

# Poetic Exploration Under the Changes of the Times: Taking Li Bai and Li He as Examples

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## Abstract:

In the nearly 300 years of the Tang Dynasty, it is evident that while the poetry from different periods embodies a rich poetic culture, each era possesses unique expressions and artistic styles. Prominent among these are the distinctive styles of Li Bai, a poet from the Tang Dynasty, and Li He, a poet from the Middle Tang Dynasty. This article will compare and analyze the imagery, artistic conception, and writing techniques of two poems by these poets, aiming to explore their divergent artistic styles and uncover the emotional expressions and philosophical thoughts they convey. It will then delve into how these poets reflect the characteristics of their times in their works and how they respond to the changes of their eras through their own creations. Additionally, the article will focus on analyzing the historical contexts of the two poets and discuss how these contexts influenced their creative ideas and modes of expression. By discussing these differences, the article reveals the diversity inherent in the development of Tang Dynasty poetry, as well as the interplay between the shifts of the times and the creative output of poets.

**Keywords:** Li Bai; Li He; Tang Dynasty Poetry; Changes of the Times.

## 1. Introduction

In the extensive history of ancient Chinese poetry, the poetry of the Tang Dynasty, akin to a luminous pearl, holds an irreplaceable position within the annals of literature, garnering extensive attention and research within the academic sphere. Li Bai and Li He are highly representative poets of the Tang Dynasty. Li Bai is renowned for his unbridled and imaginative poetic style; Li He, for his delicate, sensitive, and in-

novative imagery.

There are over a hundred relevant articles on the study of these two poets, whether focusing on a single poet or comparing the two, encompassing all aspects from the form of poetry to the interpretation of content. However, despite the substantial volume of research, most studies concentrate on individual artistic achievements and influences, with relatively few examining the interaction between Li Bai and Li He's poetry and the backdrop of their times. Notably,

existing research inadequately explores how the poetic expressions of these poets reflect and are influenced by the era's transformations. Thus, the research value of this article lies in bridging this academic gap. Through meticulous textual analysis, it reveals how the two poets mirror the characteristics of their times in their works and investigates how the era's changes have, in turn, influenced their creative style and thematic choices.

In light of this, the article will take the representative poems of Li Bai and Li He as the subject of study, employing the method of textual analysis and historical comparison to focus on analyzing the poetic elements within the poetry and their connection to the context of the times. It will discuss how these factors impact the creative motivation and expression of Li Bai and Li He from multiple perspectives, including the poets' personal experiences, socio-cultural climate, and shifts in the political landscape. Through this research, the article aims to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the historical trajectory of Tang Dynasty poetry from its heyday to its transformation, thereby further enriching the research perspectives on Tang Dynasty literature.

## 2. Li Bai's Poetic Style and Artistic Characteristics

The Tang Dynasty was one of the periods of cultural prosperity in Chinese history. Many outstanding poets emerged during this era, with Li Bai being one of the most accomplished. Li Bai (701-762), with the courtesy name Taibai and the literary nickname Qinglian Jushi, was born in the Western Regions' City of Broken Leaves (now in Kyrgyzstan) and grew up in Mianzhou, Sichuan (now Jiangyou, Sichuan) [1]. From childhood, he was known for his intelligence and diligence in studies. He immersed himself in poetry and literature. In his early years, he traveled extensively, gaining broad exposure to the lives of people from all strata of society. These experiences furnished a wealth of material for his future poetic creations.

### 2.1 Li Bai's Poetic Style and Formation

Li Bai's poems are renowned for their boldness and expansive artistic vision. They express personal ideal pursuits and ambitions while also reflecting the social realities of the time. The poetic style is distinctive and possesses clear artistic traits. The development of this style is intimately connected with personal experiences, the era's backdrop, and literary heritage [2].

Regarding social reality, „Ode to Drinking“ is among Li Bai's well-known works. This poem conveys the poet's stance on the brevity of life and the pursuit of immediate pleasure with vigorous momentum and unrestrained language. In verse such as „Can you not see the Yellow River

water coming from the sky, never to return after flowing to the sea?“ [3], Li Bai employs the Yellow River as a metaphor to depict the irreversibility of life and the relentless march of time. Although the specific social context is not explicitly delineated here, it mirrors the contemplation of life's meaning and reverence for natural laws during the Tang Dynasty's zenith. Concurrently, the audacious language in this poem also mirrors the optimistic and open-minded spirit prevailing in the social climate of that era.

„Farewell to Uncle Yun, the Imperial Librarian, at Xie Tiao's Pavilion in Xuanzhou“ reveals more of the poet's sentiments regarding personal destiny and historical changes. In this poem, Li Bai articulates profound feelings of camaraderie by depicting the scene of parting with friends. The poem not only extols the natural scenery but also extends wishes for enduring friendships. This poem also imparts a sense that the poet deeply comprehends the legacy and evolution of literary tradition. The „Xiao Xie“ mentioned in the poem refers to Xie Tiao, a renowned poet from the Qi and Liang Dynasties of the Southern Dynasties. Li Bai uses this reference to convey a spiritual connection with the literati of previous generations across time and space. Additionally, the transcendent aspiration of „I would climb up to seize the bright moon.“ also articulates the poet's quest for an ideal existence [3].

By examining Li Bai's literary experiences, one can deduce the process and rationale behind the formation of his poetic style. Li Bai was born on the western frontier. In his youth, he traveled extensively, amassing a broad spectrum of knowledge. Such travels not only expanded his horizons but also furnished a wealth of material for his poetic endeavors. Concurrently, he faced numerous professional setbacks throughout his life. These experiences enabled him to keenly perceive the tensions between ideals and reality, which he articulated in his poetry [4]. Li Bai lived during the Tang Dynasty, an era marked by robust national strength and cultural flourishing. The society of the Tang Dynasty was relatively open and inclusive, affording literati a comparatively relaxed creative milieu, which served as fertile ground for Li Bai's artistic innovation. Moreover, the political landscape of the Tang Dynasty also supplied abundant poetic material for his creative output. The literature from the Pre-Qin period and the Six Dynasties of Han and Wei exerted a significant influence on Li Bai, particularly in the realms of Chu Ci and Han Fu. However, he did not adhere strictly to convention but instead boldly innovated, fashioning a unique poetic style. By assimilating the essence of his predecessors and building upon it, he emerged as a preeminent figure of his age.

### 2.2 Artistic Characteristics in Li Bai's Poetry

Li Bai's poetry often brims with unrestrained temperament. He adeptly employs exaggerated techniques to

articulate his emotional world. For instance, in „Ode to Drinking,“ the lines „Can’t you see the Yellow River water running from the sky, Never to return after flowing to the sea?“ utilize an exaggerated concept of time to depict the water of the Yellow River falling from the sky and flowing into the sea without looking back, symbolizing the irreversible passage of time. This conveys a yearning for a free life and ambition [3].

Li Bai’s poems are imbued with romanticism. He favors fantasy and imagination, frequently employing dreamy artistic conception to express thoughts and feelings [5]. For example, “Shu Dao Nan” exaggerates the hardships of Shu Dao and also conveys the poet’s deep desire for adventure and exploration. The extraordinary imagination enables Li Bai to craft a breathtaking artistic image. Additionally, in „Wanglu Mountain Waterfall,“ the spectacular scene of Lushan Waterfall is depicted with exaggerated brushstrokes, comparing the waterfall to the Milky Way falling from the sky. This surreal description imparts a strong visual impact to the poetry and offers readers infinite space for reverie.

Natural scenery also holds a significant place in Li Bai’s poetry. He skillfully uses natural scenery to convey emotions or profound meanings [6]. For example, “Thoughts on a Tranquil Night” communicates the poet’s homesickness through a delicate depiction of moonlight. The poem ingeniously combines the two natural elements of the moon and frost, which are both tangible and poetic.

Li Bai’s poetry language is fresh and natural, characterized by a strong sense of rhythm and rich musicality. His poems are often concise and clear, easy to recite and remember [7]. For example, “Departure from White Emperor City in the Morning” depicts the morning departure scene in simple and clear language. The entire poem possesses a strong sense of rhythm and reads very smoothly, imparting a relaxed and pleasant feeling to readers.

The broad range of themes in poetry is also fully exploited by Li Bai. His poetry not only extols friendship and love but also delves into the philosophy of life [8]. For example, “Farewell at the Crossing of Jingmen” describes the feeling of parting, while „Autumn Stream Songs: The Fifteenth of Seventeen“ expresses the emotion of the passage of time and the years like a song, reflecting Li Bai’s deep contemplation on the philosophy of life.

In terms of poetic form, Li Bai does not adhere strictly to traditional rhythms. Besides the five-word and seven-word rhythmic poems, he also created a multitude of absolute sentences and other free-genre poems [9]. This diversity in form endows his works with greater variety and charm. Li Bai can select suitable poetic forms according to different themes, whether rhythmic poetry or absolute sentences, he can employ them with ease..

### 2.3 The Style of the Times in Li Bai’s Poem

The era in which Li Bai lived was during the heyday of the Tang Dynasty, a time when the economy flourished, culture thrived, and the populace enjoyed a prosperous life [10]. Many of his poems depict this golden age, such as the ambition expressed in „Ode to Drinking,“ which reflects the positive mental state of people during the dynasty’s zenith. Concurrently, the Tang Dynasty was an era of openness and inclusiveness, marked by frequent foreign exchanges and the blending of various cultures. Li Bai’s poetry mirrors this multicultural aspect. For instance, the fusion of „Hu people’s“ music with the living environment of the „Han people“ in „Watching the Barbarian Play the Flute“ creates a unique cultural landscape. „Chang’an Moon“ portrays the nocturnal scenery of Chang’an City, with the sound of the Hu people’s flute echoing through the air. This scene encapsulates the open and inclusive cultural atmosphere of the Tang Dynasty.

Although Li Bai was not particularly interested in the imperial examination, his poetry still reflects the literati’s attitude towards fame and fortune. For example, „Difficulties on the Way“ conveys the desire and confidence for future success and also reveals the mentality of literati striving to realize self-worth under the imperial examination system.

Despite the Tang Dynasty’s overall prosperity, it was not devoid of contradictions and problems. Some of Li Bai’s poems reflect the societal injustices and personal setbacks. For example, „Song of the Parting at Cháng’ān“ illustrates the hardships faced by ordinary people and expresses sympathy for the plight of those at the lower echelons of society.

Taoism was prevalent during the Tang Dynasty, and Li Bai was deeply influenced by Taoist philosophy. His poetry often praises nature and embodies Taoist philosophy. For example, the depiction of the natural landscape in „Watching the Lushan Waterfall“ and the longing for the reclusive life of Taoists in „Ode to Mount Lu“ both demonstrate the impact of Taoist culture on Li Bai’s creative works.

### 3. Li He’s Poetic Style and Artistic Characteristics

Unlike Li Bai’s opulence, Li He (790-816) holds a distinct position in Tang poetry with his gentle and delicate style. Li He, with the courtesy name Changji, was born in Changgu Township, Fuchang County, Henan Province (now Yiyang County, Henan Province). He was a poet of the mid-Tang Dynasty [11]. Despite his life being brief, his works have left a profound impact on subsequent generations. Li He’s poetry often carries a melancholic hue, which is related to his personal life experiences. Born into

an aristocratic family, he faced hardships from childhood due to his family's decline, experiences that were mirrored in his poetry..

### 3.1 Li He's Poetic Style and Formation

Li He excels at employing symbols and metaphors to convey complex emotions [12]. For instance, in „Prefect of Yanmen Pass,“ the depiction of „Black clouds press down on the city walls.“ not only paints the tense atmosphere on the battlefield but also suggests the author's apprehension regarding the turmoil of the times [13].

Furthermore, Li He's works also demonstrate a sharp sense of music and sound [14]. In „Li Píng Playing the Kōnghóu,“ the description of music reveals an artistic realm that transcends the confines of time and space, allowing readers to perceive the harmonious resonance between the notes.

Destiny is likewise a significant theme in Li He's poetry [15]. In „Autumn Song,“ although autumn is described, the focus is more on conveying personal sentiments through the autumnal landscape, rather than merely extolling the natural beauty. The poet articulates a preference for autumn by juxtaposing the distinct emotions evoked by autumn and spring.

By examining Li He's literary background, one can infer the process and rationale behind the development of his poetic style. Born into a family of officials and eunuchs, the decline of his family led to poverty and misfortune during his youth. A series of adversities, such as the early loss of his father and family upheavals, exposed Li He to the vicissitudes of life from a young age. This unique upbringing laid the groundwork for his subsequent creations and imbued his poetry with a sense of sorrow and melancholy [16].

During the mid-Tang Dynasty, a period marked by both prosperity and decline, society was in flux. Such historical circumstances provided Li He with ample creative inspiration, imbuing his poetry with critiques of the contemporary social order and concerns for the future. Moreover, while Li He was influenced by earlier writers like Du Fu and Han Yu, he did not simply emulate his predecessors but instead innovated boldly, building upon traditional foundations. He assimilated the finest achievements of those who came before and integrated his own distinctive traits to craft a singular artistic style.

### 3.2 Artistic Characteristics in Li He's Poetry

There are numerous sentences in Li He's poetry that directly convey personal emotions, and these poems often articulate the author's inner joys and sorrows. For instance, „Prefect of Yanmen Pass“ describes the golden stage of the king and the cooperation with the jade dragon to slay the king. This passage expresses the poet's re-

solve to endure hardships for the nation and also reveals a tragic mood. Li He adeptly maps the psychological states of characters with the aid of natural landscapes or other elements. By reflecting the changes in the characters' moods through descriptions of environmental shifts and expressing the complex emotional interplay between the performer and the audience through the fusion of music and natural scenes, the poetry captures a deeper emotional resonance [17].

When depicting the psychology of characters, Li He frequently employs metaphors and symbolic techniques, hinting at their inner feelings through the selection of specific images. Occasionally, Li He utilizes the method of inner monologue to directly present the characters' thoughts and emotions, allowing readers to more intuitively experience their complex feelings. In some works, Li He employs contrast techniques to accentuate the psychological transformations of the characters. For example, „Song of the Bronze Figure Leaving Han“ showcases the nostalgia for past glory and the lament for present decline through a comparison of the situation before and after.

Sadness and melancholy are pervasive in Li He's poetry, which is linked to his brief and tumultuous life experiences. „Prefect of Yanmen Pass“ conveys a sense of life's fragility and impermanence by depicting the brutal scenes of war. Due to the vicissitudes of personal experience and dissatisfaction with the social conditions of the time, Li He's poetry often exudes a melancholic and sorrowful tone. This sentiment is evident in his treatment of themes such as death and illness, leaving a lasting impression on readers.

Philosophical contemplation on life and death, the universe, and other existential issues is also prominently featured in Li He's poetry. „Heavenly Ode,“ for example, reflects the poet's quest to unravel the mysteries of the universe and his profound meditation on the significance of human existence. Additionally, Li He is fond of employing symbolic techniques to articulate complex thoughts and emotions. His poetry abounds with bizarre imagery. He often employs exaggerated and grotesque methods to construct a distinctive artistic vision. For instance, he frequently uses figures such as „ghosts“ and „foxes“ to symbolize various forms of injustice and sorrow in the world, thereby conveying profound social critique through these symbols [18].

The language in Li He's poetry is highly refined, with an emphasis on the harmony of sound and rhyme, as well as the neatness of sentences. He skillfully employs allusions and rhetorical devices, which imbue the poetry with a high degree of artistry and ornamentation. Li He's language is concise and melodic, marked by the use of cold vocabulary and obscure allusions, endowing the poetry with a strong character. Furthermore, he often employs onomatopoeia, reduplication, and other techniques to enhance the

rhythmic quality of the verse [19].

### 3.3 The Appearance of the Times in Li He's Poetry

Li He lived during the period of prosperity and decline of the Tang Dynasty, when issues such as political corruption and the separation of clans and towns became increasingly severe. Although his poetry seldom directly engages with politics, one can sense the turmoil of that era through indirect descriptions of war and the people's lack of life.

As the social environment changed, so did the mentality of scholars. In Li He's works, there are frequent laments about personal fate and sorrow over the inability to realize ideals, which mirror the helplessness and confusion of scholars in the face of social change.

Li He's poetry is imbued with a unique sense of nature. Whether it be the changes in mountains, rivers, plants, and clouds, he bestows upon them deep emotion and symbolic meaning. This not only reflects the close relationship between the Tang Dynasty and nature but also the efforts of scholars in seeking spiritual solace. Artistically, Li He does not adhere strictly to traditional forms; instead, he has the courage to explore and innovate. His poetry has achieved breakthroughs in language and imagery. This spirit of pursuing novelty and difference also mirrors the mentality of seeking innovation and change in the cultural and artistic fields of that time.

## 4. Historical Background and Poetic Shaping

Although Li Bai and Li He lived in the same dynasty, their poetic styles were influenced by different historical backgrounds and personal experiences. From the comparison, it is evident that Li Bai lived during the heyday of the Tang Dynasty's economy and culture, and the poems he created were magnificent and full of ambition. In contrast, Li He lived in the middle and late Tang Dynasty, which was gradually declining, and the poems he created had strong elements of sadness, pain, confusion, and worry. It is clear that they both lived in the Tang Dynasty and contributed two brilliant chapters to the history of Tang Dynasty poetry, yet there are still obvious differences in emotional expression and poetic shaping.

Li Bai lived in the early Tang Dynasty, when the country was prosperous, which laid the foundation for his extravagant personality and positive demeanor. He was born into a family with a strong cultural atmosphere and received a good education from an early age. He traveled extensively and had extensive contact with people from all walks of life. These experiences provided rich material for his poetry. Li Bai's poetry is full of love for natural beauty and the pursuit of personal ideals, aligning with the cultural

atmosphere of the Tang Dynasty. In contrast, Li He lived in the middle and late Tang Dynasty. Although this period was still one of cultural prosperity, signs of social turmoil had begun to emerge. Li He's family background and personal experiences made his poetic style more restrained and profound. He paid more attention to the changes in his personal inner world and his reflection on reality. Therefore, Li He's poems are full of discussions on life and death, loneliness, and fate, reflecting his helplessness and sadness about his personal destiny.

Additionally, the political environment of the Tang Dynasty also impacted Li Bai. Although Li Bai never held an important official position in his life, his enthusiasm for politics never waned. Li Bai expressed his desire for a career in poetry, reflecting his confidence and determination to realize his personal ideals. Li He's father was involved in political events, which directly affected Li He's upbringing. Against this backdrop, Li He's poetry is full of helplessness and sadness about his personal destiny. By describing the tense atmosphere of war, his poems express Li He's concern about the turbulence of the times.

Through the study of the poetic styles of Li Bai and Li He, it is found that although both were in the glorious period of the Tang Dynasty, their respective artistic characteristics were markedly different. Li Bai is renowned for his grandeur and majesty; while Li He has become a marvel in the history of Chinese literature with his euphemistic, delicate, and emotional poems. Both have profoundly influenced the literary creation of later generations and provided readers with a variety of spiritual nourishment.

## 5. Conclusion

By comparing Li Bai and Li He, two prominent poets of the Tang Dynasty, it becomes evident that poetry serves not only as an expression of language and art but also as a medium for emotional exchange and ideological collision with future generations across time and space.

Research indicates that Li Bai's romantic writing technique unfolds a picture of the Tang Dynasty in its economic and cultural zenith. His poems are replete with praise for the beauty of nature and the pursuit of life's ideals, which not only display the magnificent landscape of nature but also convey the poet's heroic and unrestrained character and the spirit of pursuing freedom. In contrast, Li He's poems are imbued with a deep understanding of life's fragility and a critique of social reality. His poems vividly depict the cruel scenes of war and implicitly express the author's worry and helplessness regarding the current situation. They reproduce a period of political decay and economic decline in the late Tang Dynasty, reflecting the real situation of social turmoil and people's suffering at that time.

By comparing the prosperity in Li Bai's poetry with the

painful philosophy in Li He's poetry, the significant impact of the times' changes on poetic meaning becomes apparent. Li Bai's poetry is imbued with a positive and optimistic spirit, while Li He's works reflect more personal struggle and introspection in the face of difficulties. The works of these two poets are not only a catharsis and transmission of their personal emotions but also a mirror of the spirit of the times, reflecting the far-reaching impact of the torrent of the times on the evolution of poetry.

Through the study of Li Bai and Li He's poetry, this article reveals a microcosm of social changes in the Tang Dynasty. This comparative analysis offers a pathway to better understand the inner worlds of these two great poets and constructs a unique perspective to examine the history and recognize the important role of literary works in reflecting social reality and human emotions. However, there are certain limitations to this study. For instance, the time frame of this research project is relatively short, making it impossible to consult a broader range of materials and historical facts within six weeks for more in-depth research. Looking to the future, it is hoped that the academic community can closely study the comparative analysis of Li Bai and Li He's works. By analyzing the similarities and differences in their poems, a clearer understanding of the changes of the times and their impact on people at that time can be achieved. Considering the impact of the times' changes on poetry creation, future research can focus more on the continuity and variability in the development of poetry, thereby better understanding the historical process of ancient literature.

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