

Refuting the Misconception: Li Bai as an Impolite Person*

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This essay endeavors to dispel the lingering misconception that Li Bai, the celebrated Tang Dynasty poet, was a man devoid of propriety. Through a meticulous examination of historical records, literary works, and contemporary interpretations, this study presents a nuanced portrait of Li Bai as a poet who, despite his eccentricities and wanderlust, possessed a profound sense of etiquette and respect for societal norms. This essay argues that his unique personality in life and free expression in poetry are all driven by the need for artistic creation, rather than challenging for ancient propriety.

Keywords: Li Bai, propriety culture, rituals, *Great Preface*, poetry expresses aspirations

Introduction

Li Bai, commonly known as “the Immortal Poet”, holds a pivotal position in the annals of Chinese literature. His verses, filled with romanticism, imagination, and a profound understanding of nature and humanity, have captivated readers for centuries. However, alongside his towering literary achievements, there exists a misconception that Li Bai was a man of little or no manners. The documents such as *The New Book of Tang* and *Biography of Tang Talented Scholars* record some interesting stories about Li Bai, such as the Emperor cooking congee for him (赐食调羹) and Gao Lishi taking off the boots for him (力士脱靴), which further reinforces people’s understanding of Li Bai’s rudeness. This stereotype is often driven by his unconventional lifestyle, masking the deep layers of his personality. Therefore, it is hard to see the deep interaction between his behavioral motivations and artistic innovation.

The Essence of Propriety in Ancient China

To understand Li Bai’s behavior within the context of his time, it is imperative to delve into the culture of propriety as practiced in ancient China. Propriety, or “Li” originated in primitive society and underwent a long process of evolution. The formation of Li occurred during the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou Dynasties. In order

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to consolidate the ruling position, the ruling class developed primitive religious etiquette into a ritual system that met the political needs of the society. In ancient China, the etiquette and rituals were generally promoted through the Zhou Li which was inherited by Confucianism. In Confucian philosophy, Li encompasses a complex system of social norms, rituals, and behaviors designed to maintain harmony and order within society.

In Confucianism, propriety is the basic social norm for interpersonal communication, emphasizing respect, harmony, and order. It stipulates the behavioral norms between different social roles, such as the etiquette of relationships between monarchs and ministers, fathers and sons, spouses, friends, etc.

The Book of Rites: “It is not absolutely feasible without propriety between emperors and subjects, fathers and sons, the elder and the younger brothers.” (《礼记·曲礼》：“君臣、上下、父子、兄弟，非礼不定。”)

It emphasized respect for authority, elders, and family members, as well as a keen awareness of one’s place within the social hierarchy.

There were many rituals in ancient China. People in the era emphasis on etiquette which includes various rituals such as sacrificial ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and festivals. Take Qingming Festival for example. There are sacrificial rituals like offering food, burning incense, and burning paper money to express gratitude to ancestors and pray for their protection. The Spring Festival is one of the most important traditional festivals in China. During the Spring Festival, ancient Chinese rituals such as sweeping, offering sacrifices, and paying New Year’s greetings reflect respect and blessing for their families, ancestors, relatives, and friends.

The practice of etiquette involves personal behavior and requires people to follow certain etiquette and moral standards in their daily lives. Without paying attention to etiquette, one can hardly establish oneself in society.

The Analects of Confucius: “Without learning etiquette, one cannot establish oneself.” (《论语》：“不学礼，无以立。”)

This behavioral system aims to cultivate individuals’ moral cultivation and sense of social responsibility. When meeting elders or strangers in certain situations, polite greetings such as “Hello” are usually used. During meals, people follow table etiquette, such as waiting for everyone to be seated before starting to eat, being careful not to make any noise when using utensils, and putting utensils back in their original positions after finishing the meals. When making mistakes, people tend to apologize to others in a timely manner. People often express gratitude after receiving help from others.

The ritual system of the Tang Dynasty, where Li Bai lived, was an important component of ancient Chinese ritual system, covering five categories: Ji Ritual for sacrificial ceremonies, Inauspicious Ritual for funerals, Military Ritual for military affairs, Guest Ritual for reception of guests, Auspicious Ritual for wedding ceremonies.

The emphasis on ritual system in the Tang Dynasty was reflected in various aspects, such as after Emperor Taizong ascended the throne, he ordered the Imperial Secretariat to revise the old rituals, and ultimately formulated the “Zhenguan Rites”, laying the foundation for the compilation of ritual codes in later generations. The Tang Dynasty also formulated detailed etiquette norms, such as the “Great Tang Kaiyuan Rites”, which became a model for the compilation of ritual codes in later dynasties.

The Tang Dynasty had an open atmosphere, but it placed great emphasis on etiquette. The society followed the teachings of *The Book of Rites* on “reciprocity” and emphasized that etiquette between people was a basic social norm.

This shows that in ancient China, people's words and behaviors were subject to etiquette and legal constraints. Anyone who wanted to break the rules was difficult to gain a foothold in society.

The Paradox of Li Bai's Eccentricity

The perception of Li Bai as a man without manners often stems from his eccentricities and unconventional lifestyle. His love for travel, alcohol, and the freedom to express his thoughts without restraint has led many people to portray him as a rebel without a cause.

Li Bai enjoys travelling. He spent almost half of his life traveling. At the age of 25, he left his hometown and travelled far away. He departed from Shu to Chu and settled there in Anlu, where he lived for 10 years. Later, he moved to Shandong and lived there for nearly 20 years. During this period, although he had family members where he should accompany them, he constantly traveled. Li Bai once said,

Li Bai's poem "Send This Lushan Ballad to Lu Xuzhou": "The search for immortals on the Five Sacred Mountains never stops, and my hobby is to visit famous mountains throughout my life." ("五岳寻仙不辞远，一生好入名山游。" 《庐山谣寄卢侍御虚舟》)

His whereabouts have spread throughout a vast area of China. He had traveled back and forth between Jinling and Yangzhou multiple times. In order to achieve his goals, he went to Chang'an three times. After leaving Chang'an, he visited Liangyuan with Du Fu, Gao Shi. He went to Xuancheng twice, Shanzhong three times, and even as far as Tiantai and Siming, and finally died as a guest in Dangtu.

Li Bai is addicted to alcohol. He was so fond of alcohol that he was no exception in the highly ceremonial palace.

The Old Book of Tang: "In 742, Li Bai arrived in Kuaiji and lived in seclusion to Shanzhong with Taoist Wu Yun. Later, Wu Yun was summoned to the imperial palace and recommended Li Bai to the palace. Li Bai had a great love for drinking and drank heavily with alcoholics every day. One day, Emperor Xuanzong composed a piece of music and wanted to create new lyrics for the song. He urgently summoned Li Bai, only to find Li Bai was already drunk." (《旧唐书》)

Also, from *The Old Book of Tang*, it is recorded that Li Bai was forced to leave the capital due to his excessive drinking and violation of etiquette.

The Old Book of Tang: "Li Bai once got drunk in the palace and reached out his feet to order Gao Lishi who is a person of high position and power to take off his boots. For this reason, he was scolded and left Chang'an." (《旧唐书》)

Li Bai loves expressing freely his thoughts. He did not pursue fame and fortune as his life goal. Therefore, he often looked down upon the wealthy and powerful, and ridiculed the political hierarchical order. In the early days, Li Bai spoke with a free voice of "not yielding to oneself or others (不屈己，不干人)" and "engaging in equal relations with emperor and nobles (平交王侯)". This spirit of freedom is also reflected in his poetry.

Li Bai's poem "Knight-Errant Ballad": "Even if you die, you will not be ashamed of the knight-errant in the world." ("纵死侠骨香，不惭世上英。" 《侠客行》)

This is a manifestation of Li Bai's spirit of rebellion against tradition and breaking free from the shackles of feudal rituals and laws (Kang, 1998, p. 122).

The various behaviors of Li Bai mentioned above, in the eyes of some later generations, violated moral constraints and lacked etiquette. The behaviors were eccentric. They portrayed such behaviors as "dissolute (放荡)" (Luo, 2012, p. 100; Wang & Tang, 2010, p. 155).

However, this portrayal overlooks the fact that Li Bai's eccentricities were, in many ways, a reflection of his artistic genius and his rejection of societal norms that hindered creativity and individuality.

His refusal to conform to traditional expectations did not necessarily equate to a lack of courtesy. Rather, it was a conscious choice to prioritize his artistic pursuits and personal freedoms over the constraints of societal conventions. In doing so, he created a unique artistic space for himself within the traditional society.

In other words, societal conventions were indeed a hindrance for Li Bai. The reason why Li Bai is not bound by secular norms and traditional constraints is an inevitable requirement for artistic innovation.

Poetry expresses aspirations (诗言志), which is the understanding of the essential characteristics of poetry by ancient Chinese literary theorists. What is aspiration? Xu Shen's *Shuowen Jiezi* states "The will". Therefore, the will contains intentions, thoughts, and other meanings. In short, it belongs to the realm of spirituality.

Poetry originates from emotions, but it should transcend general emotions. As poetry is a high-level form of writing, it cannot be equated with general emotional expression and release. Poetry should have a higher mission: to express one's aspirations. The source of the spirit is emotions, but if emotions are not controlled, they will become instinctual desires. After being guided and elevated, Emotions may be transformed into reason, and may ultimately be transformed into aspirations.

Li Bai's poetry creation draws extensively on the spiritual strength of his predecessors, and along the main line of expressing his aspirations through poetry, his self-reliant, arrogant, and self-strengthening personality can be seen everywhere in his poetry:

Li Bai's poem "Invite to Wine": "I am born with talent and must be useful." ("天生我材必有用" 《将进酒》)

Li Bai's poem "Farewell to Children in Nanling Before Entering Chang'an": "When I laugh loudly and go out, I am not like the people of the Peng Hao tribe." ("仰天大笑出门去, 我辈岂是蓬蒿人。" 《南陵别儿童入京》)

Li Bai's poem "Farewell to the Lords of Donglu": "Being able to bow down and serve the powerful, makes me unhappy". ("安能摧眉折腰事权贵, 使我不得开心颜。" 《梦游天姥吟留别/别东鲁诸公》)

These poems not only show a profound artistic conception, but also contain a unique spirit of transcending the secular world and pursuing freedom for art.

Some people cannot see the author's free spirit in pursuing art. They simply equate Li Bai's unconventional lifestyle with eccentricities, and equate free artistic expression with the moral deficiency. Why are they doing so? The main reason is likely that they forgot the reminder "poetry expresses aspirations" in the *Great Preface* (《毛诗序》).

Li Bai's Life and Works: A Reflection of Propriety

Contrary to popular belief, Li Bai's life and works reveal a man who was deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of his time. His poems, though often marked by a sense of rebellion against societal constraints, also contain numerous examples of his adherence to the principles of propriety.

Firstly, Li Bai's interactions with his friends, as recorded in historical documents, suggest a man who has been displaying courtesy and politeness.

Li Bai's poem "Farewell to Meng Haoran to Guangling": "The lone sail casts a distant shadow on the blue sky, only seeing the flowing Yangtze River to faraway." ("孤帆远影碧空尽, 唯见长江天际流。" 《送孟浩然之广陵》)

The lines of the poem may seem like a depiction of scenery, but there is a ritual detail contained in the depiction of scenery. Li Bai has been on board. Though the ship has already set sail, he is still watching the distant

sail. His gaze is fixed on the sail shadow, and he sees it gradually blur and disappear at the end of the blue sky, which indicates the long time he has been watching. This is not just a picture. It is Li Bai's deep affection and longing for his friends that are reflected in this courteous and prolonged gaze.

In the process of interacting with friends through the principle of reciprocity, Li Bai's etiquette is expressed through his longing for his friends in poetry.

Li Bai's poem "Sending the Poem From Shaqiu to Du Fu": "My longing for you is like the Wen River, flowing southward and never stopping." ("思君若汶水，浩荡寄南征。"《沙丘城下寄杜甫》)

Li Bai used the metaphor of a flowing river to express his longing for Du Fu.

Li Bai's poem "To Wang Changling to Long Biao": "I entrust my sorrowful longing to the bright moon, hoping to accompany you all the way to the west of Yelang." ("我寄愁心与明月，随君直到夜郎西。"《闻王昌龄左迁龙标遥有此寄》)

Li Bai and his friend Wang Changling are separated by two places, making it difficult to meet. Li Bai used his imagination to transform the silent moon into a person who can understand and convey his thoughts to his friends in the distance.

Furthermore, Li Bai's poetry frequently pays homage to influential figures of his era, demonstrating his respect for those who have earned their place in society.

Li Bai's poem "Letter to Han Jingzhou": "I don't need to be enfeoffed, and only hope to meet Han Jingzhou." ("生不用封万户侯，但愿一识韩荆州。"《与韩荆州书》)

Han Chaozong, served as the governor of Jingzhou, was called Han Jingzhou. In Li Bai's letter to Han Jingzhou, he borrowed people's praise for Han Jingzhou to express his admiration for him.

Li Bai often uses elaborate language to express his respect for officials.

Li Bai's poem "Letter to Pei Zhangshi of Anzhou": "My lord, you are noble and virtuous. Your appearance is outstanding. Your teeth are arranged neatly like shells. Your skin is white and beautiful like solidified grease." ("伏惟君侯，贵而且贤，鹰扬虎视，齿若编贝，肤如凝脂。"《上安州裴长史书》)

The description of Pei Zhangshi's appearance in the letter is purely a deliberate expression of Li Bai's reverence for power and position. His attitude towards big figures is an evidence that Li Bai follows the social order.

Li Bai's poem "The Poem to Xu Anyi": "The upright Xu County Magistrate has gained fame far and wide. He has remarkable political and educational achievements, which makes his name spreading to the capital. The wandering people outside come back like clouds gathering together. The barren areas were cultivated everywhere." ("清风动百里，惠化闻京师。浮人若云归，耕种满郊岐。"《赠徐安宜》)

In this poem to Xu Anyi, a county magistrate, he uses deferential tones to acknowledge Xu Anyi's accomplishments and contributions. "The wandering people outside come back like clouds gathering together" uses metaphorical techniques to illustrate people's recognition of the performance of the county magistrate.

Confucianism advocates for the widespread love of all people, which is a manifestation of benevolence. In *The Analects*, benevolence and propriety are not isolated concepts, but are integrated and mutually reinforcing.

On the one hand, benevolence provides intrinsic motivation and support for propriety. On the other hand, propriety makes benevolence concrete and practical.

The Analects of Confucius: “Highly affectionate to all, and intimate with the good.” (“泛爱众，而亲仁。” 《论语》)

Li Bai helped others, especially for those who were politically frustrated. It can better reflect his benevolence.

The New Book of Tang: “When Li Bai visited Bingzhou, he met Guo Ziyi. Li Bai saw Guo Ziyi as a unique person. At that time, Guo Ziyi broke the law. Li Bai managed to save him from punishment.” (“初，白游并州，见郭子仪，奇之。子仪尝犯法，白为救免。” 《新唐书·文苑传》)

According to another record, it is true that Li Bai saved the famous general, which was indirectly extending the dynasty's reign.

《翰林学士李公墓碑》 (Li Bai's tombstone) : “When Li Bai travelled in Bingzhou, he met Guo Fenyang in the army. Li Bai did his utmost to help Guo Ziyi avoid his criminal liability”. (“客并州，识郭汾阳于行伍间，为免脱其刑责而奖重之。” 《翰林学士李公墓碑》)

Guo Ziyi violated the criminal law and was at risk of losing his life. At the critical moment, Li Bai spared no expense to plead for mercy for Guo Ziyi. Providing all kinds of help to strangers is indeed a kind of benevolence.

Conclusion

In feudal society, one's words and actions were largely constrained by etiquette and laws. Li Bai is no exception that he cannot be independent from this circle. His unique personality in life and free expression in poetry are all driven by the need for artistic creation, rather than challenging for ancient propriety for which he neither has the impulse nor the ability. Therefore, we cannot say that Li Bai is an impolite person.

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