

Cultural Memory, Ecological Writing, and Disaster Narrative: A Multi-Dimensional Study of Yellow River Poetry in the Mid-to-Late Ming Dynasty

(明代中晚期黄河诗歌的多维研究)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Yellow River poetry produced during the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty (c. 1522–1620) through a multi-dimensional theoretical framework that synthesises cultural memory theory (J. Assmann, 2011), ecocriticism (Buell, 1995, 2001), and disaster narrative studies (Moratto et al., 2022). Situating this body of verse within the most contentious phase of Ming poetic debate — the confrontation between the archaist Latter Seven Masters (后七子 Li Panlong, Wang Shizhen, et al.) and the xingling-oriented Gongan School (公安派 Yuan Hongdao and his brothers) — the study argues that the Yellow River functioned simultaneously as a site of cultural memory consolidation, ecological consciousness, and disaster testimony, and that the two rival schools mediated these dimensions in fundamentally divergent ways. Through close reading of representative poems alongside paratextual poetic criticism, the article demonstrates that the Yellow River served as a contested literary terrain in which rival understandings of the purpose and ethics of poetry were negotiated and performed. In so doing, it fills a significant gap in Ming literary historiography, which has largely examined factional rivalry through the internal logic of poetic theory while neglecting the role of specific natural landscapes and ecological crises as mediating forces.

Keywords:

Ming Dynasty poetry • poetic thought • factional contention • cultural memory
ecological writing • disaster narrative • Latter Seven Masters • Gongan School

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background and Motivation

The Yellow River — mother river of Chinese civilisation and the foundational spiritual topos of the Huaxia cultural community — has been woven into Chinese literary imagination for millennia. Yet within the existing scholarship on Ming literature (1368–1644), the distinctive tradition of Yellow River poetry has remained conspicuously underexamined. It has been absorbed, largely without comment, into broader narratives of factional rivalry or water-management history, and has not received the sustained, focused literary analysis it merits. This gap is not merely historiographical: it reveals a deeper methodological lacuna — the absence of frameworks capable of placing the literary inscription of a specific natural landscape at the intersection of history, politics, ecology, and cultural memory.

The mid-to-late Ming Dynasty — roughly from the Jiajing reign period (1522–1566) through the Wanli era (1572–1620) — was simultaneously one of the most hydrologically catastrophic and poetically turbulent phases of the dynasty. Historical records document a succession of devastating Yellow River floods during this period: in the twenty-first year of the Wanli reign (1593), breach of the river's dykes inundated large swathes of Henan, Shandong, and Jiangsu, transforming the Central Plains into a vast inland sea (Henan Tongzhi). Tens of thousands were displaced, famines followed the waters, and the state's capacity for disaster relief was severely tested. The hydraulic engineer Pan Jixun (潘繼訓 1521–1595), serving multiple stints as Director-General of the Grand Canal, became the emblematic figure of a state grappling — not always successfully — with a river that defied governance (Dodgen, 2001).

This ecological and political turbulence unfolded against the backdrop of Ming literary history's most intellectually charged confrontation: the archaist Latter Seven Masters (后七子, led by Li Panlong (李攀龙 1514–1570) and subsequently Wang Shizhen (王世贞 1526–1590), had established the dominant poetic orthodoxy of 'prose modelled on the Qin-Han, poetry modelled on the High Tang' (文秦汉诗唐, insisting that poetic creation required rigorous emulation of canonical form and tone (Oxford Bibliographies, 2023). Against this orthodoxy, the Gong'an School (公安派 — anchored by the three Yuan brothers — launched a sustained literary counter-offensive under the banner of xingling (性灵 'native sensibility'): 'express the native sensibility freely, without being bound by fixed conventions' (独抒性灵, 不拘格套, Yuan Hongdao, Xu Xiaoxiu Shi).

It is at the intersection of this dual crisis — ecological and poetic — that the present study is situated. The central research questions are: In the context of intense factional debates of the mid-to-late Ming, how did poets affiliated with rival schools deploy Yellow River imagery as a medium through which individual ecological perception, disaster memory, and historical-cultural imagination were fused? In what ways do these divergent writerly practices reflect — and actively argue — for distinct understandings of what poetry is for and what it owes to the world it inhabits?

1.2 Significance and Novelty

This study contributes to scholarship at two levels. At the level of textual analysis, it offers the first systematic account of mid-to-late Ming Yellow River poetry as a coherent literary corpus, recovering texts that have been absorbed into either broader factional histories or hydraulic-engineering annals but not read closely as literary objects in their own right. At the theoretical level, it attempts to activate a triangulated framework — cultural memory theory (Assmann, 2008, 2011), ecocriticism (Buell, 1995, 2005; Moratto et al., 2022), and disaster narrative studies — in relation to pre-modern Chinese verse, an application that remains largely unexplored in the existing scholarship (Erll, 2011). The study's novelty lies precisely in this triangulation, redirecting attention toward an overlooked question: what happens when poets from rival schools confront the same natural phenomenon — a river that floods, displaces, and kills — and what does the difference in their responses reveal about the ethical stakes of their poetic commitments?

1.3 Scope and Corpus

The temporal scope runs from the Jiajing reign period (1522) to the end of the Wanli era (1620). The primary corpus consists of Yellow River and flood-related poems drawn from Li Panlong's Cangming Ji (沧溟集), Wang Shizhen's Yanzhou Shanren Sibü Gao (弇州山人四部稿) and Yuan Hongdao's collected writings (袁宏道集), supplemented by paratextual poetic criticism including Wang Shizhen's Yiyuan Zhiyan (艺苑卮言), Xie Zhen's Siminq Shihua (四溟诗话) and Hu Yinglin's Shisou (诗数). Secondary historical sources, including the Henan Tongzhi and Pan Jixun's Hefang Yilan (河防览 1590), establish the ecological and administrative context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Ming Poetic Factionalism: The Archaism-vs-Reform Paradigm

Scholarship on Ming literature has long been organised around the conflict between archaist and anti-archaist impulses. Yuan Xingpei's foundational division of Ming poetry into two major periods — an 'age of archaism' (1368–1521) and an 'age of new poetic trends' (1522–1644) — provides the dominant periodising framework within which the Latter Seven Masters and the Gong'an School are positioned as antagonists (Oxford Bibliographies, 2023). The most authoritative Chinese-language treatment of the archaist movement remains Liao Kebin's *Mingdai Wenxue Fugu Yundong Yanjiu* (1994), which challenges the received characterisation of archaism as mere 'formalism.' Zheng Lihua's series of studies further refines this picture: his examination of Wang Shizhen's pronouncement that 'talent must be governed by form' (格才御抑城格) reveals the internal contradictions of a movement that simultaneously venerated classical authenticity and risked stifling it through excessive imitation (Zheng Lihua, 2023). On the Gong'an School, Zhou Zhiping's *Yüan Hung-tao and the Kung-an School* (1988) remains the definitive English-language study; recent scholarship has extended this to the Gong'an School's relationship to visual culture and the broader Late Ming culture of individualism (Chow, 2023).

2.2 Yellow River Writing: Between History and Literature

Scholars have traced the Yellow River literary tradition from the grandeur of Li Bai through the Song poets' hydraulic consciousness to the late imperial period (CSSN, 2024). This tradition consistently fuses ecological perception with political commentary and cultural memory: the Yellow River has always been simultaneously a natural force and a test of dynastic legitimacy (Dodgen, 2001). Historical scholarship on Ming Yellow River management is considerable: Pan Jixun's strategy of 'regulating the river with the river, attacking silt with water' (以疏以攻) has been extensively documented (Springer Nature, 2020). Hsu's *When the Yellow River Floods* (HKU Press, 2024) offers a model for connecting hydraulic history to literary representation. What remains largely absent is a literary-critical account of how floods registered in the poetic imagination.

2.3 Cultural Memory Theory

Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann distinguish between 'communicative memory' — limited to approximately 80–100 years — and 'cultural memory,' institutionalised through rituals, texts, and monuments, spanning millennia (Assmann, 2008, 2011). Cultural memory does not merely preserve the past but actively reshapes it in the service of present identity formation; it enables cultures to respond to crises by drawing on foundational narratives (Assmann, 2011). The Yellow River is precisely the kind of 'figure of memory' (Erinnerungsfigur) that this theory describes: institutionalised through canonical texts from the Book of Songs onward, and repeatedly re-activated in moments of political crisis. Applications of Assmann's specific theoretical vocabulary to pre-modern Chinese poetry remain rare, and no study has applied it to Ming factional poetics (Erll, 2011).

2.4 Ecocriticism and Disaster Narrative

Ecocriticism was institutionalised in the mid-1990s with Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) and the *Ecocriticism Reader* (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). Buell's later *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001) extends this to 'toxic discourse' — the literary representation of environmental risk — a concept directly applicable to flood poetry. Moratto et al.'s *Ecocriticism and Chinese Literature* (Routledge, 2022) maps ecocriticism's extension into Chinese literary studies, calling for diachronic applications through the classical concepts of qing (情) and jing (境). Disaster narrative studies (Moratto et al., 2022) attends to the

ways in which disaster writing reshapes collective emotion, social identity, and cultural memory. For the Ming period, Yellow River floods were embedded within a cosmological framework in which heavenly signs and dynastic virtue were intertwined; the occurrence of catastrophic floods could indicate withdrawal of the Mandate of Heaven (Dodgen, 2001).

2.5 Identified Research Gaps

The foregoing review reveals three principal gaps: (1) mid-to-late Ming Yellow River poetry has not been treated as a distinct literary corpus, being dissolved into broader narratives; (2) existing scholarship on Ming poetic factionalism has focused on the internal logic of poetic theory without examining how rival schools diverged in responses to the same specific natural landscape and ecological crises; and (3) while cultural memory theory, ecocriticism, and disaster narrative studies have individually been extended toward Chinese literary material, no study has triangulated these three frameworks for classical Ming verse. This study fills all three gaps simultaneously. Figure 1 below provides a dual-track chronological overview of the ecological and literary events that define this study period, illustrating the temporal relationship between Yellow River flood disasters and the formation of rival poetic schools.

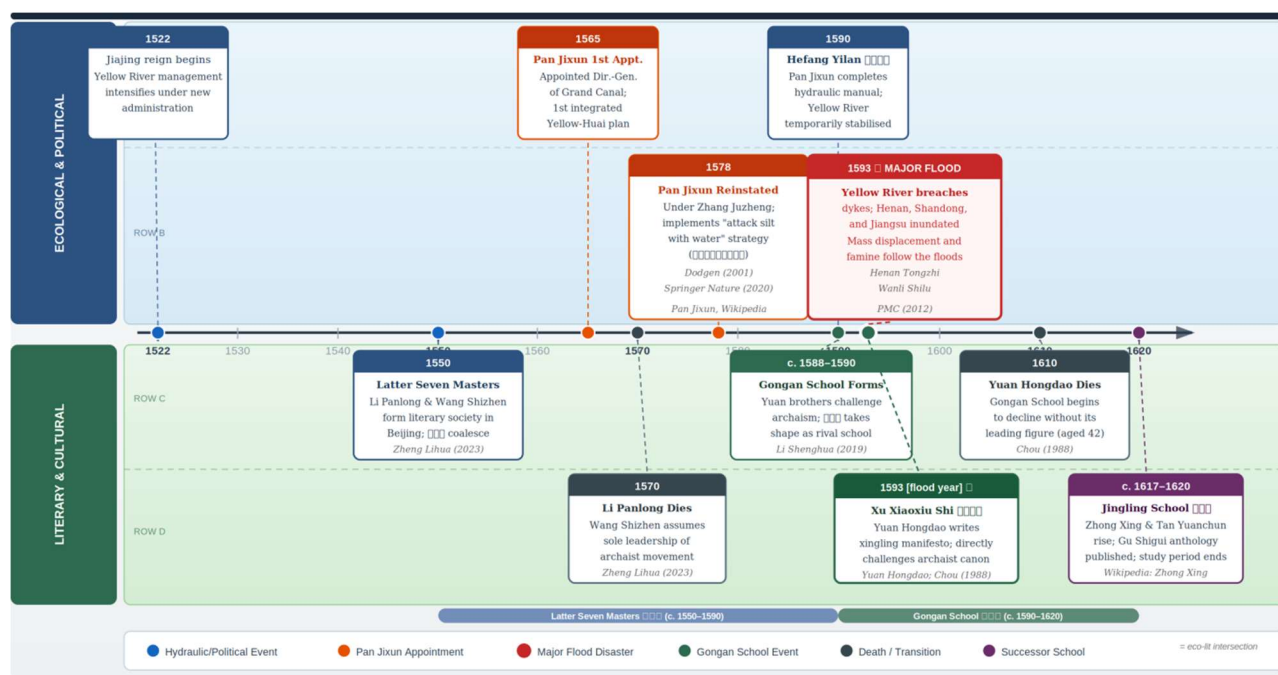


Figure 1. Dual-track chronological timeline mapping major Yellow River flood events and hydraulic interventions (upper track) against key literary-factional developments (lower track). *Note.* Broken vertical lines denote moments of ecological-literary intersection. Horizontal span bars indicate schools' active periods. ★ marks the pivotal 1593 flood-year intersection.

Table 1. Comparative Poetic Profiles of the Latter Seven Masters and the Gong'an School

Dimension	Latter Seven Masters 后七子 (c. 1550-1590s)	Gong'an School 公安派 (c. 1588-1620)
Representative Figures	Li Panlong 李攀龙, Wang Shizhen 王世贞, Xie Zhen 谢榛, Zong Chen 宗臣, Wu Guolun 吴国伦	Yuan Zongdao 袁宗道, Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道, Yuan Zhongdao 袁中道

異論		
Core Poetic Tenet	"Prose modelled on Qin-Han; poetry on High Tang" (文辭詩體)	"Express native sensibility freely, unconstrained by convention" (獨抒性靈)
Canonical Model	Han prose; High Tang shi poetry (李杜 paradigm)	Middle Tang (Bai Juyi 白居易) Song (Su Shi 蘇軾) contemporary vernacular
Theory of Form	Talent subordinated to formal convention; rigorous imitation of canonical models	Form subordinated to authentic feeling; convention as obstacle to genuine expression
Cultural Memory Mode	Canonical consolidation — river as civilisational memory archive; activation of dynasty-legitimacy narratives	Counter-memory — communicative immediacy privileged over long-term archive; recovery of original lyric impulse
Ecological Stance	Landscape as aestheticised canonical backdrop; non-human world filtered through High Tang typology	River as immediate sensory ecological presence; specificity of silt, turbulence, and devastation foregrounded
Disaster Narrative Genre	Commemorative elegy; disaster absorbed into dynastic legitimacy narrative and formal High Tang decorum	Witness testimony / remonstrance; disaster framed as immediate humanitarian and political crisis
Yellow River Treatment	Canonical tropes: Dragon Gate 龍 崑崙 origin, frontier isolation — river as fixed cultural symbol	Sensory reality: turbidity, flood waters, displaced populations — river as living ecological force
Key Sources	Primary Cangming Ji 滄溟集 (Li Panlong) Yanzhou Shanren Sibu Gao 崑崙四稿 (Wang Shizhen) Yiyuan Zhiyan 藝言 (Wang Shizhen)	Yuan Zhonglang Quanji 袁忠長集 (Yuan Hongdao) Xu Xiaoxiu Shi 叙修詩 (Yuan Hongdao) Kexuezhai Ji 珂雪齋集 (Yuan Zhongdao)

Note. Entries are derived from close reading of representative poems and critical essays from each school's corpus. Theoretical framing draws on Assmann (2008, 2011), Buell (1995, 2001), and Moratto et al. (2022).

Table 2. Theoretical Framework Application Matrix

Theoretical Lens	Key Theorists	Core Analytical Question	Application: Latter Seven Masters	Application: Gongan School
Cultural Memory Theory	J. Assmann (2008, 2011) A. Assmann (2008) Erll (2011) Halbwachs (1950)	How does the poem activate, transform, or silence the Yellow River's accumulated cultural memory	Canonical memory consolidation; river as civilisational archive activating dynastic legitimacy narratives from Yu the Great onward	Counter-memory; recovery of communicative immediacy over long-term cultural archive; present displaces past

		archive?		
Ecocriticism	Buell (1995, 2001) Moratto, Pesaro & Chao (2022) Glottfelty & Fromm (1996)	How is the non-human environment positioned relative to human subjectivity and poetic convention?	River as aestheticised backdrop; ecological reality subordinated to formal decorum; nature rendered through canonical typology	River as active ecological presence; sensory specificity and environmental urgency; toxic discourse of silt and inundation
Disaster Narrative Studies	Moratto et al. (2022) Buell (2001) Dodgen (2001)	What genre and voice govern the representation of flood disaster, and what are the ethical implications?	Commemorative elegy; disaster absorbed into dynastic order; voice of learned custodian of historical narrative	Witness testimony / remonstrance; disaster as immediate political and humanitarian crisis; voice of moral observer
Intersectional Analysis	Assmann (2011) Buell (2001) Moratto et al. (2022)	How do all three dimensions interact in the production of rival meanings of the Yellow River as poetic space?	Memory consolidation + ecological distancing + commemorative genre = poetic inscription that manages and aestheticises disaster	Counter-memory + ecological immediacy + testimonial genre = poetic inscription that confronts and critiques disaster

Note. This matrix presents the operational logic of the study's three-lens analytical framework. Each theoretical lens yields a distinct but complementary angle of analysis; the intersectional row synthesises their combined implications. Sources cited follow APA 7th edition.

Table 3. Chronology of Key Ecological and Literary Events in Mid-to-Late Ming Dynasty (c. 1522–1620)

Year	Ecological / Political Event	Literary / Cultural Event	Scholarly Significance
1522	Jiajing reign begins; Yellow River management becomes a priority concern for the new administration	Earlier Seven Masters' influence wanes; Ming poetics in transition	Opening of the study period; establishes the dual context of ecological crisis and literary flux (Oxford Bibliographies, 2023)
1550	Yellow River flooding continues intermittently throughout North China Plain	Li Panlong and Wang Shizhen form literary society in Beijing; Latter Seven Masters (后七子) coalesce as dominant factional force	Foundation of archaist hegemony; 'poetry modelled on High Tang' becomes orthodoxy. Critical context: Zheng Lihua (2023)

1565	Pan Jixun (潘勗) appointed Director-General of Grand Canal (1st term); initiates integrated Yellow-Huai River management	Wang Shizhen's Yiyuan Zhiyan (艺苑) begins circulating; archaist poetic theory reaches its systematic peak	Parallel consolidation of hydraulic authority and literary authority; both claim classical precedent as legitimating framework. Source: Pan Jixun, Wikipedia; Wang Shizhen, Yiyuan Zhiyan
1570	Yellow River dyke repairs ongoing; increased silt load documented by Pan Jixun	Li Panlong dies; Wang Shizhen assumes sole leadership of archaist movement; begins evolving toward more eclectic poetics	Transition in archaist leadership opens internal tensions; Wang Shizhen's later drift toward xingling values foreshadowed (Zheng Lihua, 2023)
1578	Pan Jixun reinstated under Zhang Juzheng; implements 'attacking silt with water' (以攻少淤) strategy; major canal repairs	Yuan brothers enter examination system; begin reading Li Zhi's philosophy of the 'childlike mind'	State hydraulic activism and emerging literary individualism in parallel; both react to perceived institutional sclerosis (Dodgen, 2001; Chou, 1988)
1590	Pan Jixun completes Hefang Yilan (河防览); Yellow River relatively stabilised after decades of engineering work	Yuan Hongdao achieves jinshi degree; Gongan School begins to form; Li Shenghua (2019) identifies this as the turning point	Hydraulic stability coincides with literary insurgency; the Gongan counter-movement emerges precisely as official archaism peaks (Li Shenghua, 2019)
1593	△ MAJOR DISASTER: Yellow River breaches levees; Henan, Shandong, and Jiangsu inundated. Mass displacement and famine follow (Henan Tongzhi; Wanli Shilu)	Yuan Hongdao writes Xu Xiaoxiu Shi (叙修诗); programmatic xingling manifesto challenging archaist orthodoxy	Pivotal ecological-literary intersection: the flood year in which the Gongan School's counter-canonical manifesto was written. The ecological catastrophe may have directly sharpened the critique of aestheticised canonical poetry (this study's core argument)
1595	Pan Jixun dies (aged 73); Yellow River management passes to less effective successors	Yuan Hongdao serves as Wuchang County Magistrate; direct administrative encounter with disaster-affected communities	Loss of hydraulic expertise parallels Yuan Hongdao's official immersion in the social consequences of flooding; informs disaster witness poetry (Chou, 1988)
1610	Yellow River management	Yuan Hongdao dies aged 42; Gongan	Simultaneous decline of hydraulic control and leading literary reformer; ecological

	deteriorating; system increasing strain	dyke under leading figure	School begins to decline without its leading figure	and literary trajectories converge again (Wikipedia: Gongan School)
c. 1617– 1620	Wanli reign ends (1620); Yellow River crisis deepens into late- Ming political collapse	Jingling School (竟陵) rises under Zhong Xing and Tan Yuanchun; publishes Gu Shigui anthology (c. 1617)	Close of the study period; successor school inherits xingling principle but shifts toward 'profound and secluded' (幽深 aesthetics, further marginalising direct ecological representation (Wikipedia: Zhong Xing)	

Note. ^Adenotes events of particular analytical significance to this study. Ecological data drawn from Henan Tongzhi, Wanli Shilu, Pan Jixun's Hefang Yilan (1590), and Dodgen (2001). Literary data drawn from primary sources, Liao Kebin (1994), Zheng Lihua (2023), Li Shenghua (2019), and Oxford Bibliographies (2023). All dates follow the traditional Chinese calendar converted to the Gregorian system.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in the hermeneutic tradition of Chinese classical literary scholarship and enriched by Western critical theory. It proceeds through close textual reading — attending to diction, allusion, tonal register, imagistic structure, and generic convention — combined with comparative poetics and intertextual analysis. This methodological combination is particularly suited to the pre-modern Chinese literary context, where meaning is produced not only within individual poems but through the dense web of canonical allusions, generic expectations, and critical commentary that surrounds them (Cai, 2008). The three theoretical lenses — cultural memory theory, ecocriticism, and disaster narrative studies — function not as external imposition but as analytical complements to the internal logic of classical Chinese poetics: the first addressing the temporal dimension of poetic meaning (relation to tradition), the second addressing the spatial-ecological dimension (relation to the natural environment), and the third addressing the ethical dimension (relation to suffering communities).

3.2 Primary Source Corpus and Historical Sources

The primary corpus consists of Yellow River and flood-related poems drawn from: Li Panlong's Cangming Ji (沧鸣集), Wang Shizhen's Yanzhou Shanren Sibü Gao (身山四稿), Yuan Hongdao's collected writings (袁宏道集), Yuan Zhongdao's Kexuezhai Ji (珂雪集), and Yuan Zongdao's Bai Su Zhai Lei Gao (白旂稿). Paratextual materials include Wang Shizhen's Yiyuan Zhiyan (艺苑言), Xie Zhen's Siminq Shihua (四明诗), Hu Yinglin's Shisou (识蓂), and Yuan Hongdao's critical essays. Historical and contextual sources include Pan Jixun's Hefang Yilan (河防览, 1590), the Henan Tongzhi, and relevant sections of the Ming Shilu (明录).

3.3 Analytical Framework and Procedure

The analytical framework operates through three sequential but interconnected lenses (see Figure 2 below). The first lens (cultural memory) examines how each poem activates, transforms, or silences the Yellow River's cultural associations. The second lens (ecocriticism) asks how each poem positions the human observer in relation to the non-human environment. The third lens (disaster narrative) examines the generic conventions and voice each school employs when writing about flood. The analytical procedure proceeds

in four stages: (1) identification and school-affiliation of relevant poems; (2) close reading through all three lenses simultaneously; (3) systematic cross-school comparison for shared topoi; (4) contextualisation of textual findings against poetic-theoretical pronouncements and the historical flood record.

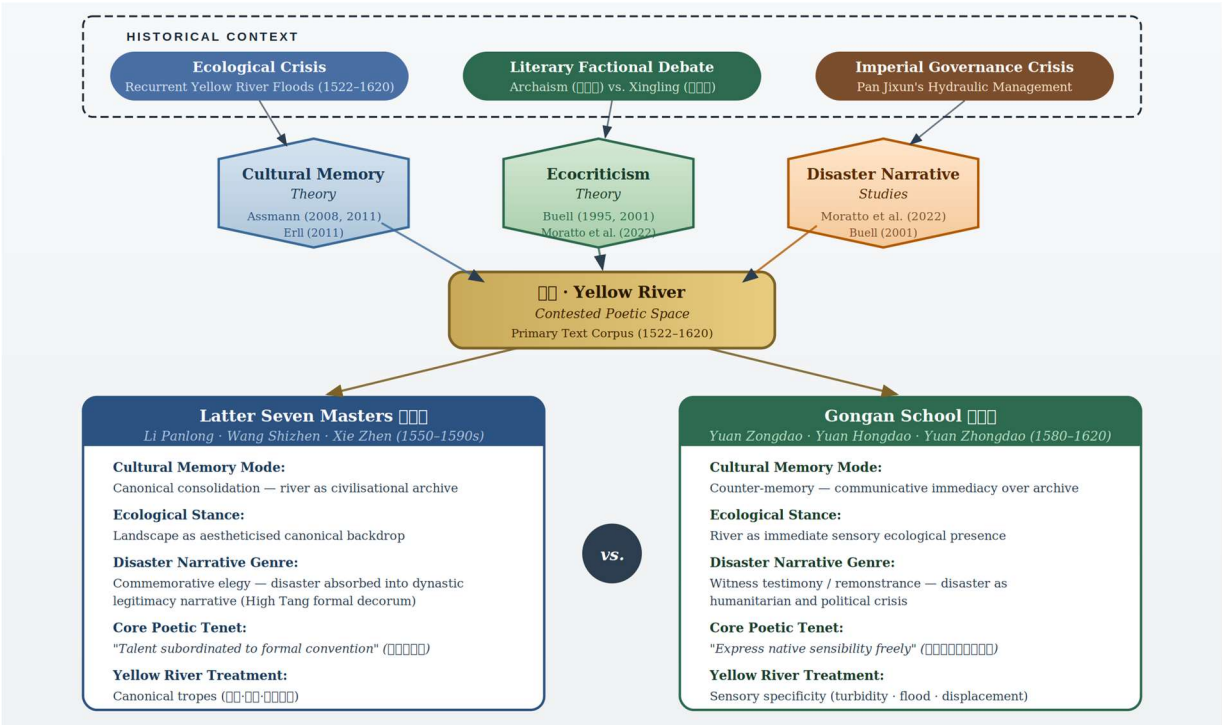


Figure 2. Integrated analytical framework showing the triangulation of three theoretical lenses, the Yellow River as contested poetic space, and the divergent poetic responses of the two rival Ming literary schools.

Note. Arrows indicate analytical directionality.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Before presenting the close-reading analysis, Figure 2 provides a comparative overview of the two schools' poetic profiles across the six analytical dimensions employed in this study. The near-inverse polygon shapes capture, at a glance, the structural opposition that the sections below examine in textual detail.

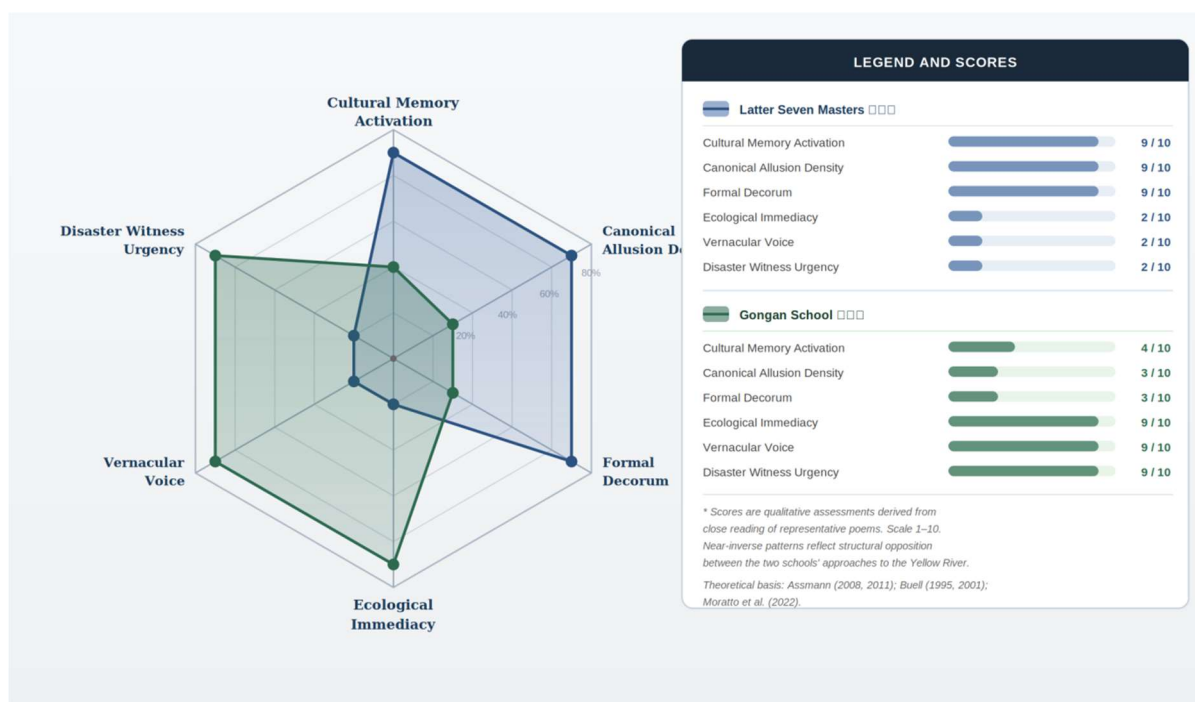


Figure 3. Comparative radar chart illustrating the contrasting poetic profiles of the Latter Seven Masters and the Gongan School across six analytical dimensions.

Note. The near-inverse patterns illustrate the structural opposition between the two schools' approaches to Yellow River poetry. Scores (1–10) are qualitative assessments derived from close reading of representative poems.

4.1 Canonical Memory Consolidation: Latter Seven Masters

Close reading of the Latter Seven Masters' Yellow River and river-disaster poems reveals a consistent pattern of canonical memory consolidation. When Li Panlong and Wang Shizhen address the Yellow River, the river is perceived and represented primarily through the lens of classical precedent. The imagistic vocabulary they deploy — the muddy yellow current tracing its course from the Kunlun Mountains, the roar of the water at Dragon Gate (龍門), the river's ancient role as a political and cosmological boundary — is drawn almost entirely from the Han and High Tang canonical models that their poetic programme declared normative. In Wang Shizhen's regulated verse on the river, the governing formal principle is precisely what the Yiyuan Zhiyan prescribes: 'sound governed by poetic convention, meaning governed by poetic convention' (聲而詩). The river's present ecological reality — its floods, its silt load, its annual threat — is displaced in favour of a temporally stabilised image whose authority derives from Tang precedent.

This is not, however, simply a failure of perception. Within the cultural memory framework (Assmann, 2011), the Latter Seven Masters' practice constitutes a deliberate act of cultural memory activation: the Yellow River, for them, is most authentically itself when it most fully resembles its canonical representations. Contemporary floods become the latest episode in a story already told, and the poet's task is to render them in a form that makes their connection to that deeper story legible. When the Latter Seven Masters address flood and river disaster, they tend toward formal commemoration rather than immediate witness. The disaster is aestheticised, made bearable and meaningful, by being inserted into a canonical narrative framework — what Buell (2001) would call the management of 'toxic discourse' through formal

elevation.

4.2 Ecological Immediacy and Sensory Witness: Gongan School

The contrast with the Gongan School's approach is striking. Yuan Hongdao and his brothers deploy the Yellow River in fundamentally different ways. The defining feature of their river poetry is ecological immediacy: the river is encountered in its present-tense sensory reality — turbid, violent, destructive, and indifferent to classical precedent. The xingling principle 'express the native sensibility freely, without being bound by fixed conventions' (性灵不缚) has direct consequences for ecological representation: if the poet's primary obligation is to authentic feeling arising from genuine experience, then the experience of witnessing a flood cannot be adequately rendered through borrowed Tang imagery. Yuan Hongdao's prose-poetry on river travel demonstrates a consistent interest in the non-human scale and agency of the river. Where Wang Shizhen's river tends to be a culturally legible space whose features are arranged according to canonical typology, Yuan Hongdao's river is characterised by surprise, disorientation, and the failure of received categories to capture what is actually being seen.

Yuan Zhongdao's flood-related poems register the human costs of river disaster in a vernacular directness that violates every precept of the archaist aesthetic. The voices of displaced farmers, the sight of flooded graves, the failure of government relief efforts — these enter the Gongan School's poetry not as classical types but as immediate presences demanding emotional response. Within the cultural memory framework, this constitutes what Assmann would call counter-memory: a refusal of the dominant cultural memory archive in favour of the communicative memory of the living, the present, the traumatically immediate.

4.3 Disaster Narrative: Commemoration vs. Witness

The Latter Seven Masters' flood poems adopt the genre of dynastic commemoration: the disaster is framed as an event that tests and ultimately confirms the vitality of the imperial system, whose hydraulic engineers stand as modern counterparts to the mythic Yu the Great. The Gongan School's disaster poems, by contrast, tend toward witness testimony: the poet is positioned as an observer — sometimes a participant — in the immediate crisis. Yuan Zhongdao's verses on famine following the Wanli floods, and Yuan Hongdao's meditations on the relation between official duties and ecological suffering, exhibit a quality of moral urgency structurally absent from the Latter Seven Masters' commemorative mode. A third pattern emerges in the later career of Wang Shizhen: after Li Panlong's death in 1570, his river poems begin to show traces of the very sensory immediacy that the archaist programme had prescribed against — suggesting that the Yellow River, as a site of ecological confrontation with the living present, exerted a pressure on even the most committed archaist sensibility that pure canonical memory could not fully absorb.

4.4 The Yellow River as Contested Poetic Space

The foregoing findings converge on a single overarching observation: the Yellow River functioned in mid-to-late Ming poetry as a contested poetic space, a terrain in which rival understandings of poetry's purpose — its obligations to the past and the present, and its relation to ecological and political reality — were dramatised and disputed. This finding also has implications for understanding the social meaning of the factional debate. It is often presented as primarily an aesthetic dispute. The Yellow River corpus reveals that it was equally a dispute about what poets owe to the historical world they inhabit: specifically, to the tens of thousands of people displaced and killed by a river that the dynasty was struggling to govern. The aesthetic choices of the Latter Seven Masters — their preference for canonical allusion over immediate witness, for formal elevation over vernacular urgency — had ethical as well as aesthetic consequences.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Rethinking the Archaism/Anti-Archaism Binary

The findings suggest that the conventional binary of archaism versus anti-archaism, while analytically useful, obscures important dimensions of the mid-to-late Ming poetic scene when applied to the Yellow River corpus. Both schools are engaged in complex negotiations with the cultural memory archive of the river: both activate it, both transform it, and both are shaped by it. The difference is not between memory and no-memory, but between different modes of cultural memory activation and different ethical orientations toward the uses of that memory. This reframing has consequences for how we understand the Latter Seven Masters' programme. The present study extends existing rehabilitations of archaism (Liao Kebin, 1994; Zheng Lihua, 2023) by showing that, within the Yellow River corpus, the Latter Seven Masters' canonical consolidation has a specific cultural memory function: it inscribes the contemporary ecological crisis within the long-memory narratives of Chinese hydraulic civilisation, thereby making the crisis meaningful and legible at a civilisational scale. Conversely, the Gongan School's preference for sensory immediacy is not simply a rejection of cultural memory but a recovery of its living source: the xingling principle, in this reading, seeks to re-access the authentic impulse of which the archaist canon is the calcified residue (Yuan Hongdao, Xu Xiaoxiu Shi).

5.2 Ecological Consciousness and the Ethics of Literary Form

The ecological dimension raises a question that literary history rarely asks of pre-modern texts: to what extent did formal choices facilitate or impede honest representation of the non-human world and of human suffering within it? The Latter Seven Masters' canonical formal conventions functioned, in the context of Yellow River floods, as a kind of representational management — providing aesthetic protocols through which the violence of the flood could be acknowledged while being absorbed into a narrative of cosmic order and dynastic legitimacy. The Gongan School's counter-approach — insisting on the primacy of immediate feeling over canonical convention — maps onto what Buell (2001) calls the first wave of ecocritical consciousness: a commitment to representing the natural world and its impact on human life with accuracy and urgency. Yuan Hongdao's prose and Yuan Zhongdao's witness poetry enact formal choices — vernacular diction, sensory specificity, the inclusion of marginalised voices — that resonate with ecocritical values across the historical distance (Moratto et al., 2022).

5.3 Social Dimensions of Poetic Debate

A broader implication concerns the relationship between literary factional debate and social consciousness in late imperial China. It is conventional to treat Ming literary school contests primarily as disputes within an elite intellectual culture largely hermetic to wider society. The Yellow River corpus complicates this picture. When the Latter Seven Masters and the Gongan School disagree about how to write about floods, they are disagreeing about something that was killing people, displacing communities, and threatening the stability of the empire. Their poetic choices, however abstract they may appear within literary-critical discourse, were choices about how to represent — or not represent — this reality to the literate public. The factional debate had ethical stakes that the participants themselves, at their most self-aware, acknowledged: Yuan Hongdao's critique of archaist imitation is, at bottom, a critique of a kind of poetry that is not adequate to the demands of the world it claims to address.

5.4 Theoretical Implications

The triangulated framework yields several implications for scholarship beyond the Ming context. With

respect to cultural memory theory, the study demonstrates that Assmann's framework is highly productive when applied to Chinese literary history, but requires supplementation with attention to the specifically Chinese forms of cultural memory activation — allusive poetics, canonical system-building, and the Confucian tradition of using classical precedent as political argumentation. With respect to ecocriticism, the study confirms the feasibility of applying the field's core questions to pre-modern Chinese verse, while insisting on genuine engagement with classical Chinese aesthetic concepts — particularly *qing* (情) and *jing* (境) — rather than simple importation of Western theoretical terminology (Moratto et al., 2022). With respect to disaster narrative, the study confirms that the distinction between commemorative and testimonial modes of disaster writing has significant purchase in pre-modern literary contexts, and that the ethical stakes of this distinction are not modern inventions.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has examined mid-to-late Ming Yellow River poetry through the triangulated lenses of cultural memory theory, ecocriticism, and disaster narrative, situating this hitherto neglected body of verse within the most contentious phase of Ming factional poetic debate. The central argument is that the Yellow River functioned as a contested poetic space in which rival understandings of poetry's obligations — to the canonical past, to the ecological present, and to the suffering communities along the river's banks — were negotiated and performed. The Latter Seven Masters practised a form of cultural memory consolidation that aestheticised disaster within canonical narrative frameworks, while the Gong'an School enacted a counter-memorial, sensory-witness mode that insisted on the priority of immediate ecological and human experience over formal convention.

The study's principal contributions are threefold. First, it establishes mid-to-late Ming Yellow River poetry as a coherent and significant literary corpus. Second, it reframes the archaism-vs-xingling debate not merely as an aesthetic dispute but as a contest over the ethical obligations of literary form in conditions of ecological crisis. Third, it demonstrates the productivity of applying cultural memory theory, ecocriticism, and disaster narrative analysis to classical Chinese verse, while insisting on grounding these applications in the specific aesthetic and philosophical traditions of the Chinese literary system.

Limitations include the non-exhaustive nature of the corpus (the Jingling School, the Tang-Song School, and the fu and popular song forms await dedicated analysis), and the inevitable risk of assimilating the Chinese case too rapidly to Western theoretical models. Future research should undertake a comprehensive survey of Yellow River poetry across all Ming literary schools, engage more deeply with indigenous Chinese critical traditions, and explore digital humanities methods — such as the geographical-distribution analysis pioneered by Lei et al. (2024) — to map the spatial dimensions of Yellow River poetic production.

The most significant implication of this study is perhaps the simplest: the Yellow River, in all its hydrological violence, its cultural depth, and its capacity to displace and destroy, was not merely a backdrop to Ming poetic debates but one of their primary interlocutors. The river posed a challenge to Ming poets that their factional commitments did not fully equip them to meet. The history of how they tried, and in different ways partially failed, to rise to that challenge is a chapter in Chinese literary history that has not been adequately written. This study is offered as a first step toward writing it.

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