



Geographic Distribution and Change in Tang Poetry: Data Analysis from the “Chronological Map of Tang-Song Literature”

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Abstract This article uses data to analyze the geographic distribution and transformation of the poetic world in the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). There are two ways we can examine spatial distribution and movement in Tang poetry. The first is a static examination of poets' hometowns (*jiguan* 稷貫). This method looks at the distribution of poets during a specific period to understand where greater or lesser numbers of poets were born, which places could be considered the center of Tang poetry, and what kinds of geographical changes occurred over time in the Tang literary world. The second is a dynamic examination of poets' activities. When we compare various Tang poets, what differences and changes can we find in the places they lived and traveled? Are the poets' spatial distribution patterns even, or do they favor certain regions? Where were the centers of poetic activity in this period? Were they the same as the political center (the two capitals), or were they located farther out in the provinces? Were they in culturally or politically developed areas or in more remote, less developed ones? In which areas was poetic activity most frequent and intense? This article attempts to answer these questions with data.

Keywords Geographical Information Systems (GIS), Tang poetry, literary history, digital humanities, chronological geography

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static examination of poets' hometowns (*jiguan* 籍貫). This method looks at the distribution of poets during a specific period to understand where greater or lesser numbers of poets were born,¹ which places could be considered the center of Tang poetry, and what kinds of geographical changes occurred over time in the Tang literary world. The second is a dynamic examination of poets' activities. When we compare various Tang poets, what differences and changes can we find in the places they lived and traveled? Are the poets' spatial distribution patterns even, or do they favor certain regions? Where were the centers of poetic activity in this period? Were they the same as the political center (the two capitals), or were they located further out in the provinces? Were they in culturally or politically developed areas or in more remote, less developed ones? In which areas was poetic activity most frequent and intense? In this article, we attempt to answer these questions with data.

Sources

The data for this article come from the “Platform for Geographical and Chronological Information on Tang-Song Literature” (Tang-Song wenxue biannian xidi xinxi pingtai jianshe 唐宋文學編年系地信息平台建設), a project of the National Social Science Fund of China run by the first author, Wang Zhaopeng. In the five years since the beginning of the project, we have mined chronologies of poets' lives, annotated editions of their works, and related biographical studies for chronological and geographic data about Tang poetry. We then used the various tools of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) to map out these data and create the “Chronological Map of Tang-Song Literature” (available online at sou-yun.com/唐宋诗人地域分布.html and at sou-yun.com/poetlifemap.html).

At present, the platform contains two types of data, dynamic and static. The static data come from Tang and Song poets' hometowns as found in brief biographical notes. We gathered these from the Zhonghua shuju editions of *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 (Complete Poems of the Tang Dynasty), *Quan Tang shi bubian* 全唐詩補編 (Supplement to the Complete Poems of the Tang Dynasty), and the Peking University Press edition of *Quan Song shi* 全宋詩 (Complete Poems of the Song Dynasty), which contain records for 3,223 Tang and 9,220 Song poets. In total, we have reliable records of the hometowns for 1,686 Tang and 5,694 Song poets.² Additionally, we have drawn on databases of *jinshi* 進士 (presented scholar) degree candidates and officials of the Tang and Song dynasties. These databases list the time periods, exam subjects, and hometowns of examination candidates, as well as the names, titles, and appointment times of officials. Dynamic data come from geographical and temporal information found in chronicles of the authors' lives, their literary collections, and previous scholarship related to them. We have dynamic data for 327 authors in the

platform: 87 from the Tang and 240 from the Song. Altogether, our database contains 106,301 discrete pieces of information, amounting to some ten million Chinese characters. We also have a database of official postings in the Tang and Song dynasties that includes information on positions at court and in the provinces, namely, the time, place, and position held.

We must make clear that both our static and dynamic data on Tang poets' hometowns and movements are partial in nature. For the static data on hometowns, we have included only those poets whose information can be verified with confidence. For the dynamic data on poets' movements, we have included only those poets whose life events can be traced with a reasonable degree of certainty. As a result, the Tang poets for whom we have reliable data are mainly the more prominent and influential ones. Both static and dynamic data sets can be seen as data samples.

It is interesting to note that the shapes of both samples are similar. Figure 1 represents the static data (distribution of Tang poets' hometowns) by modern province, while figure 2 represents the active data (activities of Tang poets) by province. According to figure 1, the provinces with the greatest number of Tang poets' hometowns are Henan, Shaanxi, Hebei, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Jiangxi. The dynamic data of the poets' activities shows the same six provinces at the top of the list, albeit in a slightly different order. The relative proportions for each province in both data sets are also close. Henan, for example, has 16 percent of Tang poets' hometowns (figure 1) and 15 percent of Tang poets' activities (figure 2). There is a difference of only one percentage point between the two types of data. The differences between the two data sets for the other five provinces are similarly small. For both the static data set of poets' hometowns and the dynamic data set of poets' activities, the overall percentages for most provinces are roughly the same. This demonstrates that these samples can be considered representative, objective, and reasonable.

For poets' hometowns and places of activity, we have produced statistics at the province level. Due to the constantly changing nature of administrative regions throughout China's history, we have sorted our data by modern provinces, not contemporaneous names from the Tang. To facilitate comparison, we have also divided Tang geography into northern and southern regions: the south, comprising the Yangzi River region, namely, the modern areas of Anhui, Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Zhejiang, Sichuan, Chongqing, Yunnan, and Guizhou; and the north, comprising the Yellow River region, namely, the modern areas of Gansu, Shaanxi, Hebei, Beijing, Tianjin, Henan, Shandong, Shanxi, Liaoning, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, and Xinjiang.

We have used inclusion in *Quan Tangshi* as the temporal basis for inclusion in our analysis of Tang poetry. The "Tang dynasty" of this collection thus

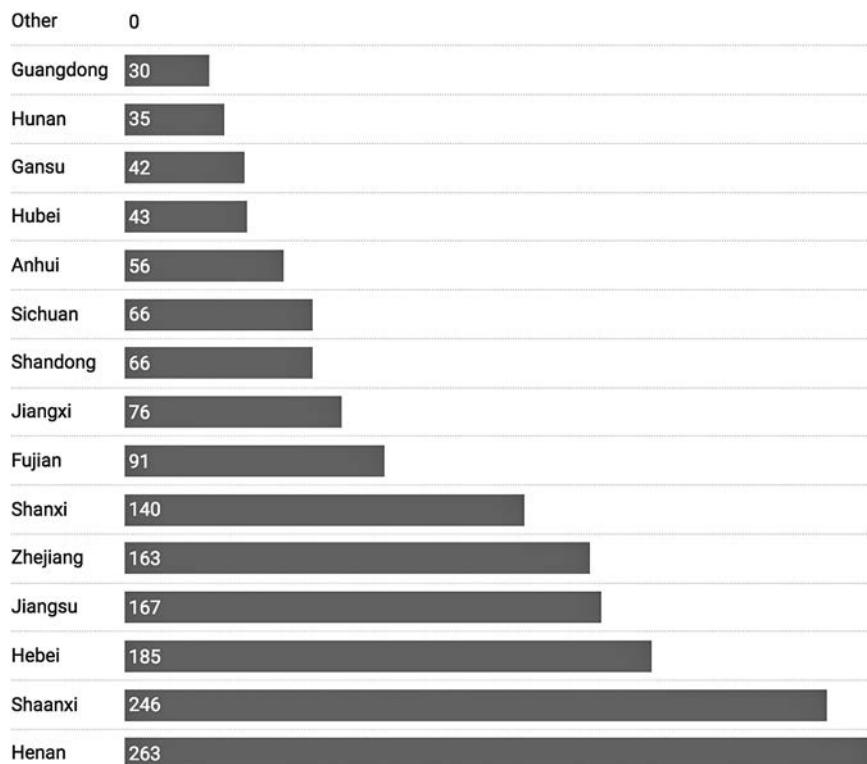


Figure 1. Number of Tang poets' hometowns per area. *Area* refers to the modern provinces, autonomous regions, and metropolises of modern China. This chart includes the 1,669 poets for whom we have reliable information on their hometowns. All bar charts created by the translator using Datawrapper (datawrapper.de) based on the authors' data.

includes the Five Dynasties (907–60), but for the sake of simplicity, we refer to this entire period as “the Tang.”

Analysis

Our statistics open up many questions about the geographic distribution of Tang poetry and suggest some answers. These are discussed in turn below.

Unequal Distribution of Prominent Tang Poets' Hometowns

Hometown (*jiguan*) refers to a poet's ancestral home, birthplace, and place where he grew up. Although some poets' birthplaces and hometowns are not identical (i.e., they were not born in their ancestral home), they nevertheless were consciously aware of their ancestral home. The classic example of this is Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–72). Though he was born in Mianyang 綿陽, Sichuan, and grew up in Suizhou 隨州, Hubei, his writings indicate that he identified his own hometown as Luling 廬陵 (modern Yongfeng 永豐, Jiangxi) and called himself

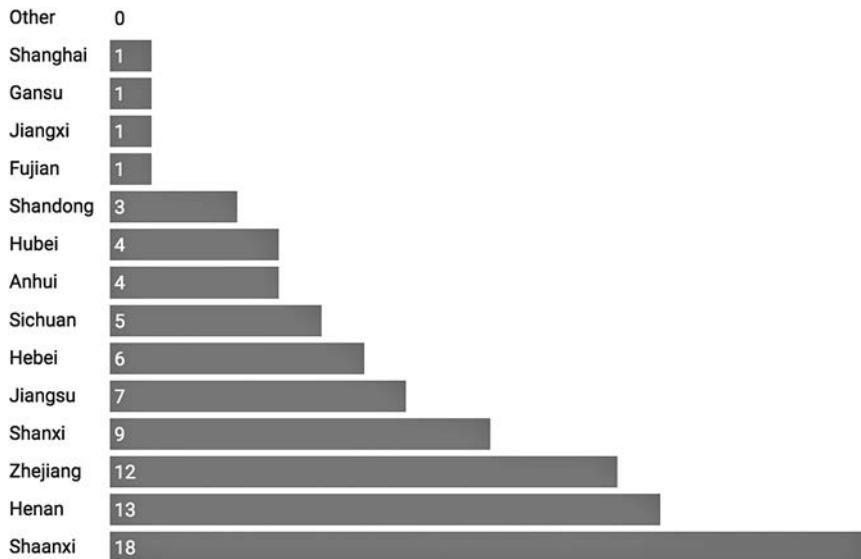


Figure 2. Number of prominent Tang poets active per province. Includes the eighty-five prominent poets whose life events can be traced with a reasonable degree of certainty.

“Ouyang Xiu of Luling.” For this reason, one’s hometown is not just a sign of one’s geographic identity but also a recognition of one’s home, a consciousness of one’s family identity. Poets’ hometowns represent the cultural environment in which they grew up and therefore can serve as indicator for the prosperity of a given regional culture. In the premodern period, the number of poets that can be claimed by a place generally corresponds to its degree of cultural development. Places with more poets are more culturally developed, whereas those less culturally developed places tend to produce fewer poets.

Figure 1 shows that among the thirty-one provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions of modern China (henceforth “areas”), only the fourteen areas of Shaanxi, Henan, Hebei, Shanxi, Shandong, Gansu, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Jiangxi, Sichuan, Anhui, Hubei, and Shanghai produced prominent Tang poets. The other seventeen areas have no poets whose hometowns can be found among them (these numbers and those given below include only our sample data). We can see from this that more than half of the territory of the Tang dynasty produced no famous poets. The distribution of prominent Tang poets’ hometowns is uneven.

The Center of Tang Poetry Is in the North

Looking at our data regionally, we can see that fifty poets’ hometowns can be found in the north, or 59 percent of the total, while the south claims only thirty-five, or 41 percent (see figure 3). The north contains nearly 20 percent more

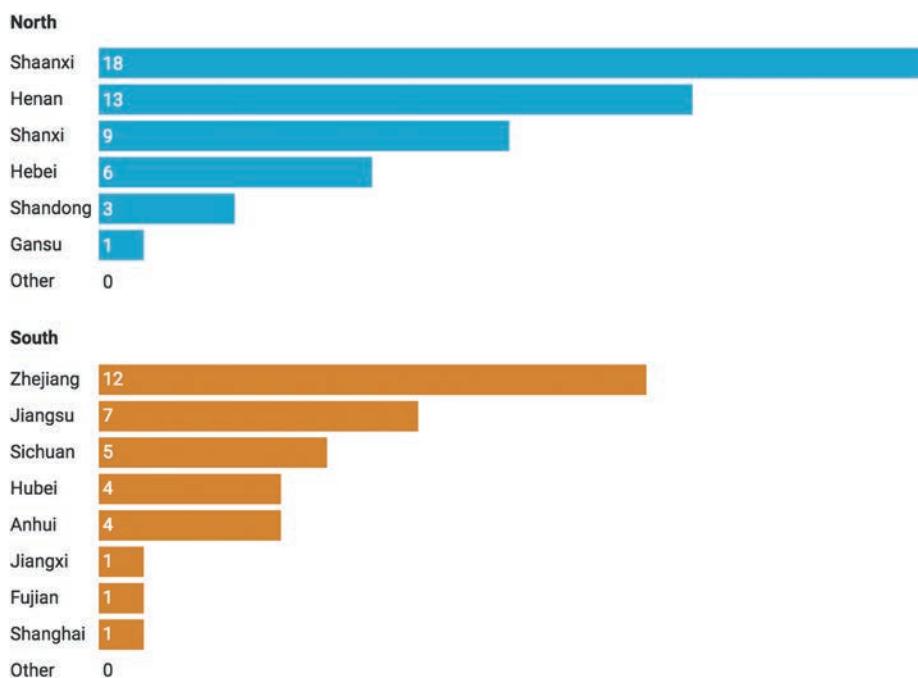


Figure 3. North-south distribution of eighty-five prominent Tang poets' hometowns, with 59 percent located in the north and 41 percent in the south. Here and throughout, northern areas are represented by blue and southern areas by orange.

poets' hometowns than the south, demonstrating that in the Tang dynasty the poetic tradition is stronger in the north than in the south.

Looking at our data by province, we can see that most poets' hometowns can be found in the four provinces of the Yellow River Basin—Shaanxi, Henan, Hebei, and Shanxi—which claim forty-six poets, or 54 percent of the total. These four provinces account for more than half of all poets, and thus they can be called the center of the Tang poetic world. They further demonstrate that Tang poetry's center of gravity is weighted toward the north.

Corroborating this finding is the fact that these same four provinces also produced the greatest number of *jinshi* degree holders. Of the 4,550 *jinshi* degree holders in the Tang, there are 1,122 whose hometowns can be reliably identified.³ Of these 1,122, Henan, Hebei, Shaanxi, and Shanxi account for 650, or 53 percent of the total (see figure 4). Given that these four provinces were home to more than half of *jinshi* degree holders, we can imagine that in the Tang cultural development was much stronger in Henan, Shaanxi, Hebei, and Shanxi than in other places.

There is also a significant number of poets' hometowns in the two provinces of the Taihu Basin—Zhejiang and Jiangsu—which claim nineteen poets, or

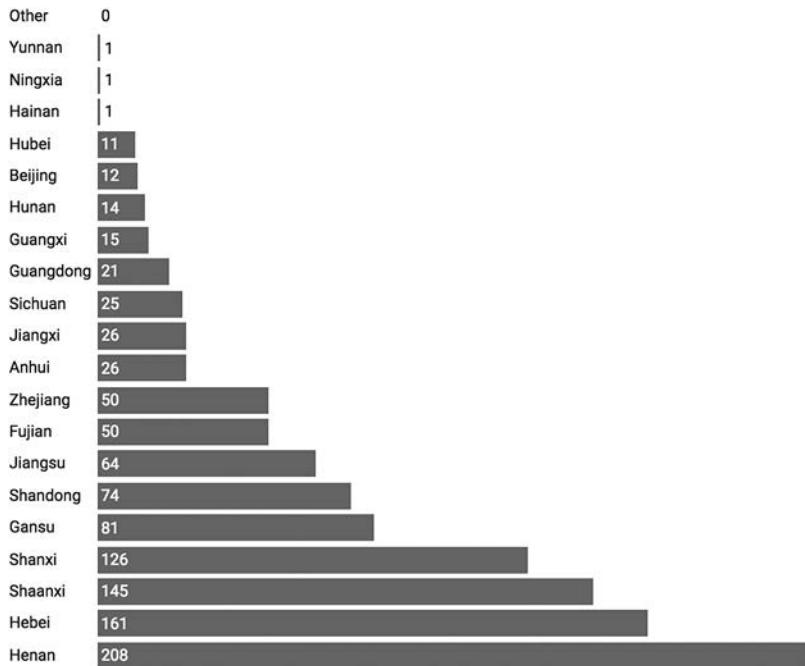


Figure 4. Geographical distribution of the 1,122 *jinshi* degree holders in the Tang for whom we have reliable information about their hometowns.

22 percent of the total (see figure 3). Given that these two provinces account for more than 20 percent of all poets in the Tang, it is fitting to call them the southern center of Tang poetry. These two provinces also account for the most *jinshi* degree holders in the south: their 114 make up 9 percent of the total (see figure 4). This shows us once again that places with greater cultural development and higher educational levels produced more poets.

Poetry's Southern Shift in the Late Tang and Five Dynasties

Looking at our data diachronically, we can see that prior to the Late Tang (835–907), the center of the world of poetry is located in the north, but in the Late Tang and after, the center of poetry moves south. Figure 5 shows that in the Early Tang (618–712) and High Tang (712–66) periods, northern areas claim nine and eight prominent poets each, while southern areas have only two. In the Early Tang, Shen Quanqi 沈佺期 (656–715?), Song Zhiwen 宋之問 (656–713), Wang Bo 王勃 (650?–76), Yang Jiong 楊炯 (650–93?), and Lu Zhaolin 盧照鄰 (634–86) are all northerners, while only Chen Zi'ang 陳子昂 (659–700) and Luo Binwang 駱賓王 (622?–84) hail from the south. In the High Tang, Li Bai 李白 (701–62), Du Fu 杜甫 (712–70), Wang Wei 王維 (700–761), Gao Shi 高適 (700?–765), Wang Zhihuan 王之渙 (688–742), and Wang Changling 王昌齡

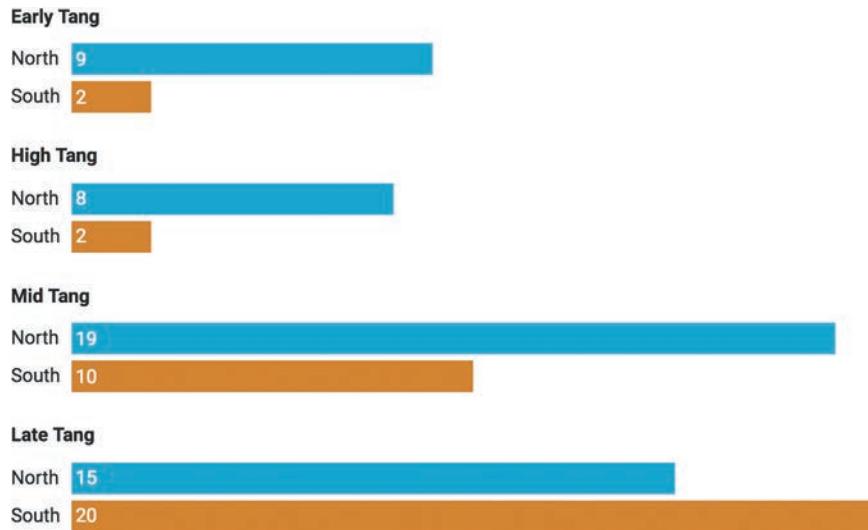


Figure 5. Diachronic change in the geographic distribution of the hometowns of eighty-five prominent Tang poets. The Tang is divided here into four periods: Early (618–712), High (712–66), Middle (766–835), and Late (835–907). There is a clear southern shift after the Middle Tang.

(?–756?) are all northerners, while Meng Haoran 孟浩然 (689–740) and Cen Shen 岑參 (717–70) are southerners. During this period, the north is clearly dominant.

In the Middle Tang (766–835), nineteen prominent poets come from the north, or 66 percent of the total, while ten poets, or 34 percent, come from the south. The north is still dominant. But when we get to the Late Tang, the number of southern poets has jumped to twenty-two, or 61 percent of the total, while the number of northern poets has fallen to fifteen, or 39 percent. The north is no longer dominant, as the number of poets' hometowns in the south far surpasses the north. Thus, we can say that after 835 the center of the world of poetry has moved south. This is completely consistent with the results of other statistical analyses we have published.⁴

The Broad Distribution of Tang Poets' Movements

When we refer to places of poets' activities, we mean the places that poets traveled to or lived in. A poet traveling to or staying at a place counts as one instance in our data, no matter how many times that poet actually traveled to that place. Because poets were active in multiple places throughout their lifetimes, the unit of analysis for a given place is the number of poets who have been there. Figure 6 shows that, of the thirty-one modern provinces, autonomous regions, and metropolises of China, only Jilin, Heilongjiang, Guizhou, and Tibet had no poetic activity in the Tang dynasty. In the other twenty-seven areas, we have records of poets living or writing there. This is very different from the

geographical distribution of Tang poets' hometowns that we saw above. All of the prominent Tang poets analyzed came from fewer than half of these areas (fourteen), while more than half (seventeen) produced no prominent poets. Yet plenty of poets were active in many of those areas that produced no poets. Take, for example, the northern areas of Qinghai, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, and Liaoning. Although no poets' hometowns were located in these areas, plenty of poets lived and wrote there. Luo Binwang of the Early Tang and Gao Shi of the High Tang both traveled to Qinghai. Luo Binwang and Cen Shen both traveled to Xinjiang—Cen Shen, in fact, lived in Xinjiang for a long period of time and wrote many works there. Luo Binwang, Chen Zi'ang, Wang Wei, and Xu Hun 許渾 (788?–858) all traveled to Inner Mongolia and wrote poems there as well. Chen Zi'ang and Luo Yin 羅隱 (833–910) wrote works in Ningxia, and Liaoning was visited by Gao Shi. In the south, Hunan, Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan, and Chongqing contained no poets' hometowns, but as much as 14 percent of all poets' activities in the Tang took place within their borders.

This shows that the distribution of the places of poets' activities is much wider than the distribution of their hometowns. Just because a place could not claim to be the hometown of a poet does not mean that no poets lived or wrote there. The mobility of poets is a counterbalance to the uneven distribution of their hometowns. Those places with less cultural development that produced no poets were still visited by poets, still inspired poets' compositions, and were still imbued with a sense of poetry.

The Majority of Prominent Tang Poets Traveled South

Did Tang poets generally travel from the south to the north, or from the north to the south? In which direction did Tang poetry generally flow? We can see from figure 6 that there were 274 instances of Tang poets' activity in northern provinces, or 43 percent of the total, while in the south there were 358 instances, or 57 percent. More Tang poets' homes were located in the north, but fewer poets' activities took place there than in the south. This shows that most instances of activities in the south were actually done by northern poets. That is to say, a great many Tang poets traveled south.

The six southern areas of Jiangxi, Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Chongqing produced few poets—some none at all—but they were the sites of many poets' activities. There is only one prominent poet from Jiangxi, but thirty-eight poets were active there, or 6 percent of the total. Hubei is home to only four prominent poets, but fifty-one poets were active there, or 8 percent. There were far more outsider poets active in these two provinces than local ones. Hunan, Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan, and Chongqing, which were home to no prominent Tang poets, also drew in many outsiders. These six southern areas

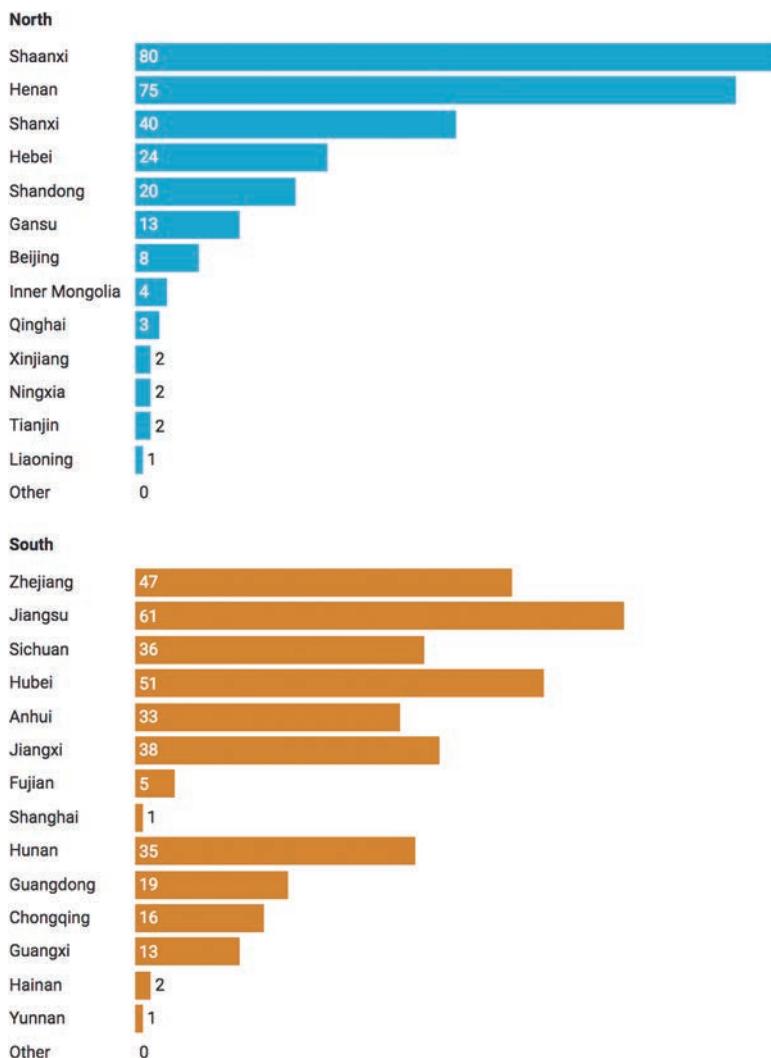


Figure 6. Geographical distribution of poetic activity in the Tang. Degree of poetic activity is measured by the number of poets who were active in a given area. Poets may be active in more than one area. A single poet's multiple activities in a single area are counted as only one instance here. The total number of activities by this measurement is 632, 42 percent of which took place in the north and 57 percent in the south.

were home to only 5 percent of all Tang poets, yet they contained 28 percent of all poets' activities.

By contrast, the four provinces of Shaanxi, Henan, Hebei, and Shanxi are home to the greatest number of Tang poets, but the number of instances of poets' activities is relatively low (see figures 2 and 6). Shaanxi is home to 21 percent of Tang poets but witnessed only 13 percent of poets' activities, a disparity of 8 percent. Henan, home to 15 percent of Tang poets, saw 12 percent

of poets' activities, a disparity of 3 percent. Hebei has a disparity of 3 percent, and Shanxi a disparity of 4 percent. For a place to be home to many poets but the site of little poetic activity reveals that many of its poets went elsewhere to write and few outsider poets came in. To put this another way, the flow of Tang poetic activity was mainly southward, not northward.

Why would the flow of Tang poetic activity tend mainly to the south rather than the north? Why would Tang poets tend to travel to the southern areas of Jiangxi, Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Chongqing? Did they go to these places to live voluntarily, or were they banished there in exile? Or were they simply there to travel? We will attempt to quantitatively answer these questions in another article. It is often said that “poetry is written in distant places and on the road” 詩在遠方, 詩在路上. Statistically speaking, this is correct for the Tang: poetry is written in distant places, on the road, and in other towns.

Cities Are the Center of Poetic Production

The number of poets active in the northern provinces of Shaanxi and Henan may occupy a smaller share of the total compared to the number of poets whose hometowns were there, but the frequency of activity in these places is much higher. By *frequency of activity*, we mean how many discrete activities of a poet can be assigned to a given place. A higher frequency means poets went to that place more often and for longer periods of time. As figure 7 shows, Shaanxi and Henan have the highest frequencies of activity, with 10,336 and 3,698 activities, respectively, or 34 percent and 12 percent of the total. Together, these two provinces account for nearly half of all discrete poetic activities in the Tang. Why do Shaanxi and Henan have the highest frequencies of activity? It is obviously because they are home to the two capitals: Chang'an 長安 in the west and Luoyang 洛陽 in the east.

If we analyze our data by county instead of province, we can more clearly see that the two capitals are the true center of Tang poetry. Figure 8 shows that sixty-six Tang poets wrote 4,053 poems at the western capital of Chang'an (modern Xi'an 西安), a far greater number than for any other county. Forty poets wrote 1,004 poems in Luoyang, ranking it second for frequency of activity and third for number of poems produced per poet. The number of poems written in the two capitals is greater than the next eighteen counties combined. These statistics demonstrate that the capitals, which served as the Tang political center, were very attractive to poets. They were where poets tended to gather. Judging by the sheer number of poems, the capitals should truly be considered the center of poetic production in the Tang.

But what does the spatial distribution of poetry look like in the rest of the empire? Figure 6 shows that poems were written everywhere—politically

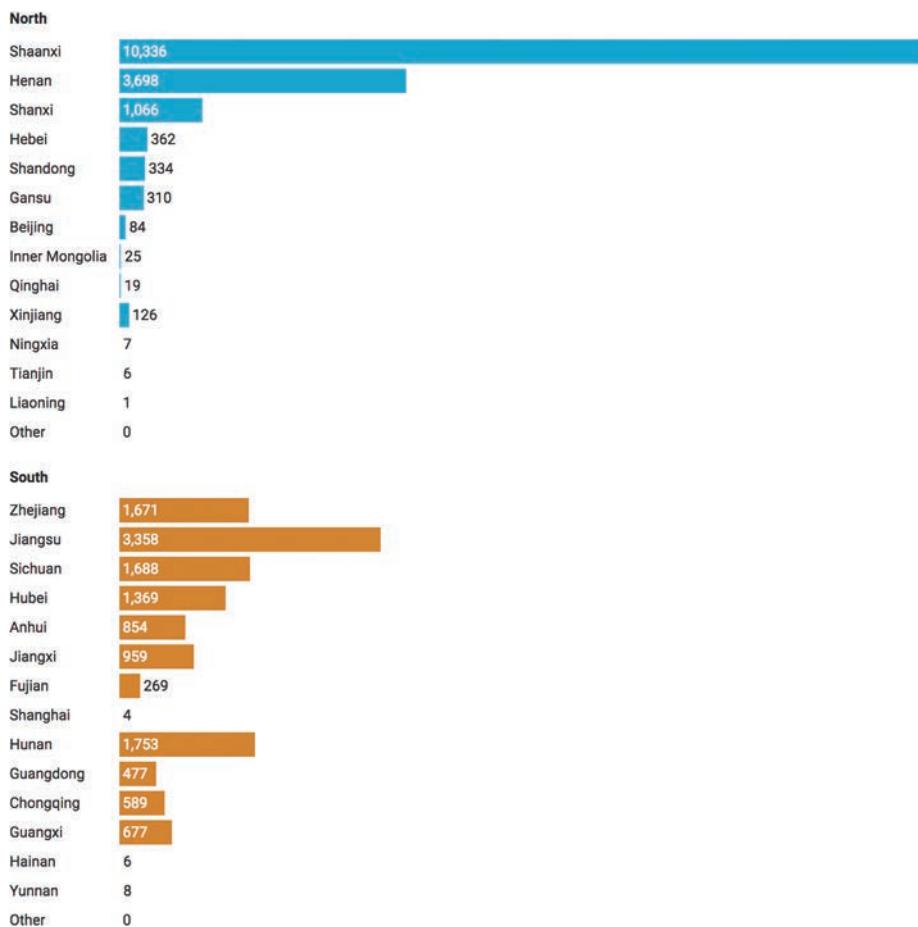


Figure 7. Geographical distribution of the frequency of poetic activity in the Tang: the number of discrete activities that can be assigned to a given place. The total number of activities here is 30,056. Of that total, 53 percent occurred in the north and 47 percent in the south. Shaanxi and Henan dwarf all other areas.

important metropolises as well as distant provinces, culturally and economically developed regions as well as marginal areas, lofty temples as well as remote backwaters.

In the top ten places of poetic production, we find Suzhou 蘇州, Chengdu 成都, and Yangzhou 揚州. All of these were prosperous cities in the Tang, encapsulated by the slogan “Yang is first, Yi second” (*Yang yi Yi er* 揚一益二).⁵ Many poets visited these three cities: fourteen visited Suzhou, seventeen Chengdu, and twenty-one Yangzhou. Among the most productive poets in Yangzhou were Pi Rixiu 皮日休 (834?–83?), Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–842), Meng Haoran, Wei Yingwu 韋應物 (737–92?), Du Mu 杜牧 (803–52), and Du Xunhe 杜荀鶴 (846–904). Those who lived long stretches in Chengdu and wrote many poems

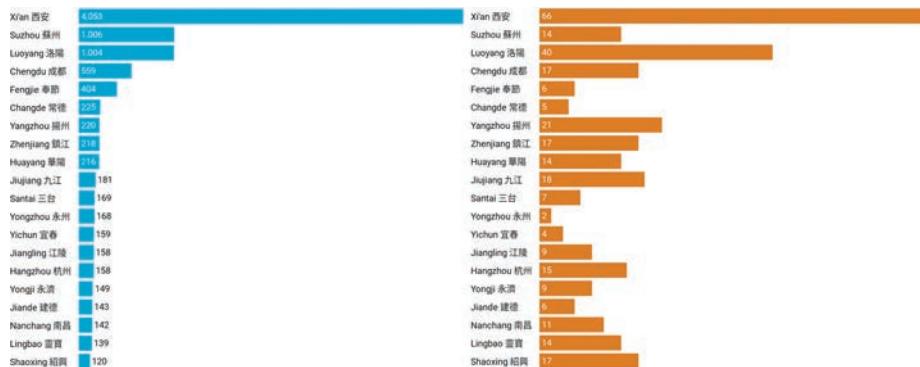


Figure 8. Frequency of poetic activity and number of poems produced per poet, divided by county. The two capitals of the Tang, Chang'an (modern Xi'an) and Luoyang, were favored places of poetic activity.

there include Du Fu, Zheng Gu 鄭谷 (851?–910?), Li Shangyin 李商隱 (812–58), and Cen Shen.

The next counties on our list were all considered relatively remote backwaters in the Tang: Fengjie 奉節 in Chongqing, Changde 常德 and Yongzhou 永州 in Hunan, and Yichun 宜春 in Jiangxi. Nevertheless, quite a few poets traveled to these places and wrote copious amounts of poetry there. When Du Fu visited Fengjie, he wrote 305 poems, and Liu Yuxi wrote 66 poems while serving as prefect of Kuizhou 愍州. Liu Yuxi wrote 210 poems while in exile in Changde, and Wang Changling, upon being relegated to Longbiao 龍標, wrote 6 poems while passing through Changde. Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819) wrote 164 poems while in exile in Yongzhou, and Zheng Gu wrote 4 when he followed his father to the same place. Zheng Gu, Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), and Li Deyu 李德裕 (787–850) all served in Yichun at different times, writing 180, 56, and 38 poems there, respectively. Even though these remote areas contained no hometowns of famous poets, they were nonetheless touched by the muse and saw the beauty and light of poetry, due to the vagaries of poets' official postings, demotions, and travels.

Conclusion

A geographical analysis of the distribution of Tang poetry gives us several new angles from which to understand the poetic world. In terms of poets' hometowns, the distribution is very imbalanced. More than half of all provinces produced no poets. From the Early through the Middle Tang (618–835), the center of the poetic world is located in the north, especially in the Yellow River Basin. From the Late Tang onward (835–960), however, it moves south, as southern poets increasingly outnumber northerners. When we look at our data in terms of the number of poets active in different regions, poets' mobility serves

as a counterbalance to the uneven distribution of their hometowns. Poets are active everywhere, from the capitals to provinces, from economically and culturally developed areas to remote backwater regions. However, as the cultural and political center of the Tang, the two capitals were the most attractive to poets. The metropolises of Chang'an and Luoyang, without a doubt, should be considered the centers of Tang poetic composition.



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Notes

1. Not all authors were born in their hometowns. Due to the limitations of the historical records, it would be very difficult for us to fully verify each and every premodern poet's birthplace. Therefore, we have gathered data from a given author's hometown as listed in the relevant historical sources.
2. For Tang and Song poets' hometowns, see Zhou, *Zhongguo wenzuejia dacidian*; and Zeng, *Zhongguo wenzuejia dacidian*.
3. Meng, *Dengke jikao buzheng*.
4. See Wang, "Tang-Song shige bantu."
5. Yi is an abbreviation of Yizhou 益州, the name of the county in which Chengdu was located. The locus classicus for this phrase is Hong, *Rongzhai suibi*, 9.123, "The Prosperity of Tang-Dynasty Yangzhou" 唐楊州之盛:
 There was a salt and iron trade station at Yangzhou in the Tang dynasty which completely controlled the flow of money and power. There were several dozen judges there, and so many merchants that they appeared to be woven together. For this reason, a proverb stated, "Yang is first, Yi second." Yangzhou was the most prosperous place in all of the empire, and Shu [the Chengdu region] was next.
 唐世鹽鐵轉運使在楊州，盡斡利權，判官多至數十人，商賈如織，故諺稱「楊一益二」，謂天下之盛，楊爲一而蜀次之也。

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