

The Collision of Romance and Reality: A Study of the Aesthetic Connotations of the Moon Imagery in the Poetry of Li Bai and Su Shi

Peihua Sun*

School of Literature and Journalism at Sanjiang University, Nanjin, Jiangsu, 210012,
China
nimt100@126.com

Feiyue LI

College of Liberal Arts, Shanghai University, Shanghai, 200444, China

Abstract: From ancient times to the present, the imagery of the moon has touched the hearts of countless literati, inspiring them and providing themes for their creations. It also embodies the complex emotions of ancient scholars, becoming one of the conventional images in classical Chinese poetry. Numerous literati from ancient China have left a wealth of famous works expressing their feelings about the moon. Against this backdrop, focusing mainly on the Tang and Song dynasties, this study delves into and enriches the connotations of the moon imagery through the lunar poems of Li Bai and Su Shi. The moon imagery is a particularly prominent image cluster in the works of Li Bai and Su Shi, with noticeable differences in aesthetic connotations. In terms of aesthetic realms, the moon imagery in the works of Li Bai and Su Shi represents, respectively, an ethereal fairyland and a serene Zen state; in terms of aesthetic functions, Li Bai primarily magnifies personal emotions, while Su Shi focuses on understanding history and life; in terms of aesthetic characteristics, Li Bai's portrayal of the moon emphasizes intense emotions and transcendence of reality, whereas Su Shi's portrayal focuses more on profound thought and integration with reality.

Keywords: Li Bai, Su Shi, Moon Imagery, Aesthetic Connotations

1. INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, the bright moon has always been a source of endless imagination, touching people's deep reflections on reality, society, and life. The symbolic meaning of the moon has stirred the hearts of countless literati, providing them with endless creative inspiration and material, while also bearing the complex emotions of ancient scholars (Ding, 2013). It has become an eternal theme of constant thought and exploration for ancient literati and is one of the common images in classical Chinese poetry. In Chinese classical poetry, the moon symbolizes a profound cultural tradition and unique aesthetic taste. It can be seen as a symbol, an atmosphere, or more precisely, a bond of emotion (Qu, 2023). The moon symbolizes the emotions expressed by ancient literati in their works and is an important

element in ancient literature (Song, 2016). Many ancient poets and writers have left masterpieces themed around expressing their feelings through the moon. These works fully demonstrate the unique charm of the moon as a literary image. Some even describe the moon in Chinese literature as an eternal poem, as it has rich connotations and limitless artistic appeal in poetry and songs through the ages (Zhao, 2020). As a frequently occurring natural phenomenon, the moon continuously attracts the brushstrokes of literati, becoming an inexhaustible source of inspiration for their creations.

2. DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES IN AESTHETIC REALMS

2.1 The Aesthetic Realm of the Moon Imagery in Li Bai's Poetry

In Li Bai's poetry, the moon is often depicted as embodying an elegant beauty, exuding a fairy-like freedom and vastness. This is similar to his depiction of white gulls in "Ancient Style Poems," where they frolic freely on the beach, casting shadows, unconcerned with climbing peaks or chasing cranes in the clouds. These verses reflect the poet's own state of mind. The first half of the poem depicts carefree seagulls and unrestrained sea wanderers playing on the sandy beaches, while the latter half directly expresses the poet's detachment from worldly troubles and a state of tranquil contentment (Li, 2015; Wang, 2022). In "Ming Gao Song Sending Off Cen Zheng Jun," the poet, through the description of his friend Cen Xun's perilous journey and the quiet solitude of Ming Gao Mountain, expresses his own feelings of being ostracized. Especially in the latter half of the poem, a series of metaphors vividly depict the intrigue and hypocrisy within the ruling class, such as in lines like "chickens gather and fight for food, while the phoenix flies alone without neighbors." These not only reveal political darkness but also express the poet's firm character of not wanting to associate with the powerful. The entire poem is filled with variety in language and structure, creating a dreamlike artistic effect with vague, obscure, and hazy imagery, full of wild imagination and passion, and a strong atmosphere (Xu, 2018). In "Xuanzhou Xie Tiao Tower Farewell to School Book Uncle Yun," the poet expresses his unrestrained emotions: "Embracing leisurely interests, aspiring to soar high, wishing to fly to the blue sky, gazing at the bright moonlight" (Cheng, 2021). And in "Liangyuan Yin," the poet, during his travels, sees a desolate scene: the ancient nobleman Xiangling Jun has been forgotten, and people are now farming over his tomb, the city in ruins, lost in the clouds of Cangwu Mountain. This ignites the poet's nostalgia for ancient times, realizing that life must

barely continue, with happiness coming from enjoying the present rather than worrying too much about the future, reflecting his dissatisfaction with reality. The poet also shows disdain for noble people, highlighting his own *laissez-faire* attitude.

2.2 The Aesthetic Realm of the Moon Imagery in Su Shi's Works

Su Shi's literary style also exhibits a quality of "purity," which, although lacking Li Bai's open-mindedness and transcendental temperament, has a sense of "ethereal" enlightenment, showcasing an emotion immersed in a Zen-like state. In "Dian Jiang Chun" ("Leaning on a Hu Bed, Strolling in a Leisurely Court"), he conveys the joy of roaming with friends in the mountains and lakes of Hangzhou: "Who sits with me? The bright moon and clear wind are my companions." This lyric skillfully employs a variety of writing techniques such as narration, description, real sensation, allusion, antithesis, and emotional coloring, fully displaying Su Shi's pleasure shared with friends amidst lakes and mountains. Describing the peaks outside the building, the bright moonlight, and the fresh scenery like a beautiful painting, it is enchanting. Those who merge with nature and maintain a connection with it naturally endow themselves with art and a beautiful life (Liang, 2012). In "Nian Nu Jiao·Mid-Autumn," Su Shi writes: "From a high vantage, I gaze afar, seeing the vast sky for miles, clouds leaving no trace. The light of the cassia moon flies here, piercingly illuminating the autumn colors. In jade palaces and crystal towers, riding on a phoenix, one dwells in a cool and refreshing place." This realm is fresh and tranquil. At that time, Su Shi was living in Huangzhou, amidst an unstable political situation. To escape political setbacks and the impurity of the secular world, he longed even more for that transcendent realm of purity and tranquility (Wang, 2012).

2.3 Comparison of the Aesthetic Realms of Moon Imagery in Li Bai and Su Shi's Works

Li Bai and Su Shi, two literary giants, incorporated elements of "freedom" (逸) and "emptiness" (空) into their works, respectively, creating distinctly different realms of immortals and Zen. This style of creation reflects significant differences in their approaches to life. Overall, Li Bai focuses more on the richness and development of emotions, while Su Shi emphasizes spiritual sublimation through understanding and introspection. Li Bai's poetry is characterized by romance and passion. He is adept at using metaphors and symbolism to vividly express natural

scenery and inner emotions. Using the moon as a medium, he expresses his unique insights and emotional experiences about nature and life by portraying the moon's image, color, and dynamics (C. Li, 2021; Zhou & Zhang, 2020). On the other hand, Su Shi is known for his erudition, talent, and diverse styles. His poetry not only covers a wide range of subjects but also exhibits greater flexibility in expression. He also uses the moon as a medium, expressing his unique insights and emotional experiences about nature and life through the depiction of the moon's image, color, and dynamics (C. Li, 2021; Yang, 2022). While both poets use similar imagery, their treatment and the emotions they evoke are distinct. Li Bai's moon often symbolizes an unbounded, romantic spirit, reflecting his yearning for freedom and his passionate nature. In contrast, Su Shi's moon conveys a sense of tranquility and introspection, mirroring his philosophical and contemplative approach to life. This contrast between the poets' depictions of the moon highlights the diverse spectrum of Chinese classical poetry and the depth of its emotional and philosophical explorations.

3. DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES IN AESTHETIC FUNCTIONS

3.1 The Aesthetic Function of the Moon Imagery in Li Bai's Poetry

In his poetry, Li Bai emphasizes a penchant for free roaming, highlighting his individualistic traits and portraying an independent, open-minded inner world in harmony with nature. In "Drinking Alone Under the Moon" (Part 1), through the lines "I raise my cup to invite the bright moon, and my shadow makes us three," he seeks solace in the companionship of the moon and his shadow, displaying his personality of dispelling loneliness and embracing unrestrained emotions (Lu, 2019; Tang, 2022). In "Drinking Alone Under the Moon" (Part 3), with verses like "A jug of wine equals life and death, myriad matters are hard to discern. Not knowing my own existence, this joy is most profound," he describes a banquet shared with life and death, highlighting life's unpredictable changes but also expressing a transcendent awareness of his existence, merging with the universe, as grand as heaven and earth (Yu, 2019). Li Bai often used "playing with the moon" to showcase his free spirit. The concept of "borrowing the moon" aptly represents Li Bai's interaction with nature. For instance, in "Sending Off Mr. Yang to Mount Song," he writes: "Temporarily borrowing the moonlight of the eastern hill, a whole night of hearty singing sends off the spring water." Here, Li Bai uses the moonlight

as a lamp and the green hills as a stage, indulging in drinks and songs with friends, expressing his unorthodox romantic sentiments. He also advises his friend not to dwell on his demotion, encouraging a detached, leisurely life like Tao Yuanming, reflecting Li Bai's deep friendship and unique insight into life (Zhao, 2017). Li Bai also frequently used words like "flower moon" and "autumn moon" to describe scenes, directly appealing to the senses and evoking emotional resonance. For example, in "Song of the Hu Horsemen in Youzhou," he writes: "Galloping and hunting birds and beasts, drunk under the flower moon in my carved saddle." This verse, depicting the Hu horsemen's battles and entertainments, expresses their bravery, freedom, and love for life. It also shows Li Bai's admiration and longing for the culture of the northern minorities (Hao, 2019). In Li Bai's "Song of Xiangyang, Four Pieces," the first piece states: "The river city's winding waters, flowers and moon bewitch the mind." This verse paints a beautiful scene: a river city surrounded by water, where the clear and green river shimmers under the moonlight, and the flowers under the moonlight are captivating. Such a scenery intoxicates and fascinates Li Bai, expressing his love and longing for nature. He also uses the beautiful scenery to convey his emotions, expressing his love for life and pursuit of happiness. In "Yuhu Yin" ("Song of the Jade Flask"), the poet's emotions are varied, encompassing both somber and light feelings. Through the line "Three cups stir the sword to dance under the autumn moon, suddenly singing loudly with tears streaming," he expresses the ups and downs of his inner emotions. In the poem "Accompanying a Courtesan to the Peach Garden of the Meng Family on Liang Wang's Xiazhan Mountain," the poet's emotions also cover a wide range of time and space. He uses the line "Today is not yesterday, tomorrow will come again" to depict the passage and constant change of time, while also evoking memories of the past and expectations for the future. When describing the moon and the oriole, the poet connects them with the ancient King of Liang, thereby expressing a sense of nostalgia. This connection brings a sense of continuity between the past and present, evoking emotions that are shared by all beings through time.

3.2 The Aesthetic Function of the Moon Imagery in Su Shi's Works

Su Shi's descriptions of the moon often possess a reflective nature, serving to contemplate history and life. He uses the moon as a symbol to examine his inner world, aiming to achieve honest self-recognition and the pursuit of moral realms (Bai, 2020). In "Five Intoxicated Poems from Wanghu Tower on June 27th," the second poem reads: "Water pillows

make mountains bow and rise, wind sails allow lingering with the moon." In this verse, Su Shi uses the depiction of natural scenery to express his profound love and yearning for nature. At the same time, he uses this beautiful scene to express his inner feelings, conveying his love for life and relentless pursuit. However, he also expresses dissatisfaction with his current situation and a desire to be reutilized in the future. In his own commentary on "Xi Jiang Yue," he writes: "Upon awakening, the chaotic mountains embrace, and the flowing water tinkles, as if it were not of this world. I inscribed these words on a bridge pillar." The underlying philosophy is "Accept what comes, then let it go," signifying that one can find a home anywhere in life. It is evident that the author demonstrates an independent attitude that transcends worldly concerns, living in harmony with the world. Notably, Su Shi seems more concerned with real life, deepening his contemplation and questioning of his own existence, along with the ensuing worries and resolutions. His works often reflect concerns about society, politics, and interpersonal relationships, as well as exploring the individual's place in the complex realities of life. In the context of farewells, the author experiences life anxieties and reflects on his own life, realizing a principle of living unbound by fame and fortune. "Xing Xiang Zi · Expressing My Feelings" conveys the poet's emotions while drinking under the moon, communicating the transience of life and the difficulty of finding like-minded individuals, while also expressing the poet's desire to escape worldly troubles and pursue seclusion and detachment. Su Shi often uses the moon to clarify his heart and intentions, as in "Following the Rhymes of Jiang Hui's Uncle," where he writes: "Transient clouds and worldly affairs change, the solitary moon illuminates this heart," expressing his resolve to hold onto his beliefs and sentiments. He likens his inner world to a solitary moon—lonely, yet bright and steadfast. He is determined not to be swayed by external influences, maintaining clarity and firmness in his heart, pursuing the life he truly desires. This expresses Su Shi's sentiments towards the changing times and his determination to adhere to his beliefs and emotions.

3.3 Comparative Aesthetic Functions of Moon Imagery in the Writings of Li Bai and Su Shi

Both Li Bai and Su Shi used poetry and prose as tools to express and present themselves, considering it a way to manifest their inner spirits. However, the aesthetic differences between them are apparent. Li Bai's poetry mainly pursues grand self-emotions, often blurring the distinction between the "moon" and "I." He integrates its form with surrounding elements, presenting a light-hearted mood that freely wanders between

nature and man. In contrast, Su Shi focuses more on deeply observing history and life. The "moon" he shapes is more like a philosopher, abandoning material attributes and filled with personal characteristics. He pursues elegance and self-improvement, encompassing philosophical thoughts of nature and Zen. The so-called "magnifying self-emotions" emphasizes freely expressing deep and broad emotions. Whereas the so-called "insight into history and life" emphasizes clarifying the mind, self-reflection, and deep understanding of history and life, showing noble character and profound emotional thought.

4. AESTHETIC CHARACTERISTICS: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

4.1 Aesthetic Characteristics of the Moon Imagery in Li Bai's Writings

In Li Bai's literary works, the imagery of the moon is primarily characterized by "emotion that is difficult to bear," reflecting the author's profound contemplation and reflection on life. The moon in his poetry is often endowed with rich emotions, displaying a sentimental nature, which mirrors his complex understanding of life and human nature (X. Li, 2021; Xu, 2018). In "Autumn Thoughts," Li Bai writes: "As if the spring sun was only yesterday, yellow orioles sing among the green trees. Weeds grow rampant in the evening, a brisk wind chills the air. In the autumn sky, leaves fall from trees, the moon is cold, and the sandgrouse weeps. Sitting in sorrow as the flowers fade, white dew intensifies their withering (S. Li, 2021)." The poet's deep sorrow is triggered by various autumn scenes, yet his contemplations on life are subtly present within this melancholy, not explicitly expressed. In "Song of Xiangyang," he writes: "Tears cannot be shed for it, nor can the heart grieve for it." The poet often improvised in different situations, integrating others' experiences into his works, vividly showcasing his disdain for fame and wealth, his pursuit of a free and unrestrained life, and his passive emotions about the impermanence of life and cherishing the present. "Preface to a Spring Night Banquet in the Peach Blossom Garden with My Younger Brother" profoundly expresses the author's perception and insight into life. The text vividly describes a spring night gathering, where the author and his brothers drink and compose poetry. The author reflects on the vastness of the world, the fleeting nature of time, the brevity of human life, and the scarcity of joy. He substantiates this viewpoint with the ancient practice of "night roaming by candlelight," conveying his deep love for life and nature, as well as his extensive historical knowledge and broad-mindedness. The article is smoothly written, with a firm and powerful tone. In the second year of

Qianyuan (759 AD), after receiving a special pardon, Li Bai returned to Jiangling. While admiring the naval forces in Jiangxia, he wrote "To Han Yang Fu, Record Keeper in Jiangxia." This poem deeply expresses the frustration and helplessness of being unable to serve the country, even feeling the river has become as narrow as white silk. The four lines on "serving the country" and four lines on "drawing the sword" intensify the emotions to the extreme. However, contemplations on life are only faintly revealed through these intense emotions. Through the vivid expression of feelings, the poem reflects the poet's concern for the rise and fall of the nation and his personal sense of powerlessness. It also mirrors his profound contemplation on human fate, ingeniously blending emotion and thought. This blend of emotion and thought enriches the poem with depth and emotional resonance, profoundly influencing later generations. While it is impossible to escape reality, in the process of aesthetic appreciation, one has the opportunity to reflect one's own character and preferences. Li Bai often expressed his inner state and relationship with real life by articulating his desire for seclusion and a life detached from worldly concerns. This desire was his way of fulfilling spiritual aspirations and escaping worldly turmoil (An, 2016; Shu, 2022). "Song of Xiangyang" says: "The clear breeze and bright moon can be enjoyed without cost, and the collapse of Jade Mountain is not caused by man. The ladle of Shuzhou, the bell of the strongman, Li Bai will share life and death with you." There is a transcendence in being lost in drunkenness, becoming one with the wind and the moon. Although the poet's lifestyle was somewhat unrestrained, it did not degenerate into decadence. The poem is imbued with self-appreciation and indulgence of his past romantic life. The poet, with a candid tone, creates an image of an ingenuous drunkard. The vivid depiction of life scenes in the poem is dramatic, presenting a lifelike picture and reflecting the vibrant and lively aspect of Tang Dynasty society. "To the Hermit of Moon Creek" goes: "You play with the bright moon, extinguishing its reflection in the clear Huai. Your lofty tracks are hard to follow, comparable to the ancients. ... When I bid farewell to the world, I will join hands with you to visit the pine hermit." His figure seems to be amidst swirling clouds and mist. This reflects the poet's weariness of worldly matters and his longing for immortality, showcasing Li Bai's pursuit of freedom and his unique perspective on life.

4.2 Aesthetic Characteristics of the Moon Imagery in Su Shi's Writings

In Su Shi's "Linjiangxian · Once Departing the Capital, Thrice Changed by Fire," the phrase "Melancholy sets a lone sail for an overnight voyage, sending off under the faint moon and light clouds" expresses a

philosophical view akin to "life is like a journey against the flow, and I too am a traveler." While expressing the sentiment of parting, the poet places greater emphasis on a profound contemplation of life, human existence, and the human condition. By comparing nature with life, he reveals the transience and unpredictability of life, as well as an understanding and acceptance of parting. This contemplation imbues the poetry with a higher philosophical level, elevating it beyond ordinary verses of farewell into a richly meaningful and philosophically profound literary masterpiece. Through this poem, the poet not only expresses the sorrow of parting but also reflects his deep insight into life and the world, endowing the work with broader significance and value. In "Yu Meiren," the lines "The evening's clear skies enhance the pavilion's charm, already tipsy before the flowers. As the night deepens in quietude, the moon encroaches on the corridor, I walk alone, pondering deeply" exhibit a rich sentiment of cherishing spring. The contrast between the vibrant scenery of spring in nature and the dim aspects of human life profoundly reflects the impermanence and changes in life, creating a stark emotional contrast. In "Spring Night," the poet writes: "A moment of spring night is worth a thousand gold, flowers emit a faint fragrance, and the moon casts shadows. The faint sound of songs and pipes from towers and pavilions, the swing in the courtyard sinks into the deep night." This poem more explicitly displays the poet's inner thoughts, merging the beauty of nature with the fleeting moments of human life, eliciting a profound emotional resonance in the reader. Thus, while the emotional expression and intensity vary in these works, they all reflect the poet's profound contemplation on life and existence. Only those who can deeply experience and transcend the realities of life can truly understand the essence of existence, and approach life with a profound understanding and composure. We see in Su Shi's works that the moon often becomes a symbol filled with real-life emotions, especially in his collection of poems, such as in "Butterfly Loves Flowers," where his late-night works express a deep perception of real life. The value of Su Shi lies in his ability to experience the hardships and efforts of life between reality and transcendence. In "Yong Yue Le · The Moon Shines Like Frost," Su Shi mentioned in his preface: "Spending the night in the Swallow Tower, I dreamt of Panpan, thus inspiring this poem." Panpan is a loyal courtesan depicted in Bai Juyi's "Preface to the Poem of Swallow Tower." In his dream, Su Shi found himself in the Swallow Tower as recorded by Bai Juyi. This naturally evoked his nostalgia for ancient times. He is able to transcend the confines of reality to examine life and yet projects his emotions into real life, embodying his philosophy of "integrating emotions with objects, not being confined by them."

4.3 Comparative Aesthetic Characteristics of Moon Imagery in Li Bai and Su Shi's Writings

Through the imagery of the moon, they achieved a transcendence and sublimation of life, elevating their emotions and thoughts to a nobler level. This understanding and expression of the moon not only enriched their literary works but also enlightens people on how to integrate with nature, forget oneself, and achieve inner sublimation and transcendence in the pursuit of ideals. However, these two poets have different emphases in the aesthetic characteristics of their moon imagery. Li Bai's moon imagery emphasizes emotional immersion and transcending reality, while Su Shi's work focuses more on contemplation and returning to reality. Li Bai's works excel in emotion, while Su Shi's excel in thought.

5. CONCLUSION

Li Bai and Su Shi are famous poets in the history of Chinese literature, and their poetry has had a profound impact on later generations. The moon portrayed by Li Bai is a way of releasing emotions, unrestrained, and filled with a boisterous atmosphere. On the other hand, Su Shi's moon reveals a deep introspection, a calm and steady inner world, appearing serene and serious. The imagery of the "moon" in the poetry of Li Bai and Su Shi carries rich cultural connotations. Through studying their poetry, we can gain a deeper understanding of the essence of traditional Chinese culture and integrate it into contemporary aesthetic practices, providing new ideas and methods for contemporary cultural and artistic creation. In the context of globalization, cultural diversity is increasingly attracting attention. Studying the imagery of the "moon" in the poetry of Li Bai and Su Shi also helps to enhance our cultural confidence and promote the inheritance and development of outstanding traditional Chinese culture.

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