters.

These widespread habits reveal a clear reality: early Ming writers recognized Ci's fundamental demand for consistent rhyme, yet lacked a single universally accepted official Ci rhyme standard. They understood unified rhyme was mandatory for Ci composition, yet could not identify which rhyme manual to follow as authoritative. They acknowledged Song Ci permitted limited rhyme variation, yet lost the phonetic logic justifying these flexible shifts. They observed northern Qu freely adopt contemporary vernacular phonetics, yet worried over-excessive Qu-style looseness would strip Ci of its refined elite aesthetic.

From my sorting of early Ming Ci texts, we may summarize the genre's awkward developmental predicament: Ming writers possessed abundant canonical Song templates for imitation, yet lacked a unified set of formal creative standards to abide by. Though they held deep reverence for Song Ci and copied its written phrasing extensively, their learning relied solely on printed anthologies. The inseparable bond linking Ci's structural layout, metrical rules and original melody could no longer be fully transmitted between generations. This developmental vacuum fueled growing demand for systematic Ci manuals, rhyme tables and complete theoretical discourse to standardize composition.

4. YANG SHEN(杨慎)'S CI CREATION: RESTORING REFINED AESTHETIC STANDARDS TO MING LYRICAL WRITING

Yang Shen ranks among the most distinguished literati, scholars and Ci poets of the mid-Ming Dynasty. All compositional obstacles visible in his lyrical output originate from the broader structural dilemmas facing early Ming Ci creation:

ambiguous metrical standards, unregulated blending of Ci and Qu techniques, and an undefined independent artistic identity for the Ci genre. His complete body of work illustrates how mid-Ming elite literati reconstructed Ci's refined, self-contained compositional framework after Song Ci solidified its canonical status.

Yang Shen achieved comprehensive mastery across shi prose, essays, Ci, Qu, historical research and ancient textual collation. He exhaustively read all surviving pre-Ming canonical texts and Tang-Song literary masterpieces, while retaining a sincere appreciation for folk ballads, regional civilian life, local vernacular and grassroots cultural expression. This cross-domain reading background endowed his Ci writing with unique artistic characteristics, balancing elite refined taste and vivid civilian expressive language simultaneously.

He refused to confine his learning to one single school of Song Ci creation. This multi-source learning path freed him from the narrow creative trap of writing exclusively romantic or heroic Ci. His own lyrical output covers an exceptionally diverse range of themes and artistic styles.

His most valuable theoretical contribution lies in his balanced handling of the stylistic boundary separating Ci and Qu. Northern Qu dominated literary fashion across the Ming, with constant cross-fertilization of compositional techniques between the two lyrical forms. If creators fully rejected all colloquial vocabulary originating from Qu, Ci would lose vivid, lively civilian expressive power. If they fully adopted Qu's loose unregulated framework, Ci would sacrifice its neat structural layout and elite refined temperament. Yang Shen never completely discarded Qu's creative advantages. He maintained thorough familiarity with Qu's writing logic, absorbing its vivid colloquial strengths while preserving Ci's quiet subtle sentiment, complete integrated structure and gentle elite literary temperament.

Many Ci works penned by Yang Shen integrate folk ballad phrasing and daily vernacular vocabulary, yet these pieces never degenerate into northern Qu. He strictly adhered to fixed cipai frameworks, rhythmic cadence and designated rhyme positions, deploying tightly woven imagery clusters to carry layered emotional expression. His consistent creative logic emerges clearly from textual analysis: transforming civilian popular language into refined Ci literature. True refinement never requires eliminating all traces of daily vernacular and folk melodic sentiment; it means

embedding these grassroots expressive elements within Ci's established elegant structural template.

Exiled by the imperial court to remote frontier Yunnan, Yang Shen immersed himself in rugged mountain landscapes, indigenous folk customs and the lingering grief of personal displacement; all these tangible, lived experiences permeated his Ci output, endowing his lyrical writing with authentic historical weight and distinctive regional cultural texture. To Yang Shen, Ci composition was never a mechanical reproduction of pre-existing Song metrical templates, but a literary medium capable of bearing genuine personal sentiment and firsthand ethnographic observation of local society.

Though Yang Shen never authored a comprehensive theoretical treatise outlining complete Ci metrical regulations, every lyrical piece he composed demonstrates consistent attention to the structural norms of fixed cipai. He rigorously abided by each tune's inherent framework: regulating symmetrical line layouts, designating fixed rhyme positions and balancing upper and lower stanzas. This consistent creative practice signals a pivotal ideological shift: Ming literati gradually recognized Ci as an independent literary form distinct from regular shi poetry, rather than evaluating its artistic value solely based on narrative content. Occasional metrical variations and relaxed rhyming schemes scattered across his works can be reasonably contextualized through three critical historical realities: the Ming Dynasty lacked officially unified Ci rhyme manuals, Song Ci itself permitted moderate flexible formal variations, and Yang Shen attained comprehensive mastery of compositional techniques from both Ci and northern Qu traditions.

Scholars cannot judge Yang Shen's Ci creation using the rigid formal standards laid out in late compiled Ci manuals. His core historical value does not lie in crafting perfectly rule-compliant Ci under later artificial regulations. He took active initiative to construct clear compositional norms at a time when no universal standards existed. He conducted in-depth research on Song Ci masterpieces, drew distinct dividing lines between Ci and Qu, prioritized standardized cipai metrical layout, absorbed civilian literary expressive techniques and pioneered new thematic directions for Ci writing. All these creative explorations set a viable reference template for Ming literati aiming to restore refined aesthetic standards to Ci composition.

Yang Shen's lyrical practice proves mid-Ming Ci's refined aesthetic reform was never blind mechanical copying of ancient printed texts. Its core objective lay in establishing clear, unified compositional order for the Ci genre. Song Ci provided complete elegant creative templates, yet Ming writers had to confront three unavoidable historical barriers: extinct traditional Ci melody, widespread phonetic shifts in spoken language and conflicting variant printed editions of ancient Ci anthologies. Only by converting Song Ci's textual canonical value into standardized new compositional rules could Ci secure a stable, independent position within Ming literary landscape.

5. CONCLUSION

After the Song court collapsed, Ci's traditional melodic heritage gradually faded away. The rise of woodblock printing and elite silent reading transformed Song Ci into static canonical printed texts. Early Ming literati maintained sincere admiration for Song Ci masterpieces, yet lost access to shared unified compositional standards. Widespread cipai formal alteration, loose unregulated rhyming, full mechanical transcription of ancient works and blurred Ci-Qu genre boundaries do not merely reflect limited creative skill among Ming writers. These phenomena stem from three irreversible historical shifts: the extinction of Ci's live musical transmission tradition, massive phonetic evolution of daily spoken language, and conflicting variant printed copies of ancient Ci anthologies.

Yang Shen's Ci writing outlines a viable mid-Ming solution to resolve these systemic creative dilemmas. He comprehensively absorbed diverse artistic techniques from all schools of Song Ci, retained reverence for Ci's original melodic emotional tone, established clear stylistic separation between Ci and Qu, integrated civilian vernacular phrasing and regional life narrative to convey layered lyrical sentiment. His complete body of work demonstrates Ming Ci's refined aesthetic reform never severed connections with grassroots popular culture; it restructured diction, metrical layout and thematic scope based on Song Ci's established canonical standards.

The pervasive creative struggles of early Ming Ci drove growing social demand for unified fixed compositional standards. Later compiled Ci manuals, rhyme tables and Ci critical discourse all targeted these visible structural flaws: ambiguous

metrical layout rules, inconsistent rhyming conventions and undefined boundaries separating Ci and Qu. Early Ming Ci creation never matched the supreme artistic height of Song Ci, yet it occupies an irreplaceable turning-point status within Ci literary history. It marks the genre's critical transformation: from melody-driven live performance creation to printed-text based metrical rule writing, and from blind transcription of ancient works to systematic theoretical system construction.

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