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## Folk Adage in the Literati Notes of Tang Dynasty

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### Abstract

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Written in classical Chinese but enriched with vernacular expressions, slangs, dialectic expressions, loan words and so on, the Tang literati notes (*biji* 笔记) forms a rich and valuable corpus for studying the lexis of the Tang dynasty (618-907) and middle ancient Chinese. This paper, with the use of literary works and dictionaries as references, gives a lexical elaboration and analysis on certain folk adages (*suyu* 俗语) used in the representative Tang literati notes, such as Feng Yan 封演's *Feng Shi Wen Jian Ji* 封氏闻见记, Li Kuangyi 李匡义's *Zi Xia Ji* 资暇集, Duan Chengshi 段成式's *You Yang Za Zu* 酉阳杂俎 and SuE 苏鹗's *Su Shi Yan Yi* 苏氏演义. Nowadays there are still differences in stating the definition, components and characteristics of folk adage. In this paper, discussion is focused on those popular sayings quoted together with the word 'su' (俗), such as 'suyu' (俗语), 'su yue' (俗曰), 'su yun' (俗云), and 'su yan' (俗言). Firstly, with reference to the examples founded in Tang notes, the paper examines and clarifies the characteristics of folk adage including its form and meaning, and then comments on the definition and coverage of folk adage with a comparative analysis on proverb (*yanyu* 谚语). With related to the meaning of folk adage, a sociocultural review on the reflection of common ideas and beliefs of the people of Tang and pre-Tang periods is also made. Secondly, examples are also taken to show their functions and significance in lexicography, which include serving as the first textual evidences, supplementing entries and explanations, advancing textual evidences, and supplementing textual evidences in dictionary entries. Lastly, the paper concludes with the contribution of such lingual material to the compilation and revision of dictionaries and to the study of the variation of folk adage.

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**Keywords:** folk adage (*suyu*); literati notes (*biji*); Tang dynasty; lexical analysis

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## 1. Introduction

Literati notes (*biji*笔记) in this paper is regarded as a sort of miscellany, written by the literati, covering a wide array of themes and subjects in form of various descriptions such as anecdotes, reading notes, criticism and tales. Its miscellaneous contents have provided plentiful and valuable resources for numerous areas of Chinese studies, such as history, literature, art, music, geography, astronomy, food, flora and fauna, biography, government, laws and regulations, custom, common beliefs, divination and even supernatural occurrences, or rather every branch of knowledge and any activity of all walks of life and all strata in society. They can be treated as a kind of records, and serve to be very useful and helpful references.

The vast coverage of literati notes naturally necessitates a huge lexical corpus, which in turn provides us with valuable linguistic materials for studying not only the Tang language but also the Chinese lexicon and the development of Chinese lexis as a whole. This paper gives a lexical study on the folk adage (*suyu* 俗语) stated in the extant representatives of the literati notes written in the Tang dynasty (618-907). On one hand, the definitions and characteristics of folk adage, with a comparative analysis on proverb (*yanyu* 谚语) which has not been easily distinguished from folk adage, are reviewed with specific reference to the examples found; on the other, the function and significance of the folk adage in Tang notes are discussed.

## 2. Folk Adage: a General Term, or a Specific Term?

There have already been numerous sayings on defining the characteristics of folk adage in terms of meaning and form. As definitions vary even in dictionaries, the term 'folk adage' may refer to (a) a particular sort of popular sayings in fixed word-combination, (b) a collective interpretation with the addition of proverb, or (c) a general term consisting of all sorts of popular sayings in fixed word-combination such as proverb and allegorical saying (*xiehouyu* 歇后语). The difference and confusion persist as it is indeed not easy to draw a clear distinction among the various kinds of popular sayings, particularly between folk adage and proverb. Yet some points can be raised if we take a view on the folk adages and proverbs quoted in the literati notes of Tang dynasty.

In this paper, 48 extant representatives of Tang notes have been searched, and examples of the folk adages, which have been labelled with the word ‘*su* 俗’ or ‘*yan* 谚” when cited by the writers, are drawn and listed as follows:

Folk adage [F]	Proverb [P]
<p>[F1] Building a house in the middle of a road will not be completed even after three years 当道造屋，三年不成(Su E, v.1)</p> <p>[F2] Once started, the <i>shuanglu</i> game never ends 双陆无休势(LiuSu, v.12)</p>	<p>[P1] The street gossip is beneficial swiftly to the emperor’s moralization 街谈巷议，倏有裨于王化(Fan Shu, preface)</p> <p>[P2] Calamity comes in different ways from arrogant and extravagant 骄奢之灾，祸非一致(Li Rong, v.II)</p> <p>[P3] Even how prestigious the Three Dukes are, they have descendants as dull as a dog that looks lifeless 三公后，出死狗(Zhang Zhuo, v.4)</p> <p>[P4] Appearing to be foolish and deaf if you want to be a mother-in-law or father-in-law 不痴不聋，不作阿家阿翁(Zhao Lin, v.1)</p> <p>[P5] A self-comfort can be obtained only when the official duties have been released or not been assigned 免巡未推，只得自如(Zhao Lin, v.5)</p>
<p>[F3] Chancing on a magpie nesting brings prominence 见鹊上梁必贵 (DuanChengshi, v.16, Set I)</p> <p>[F4] Having house crickets around the stoves is a harbinger of being well fed 灶有马，足食之兆 (DuanChengshi, v.17, Set I)</p> <p>[F5] Mouse gnaws in outer garments are an auspicious sign 鼠啮上服有喜 (Duan Chengshi, v.8, Set II)</p> <p>[F6] Seeing a cat cleaning itself past its ears suggests a visitor is arriving 猫洗面过耳则客至(Duan Chengshi, v.8, Set II)</p> <p>[F7] Report for duty in the fifth month and you are done for promotion 五月到官，至免不迁(Ma Zong, v.4)</p>	<p>[P6] Never talk about people by day, otherwise harms will occur; never talk about ghosts at night, otherwise monsters will come 白日无谈人，谈人则害生；昏夜无说鬼，说鬼则怪至(Liu Zongyuan, v.I)</p> <p>[P7] No village if no fox spirit 无狐魅，不成村(Zhang Zhuo, recorded in Li Fang, v.447)</p> <p>[P8] A retribution for the animals 走马报(Zhang Zhuo, v.2)</p>
<p>[F8] Drizzle intermittently on the eighth day of the fourth month portends poor harvest for all crops 八日雨</p>	<p>[P9] If it rains on the date of <i>jiazi</i> in Spring, the barren lands will extend over thousands of miles; if it rains on the date of <i>jiazi</i> in Summer, people have to take a boat to the town; if it rains on the date of <i>jiazi</i> in</p>

<p>班闌，高低尽可怜 (Han E, v.3)  [F9] Plant fruit trees in abundance and there will be no bad years 木奴千，无凶年 (Han E, v.3)  [F10] To plan ahead for a year, grow grains; to plan ahead for a decade, plant trees 一年计树之以穀，十年计树之以木 (Han E, v.1)  [F11] Morning is the time to plan for the day, and spring for the year 一日之计在一晨，一年之计在一春 (Han E, v.1)  [F12] Timely tending and watering your crops is the best policy 以时及泽为上策 (Han E, v.1)</p>	<p>Autumn, the crops will mildew and rot; if it rains on the date of <i>ji</i>zi in Winter, and the magpies nest near the ground, there will be floods throughout the year 春雨甲子，赤地千里；夏雨甲子，乘船入市；秋雨甲子，禾头生耳；冬雨甲子，鹊巢下地，其年大水 (Zhang Zhuo, v.1)  [P10] A tucking of the Chinese date into the nostril is followed by a suspension of the seeds in the storied house as well as the cultivation 枣子塞鼻孔，悬楼阁却种 (Zhang Zhuo, v.1)  [P11]* On hearing the chirps of cicadas, we will have no cake or porridge to eat due to the coming bad harvest 蝉鸣蛩螿唤，黍种齏糜断 (Zhang Zhuo, v.1)  *There is an ellipsis of 'yan 谚' when cited by the writer as [P11] is quoted right after [P10] in the text.</p>
<p>[F13] Don't cut up the forage and dump into the well though it will be thousand miles away 千里井，不反剉 (Li Kuangyi, v.II)</p>	<p>[P12] No spitting into the well though it will be thousand miles away 千里井，不反唾 (Li Kuangyi, v.II; Su E, v.II)</p>
<p>[F14] It takes a fool to borrow a book, a fool to lend one, a fool to ask it back and a fool to return it 借一痴，借二痴，索三痴，还四痴 (Li Kuangyi, v.II)</p>	<p>[P13] Lending books brings into sneers, so does the return of books 借书一嗤，还书二嗤 (Li Kuangyi, v.II)  [P14] It is stupid to lend your books as well as to return the books you have borrowed 有书借人为痴，借人书送还为痴 (Duan Chengshi, v.4, Set II)</p>
<p>[F15] A taste of the West Queen Mother's peaches relieves fatigue 王母甘桃，食之解劳 (Duan Chengshi, v.10, Set II)  [F16] Be happy on the date of birth 生日可喜乐 (Feng Yan, v.4)</p>	<p>[P15] Xian Mountain unfolds her canopy as the rain is pelting down 岷山张盖雨滂沱 (Huangfu Mei)  [P16] Have Wang Changling flayed and Guo Zhengyi swallowed alive 活剥王昌龄，生吞郭正一 (Liu Su, v.13)  [P17] Scholarism is viewed by punctuating the text 学识何如观点书 (Li Kuangyi, v.I)</p>

It has been stated in a number of dictionaries that the major or distinct difference between folk adage and proverb is the profundity of content or its instructive meaning.

Though both of them come from the observation and experience of the masses and contain all aspects of life, proverb rather than folk adage is always said to be pearls of wisdom which can bring out profound lessons, principles, truth or practical experience of life that are worthy to refer. For instance, example [P1] states the significance and effectiveness of street gossip which should be beneficial swiftly to the emperor's moralization; [P2] signifies the lesson that calamity emerges in different ways from arrogant and extravagant; [P3] tells a maxim that even the prestigious dignitaries may have futile descendants; and [P4] teaches that one should appear to be foolish and deaf if she or he wants to be a mother-in-law or father-in-law, which, from practical experience, is a good way to live in harmony with family members. On one hand, part of the folk adages may be challenged to have advocated or related to superstitious belief or unscientific assumption from an intellectual or logical point of view nowadays. For example, [F7] states that an official will never be promoted if he assumes a post in May; [F8] makes a forecast on poor harvest if it drizzles intermittently in the eighth day of April; and [F3-6] show a common belief on propitious signs associated with animals and insects: one will get riches and honors if he or she sees magpies carrying bites of wood in their bills to build nests ([F3]); there will be ample food in living if a house cricket is found in the cooking stove ([F4]); happiness will come if the outer clothes are gnawed by mouse ([F5]); and there will be visitors when a cat cleans its face and goes beyond its ears ([F6]). But in fact, such kind of superstitious beliefs or ungrounded sayings can also be found in proverbs, such as the belief in ghost, monster, fox spirit, and retribution ([P6-8]) as well as the forecast on the weather and harvest according to rainfalls in a particular date in the four seasons ([P9]).

On the other hand, part of the folk adages, like proverbs, may also embody a familiar truth or principle which is based on common sense, belief, or practical experience of humanity. Example [F1] points out that a house can hardly be built on the road even after three years since there will be too many different opinions on the construction from people passing by, and the folk adage actually brings out a reason that too many discussions or arguments will lead to the un-completeness of a job. Example [F2] tells that being an official is like playing a game of chess: it will not stop once started, and an upright and honest official will eventually get the recognition and promotion. Examples [F11] and [F12] which originally bring out the significance of timing in ploughing and sowing have already been applied with its extended instructive meaning to all kinds of work.

The profundity of content or its instructive meaning may not function effectively in distinguishing between folk adage and proverb. Some say that, with regard to the form of expression, both folk adage and proverb are expressed in a simple, short, easily understood and remembered form, but proverb is comparatively refined or terse as if expressed in written language, for example, [P6] and [P16] each demonstrates an orderly structure while [P10] and [P11] have even been treated to be Tang poems. Folk adage is generally regarded to be expressed in vernacular or colloquial style. But such style is also applied to proverb, for example, colloquial words like '*ajjaaweng* 阿家阿翁 (mother-in-law and father-in-law)' ([P4]) have been used. In addition, vernacular or colloquial expression does not imply a plain expression only. The examples in Tang notes show that part of the folk adages is also expressed in an orderly form ([F10], [F11] and [F15]) and even in rhyme ('*gu* 谷, *mu* 木' in [F10], and '*tao* 桃, *lao* 劳' in [F15]). Similar forms can also be seen, for example the orderly paired 3-character form ([F9], [F13] and [P3], [P7], [P12]), the 4-character form ([F1], [F7], [F15] and [P2], [P5]) and the 5-character form ([F8] and [P10], [P11]). It seems that such criteria on expression form in distinguishing between folk adage and proverb can hardly be applied undoubtedly.

In fact, many people have not had serious concern or clear concept in using the terms 'folk adage' and 'proverb'. An interchange or arbitrary use of the two terms for the same sayings can be found. For instance, example [F2], quoted as a folk adage in Tang notes (Du Wenlan, v.58; Shen Qinhan, v.3, Set of Essay), is stated as a proverb in Chao Yin 曹寅's *Entire Poems of the Tang Dynasty* 全唐诗 of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911); on the contrary, example [F12], a proverb already quoted in Jia Sixie 贾思勰's *Essential Techniques for the Populace* 齐民要术 of the Northern Wei (386-534), has been changed to be a folk adage in Tang notes (Xu Guangqi, v.25). Moreover, the popular sayings 'Building a house in the middle of a road will not be completed even after three years 当道造屋, 三年不成' ([F1]), 'Building a house by the side of a road will not be completed even after three years 作舍道边, 三年不成' (Yuan Hong, v.12) and 'Constructing a house in the middle of a road will not be completed even after three years 当道筑室, 三年不成' (Sima Guang, v.272 & 280) are fundamentally the same both in expression and meaning, but the first one is treated as a folk adage in Tang notes whilst the other two are labelled as proverbs in other works or documentation.

The definition of folk adage has been vague and arguable. Logically speaking, it is not justified to define folk adage as a term consisting of folk adage itself and other kinds of popular sayings. As both folk adage and proverb are popular sayings expressed in fixed word-combination, three assumptions regarding their relationship can be made: (a) they represent the same sort of lexis with different names; (b) they represent two sorts of lexis with a number of overlapped expressions; or (c) proverb which has fulfilled certain or some more criteria is a part or subcategory of folk adage. One of the criteria may be the recognition or acceptance not only by the common people but also the literati. As shown in the Tang notes, the correctness of proverb is generally recognized or accepted (even for those viewed as ‘superstitious sayings’ nowadays) while criticisms, clarifications or rectifications on the fallacy or misuse of the words of the current folk adage, with relevant proverbs placing together for discussion, can be found, for example [F13] and [F14]. In view of the three assumptions, it may be more justified to say that folk adage is a general term representing popular sayings expressed in fixed word-combination while proverb is a part or subcategory of folk adage and consists of those folk adages with relative refined expressions to written language, profound instructive meanings and high recognition in a long spreading time.

### 3. Function and Significance

In the fields of lexicology and lexicography, the literati notes of Tang dynasty provides plentiful lexical materials, and the folk adages quoted can serve to be new entries or to supplement textual definitions and evidences. For instance, examples [F1], [F2], [F3] and [F11] can be adopted to advance textual evidences or to be the earliest textual evidences in dictionary entries. The record or description regarding the quoted folk adages can so serve as evidence or reference to textual research on the origin, formation, word in hand meaning of the relevant lexis, for instance, example [F7] is said to be derived from the verse ‘Just like the yare taking counsel on building a house on the road with people passing by, which will consequently never come to completion 如彼筑室于道谋，是用不溃于成’ in *XiaoMin* 小旻 of the *Book of Songs* 诗经 and can be associated with the idiom (*chengyu* 成语) ‘Building a house by the side of a road 作舍道边’ and its variations like ‘筑室道旁, 筑舍道旁, 作舍道旁, 道旁筑室, 当道筑室, 筑室道谋’ with the same idiomatic meaning to get a more understanding of their relationship as well as the lexical development.



Furthermore, folk adage can bring out issues on textual argument and rectification. Example [F13] 'Don't cut up the forage and dump into the well though it will be thousand miles away 千里井，不反剉' and its variation 'Don't dump the chopped forage into the well though it will be thousand miles away 千里井，不泻莖' are derived from the same story recorded in Su E 苏鹗's *Su Shi Yan Yi* 苏氏演义: An official dumped the chopped forage into the well when he left the place which was thousand miles away from his next destination. He, unexpectedly after some time, went back to the place. By then he was too thirsty to remember the dumped forage and was choked to death when he hastily drank water taken from the well. So the folk adage was circulated by the masses to serve as a warning or reminder. Example [P12] is just one word different from [F13] but embodies a different meaning, and can be traced to a poem written by Cao Zhi 曹植 of the Three Kingdoms period (220-280): a woman would not split into the well which she had relied on though she was abandoned by her husband and had to leave for thousand miles away. The proverb is said to have expressed love and sincerity of the abandonee. As 'the well that is thousand miles away 千里井' has embodied different meanings, there have been a number of discussions from Tang onwards on its proper interpretation, particularly on the meaning of the verse 'Feared by the well that is thousand miles away 畏人千里井' written by the famous poet Du Fu 杜甫 of the Tang dynasty (Du Fu, v.36, Set of Modern-style Poetry; Luo Binwang, v.4, Set of Songs; Cheng Dachang, v.13; QianXiyuan, v.1; Yu Zhengxie, v.14).

Example [F14] also associates with a continuous textual argument and clarification. There have been sayings in the Tang notes that the word 'stupid' or 'fool' (*chi*痴) in examples [F14] and [P14] popularly used by that time should be 'sneering' (*chi*嗤) which has been stated in the old proverb ([P13]). With further reference to other writings or documentation, there are also sayings that '*chi*嗤' does not mean sneering but can be interchangeable with '*chi*痴' meaning stupid. In the Song dynasty (960-1279), some scholars even pointed out that '*chi*甌' or '*chi*鴟', which meant a wine vessel and could be interchangeable with each other, should be more reasonable since, as evidenced by a number of Song poems, it had been a customary courtesy for people to give wines to the lenders as a gift when they borrowed and returned books, and both '*chi*痴' and '*chi*嗤' were misused caused by the same pronunciation of '*chi*甌' and '*chi*鴟'. Argument, of course, has followed (FangShao, v.11; Hu Zi, v.32, Set II; WangMao, v.11; Chen Shi, v.6; Zhu Yidong, v.13).

From the view of cultural studies, folk adages quoted in the Tang notes can serve as linguistic materials of which the meanings or contents are particularly helpful to the studies on the Tang society and culture, such as the customs, ideas and beliefs of the Tang people. Though only 16 examples are drawn, they have already reflected certain social and cultural conditions at that time, for instance the beliefs in auspicious sign ([F3-6]) and taboo ([F7]), the concerns on farming ([F8-12]), the principles in working ([F1]) and being an official ([F2]), the speciality of a certain place ([F15]), and the activities in daily life like playing chess game ([F2]), borrowing and lending books ([F14]) and celebrating birthday ([F16]). Furthermore, a comparison or a change of people's notion or saying can be noted. For example, mouse gnaws in outer garments are an auspicious sign [F5] in Tang, but they are thought to be ominous to the master who wears the clothes in the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220). According to Chen Shou 陈寿's *Record of the Three Kingdoms* 三国志 of the Jin dynasty (265-316), Cao Chong 曹冲 had once purposely cut through his clothes by knife and made it look to have been gnawed by mouse. He wore the clothes to see his father Cao Cao 曹操 and pretended to be upset. The ominous saying on mouse gnaws was then quoted by him to explain his worry. Obviously, there is a change of people's notion and saying in Tang, and it is interesting to note that the sign, whether auspicious or ominous, has depended on what have been gnawed. It is commonly regarded as an auspicious sign, as stated in a number of Tang notes, to have mouse gnaws in clothes, hat or belt. But more often the sign is ominous when mouse gnaws occur in many other things such as cane, shoe, horse hoof, ox horn, knife and sword, branch and leaf, sacrificial offerings as well as the head, foot, finger, ear, nose and hair of a person (Qutan Xida, v.116; Li Fang, v.137 & 440; Chen Yuanlong, v.88).

#### 4. Conclusion

Folk adage consists of a huge number of popular sayings expressed in fixed word-combination. As vagueness and confusion regarding the term still exist nowadays, more elaborations or clarifications on its definition and characteristics as well as the relationship, similarity and difference among proverb, allegorical saying, conventional phrase (*guanyungyu* 惯用语), idiom, maxim (*geyan* 格言), slang (*liyu* 俚语), vulgar words (*biju* 鄙语), etc. should be made. More considerations can also be given to the current criteria set for the folk adage though they have been generally accepted. For instance, the fixed word-combination is commonly referred to set phrase (or to be used as a sentence), which implies that words are excluded from this sort of lexis.

But from the view of lexicology rather than grammatical distinction between phrase (*yu* 语) and word (*ci* 词), the possibility of incorporating popular words (*suyuci* 俗语词) or popular sayings expressed in word form into folk adage may further be considered. In a broad sense, '*yu* 语' in '*suyu* 俗语' is not necessarily confined to 'phrase' and may be taken to mean 'saying' which is similar with '*hua* 话, *yan* 言, *shuo* 说' in the terms '*suhua* 俗话, *suyan* 俗言, *sushuo* 俗说'.

Written in classical Chinese but enriched with vernacular expressions, folk adages, proverbs, loan words and so on, Tang notes written by the literati forms a rich and valuable corpus particularly for studying the lexis of the Tang dynasty and middle ancient Chinese. These raw materials contribute immensely to the determination of meanings, origins and usage of the various forms of language expression, to the compilation and revision of dictionaries, and to the study of the variations or development of lexical units. The function and significance of folk adage in the fields of lexicology, lexicography, social and cultural studies, etc. can further be explored and discussed by making use of such valuable documental examples.

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