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On the Sublime Beauty in Li He's Poetry

Shuyan Huang

College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Huazhong Agricultural University, Wuhan, China
2073130744@qq.com

Abstract. Li He, known as the "Poetic Ghost," possesses a highly distinctive personality, and his poetry is renowned for its peculiar, grotesque, and fantastical style. This paper frames the discussion of Li He's unique sublime beauty within Western theories of the sublime, drawing on the aesthetics of Longinus, Edmund Burke, and Immanuel Kant. Specifically, Longinus's theory of rhetorical transcendence highlights the grandeur of language and imagery in Li He's poetry; Burke's concept of the sublime rooted in terror elucidates the aesthetic experience derived from death imagery and the transformation of pain; Kant's idea of rational transcendence reveals Li He's spiritual resistance under the oppression of fate. Li He's poetry not only portrays the individual's insignificance and powerlessness before history and time but also achieves a poetic transcendence of harsh realities through artistic expression. This form of sublime beauty establishes a cross-temporal dialogue with Western theories while retaining the Chinese poetic characteristic of being "mysterious yet grounded in the human world," thereby offering new aesthetic perspectives for the study of classical poetry.

Keywords: Li He, Poetry, Theories of the Sublime, Aesthetic Categories

1. Introduction

Li He, courtesy name Changji, was a renowned poet of the mid-Tang period. His works are marked by rich imagination, and his poetic style is distinguished by its poignant beauty and eerie strangeness. He frequently employed mythological allusions to project the ancient onto the present, earning his poetry the epithet "utterance of a ghostly immortal." For this reason, later generations came to refer to him as the "Poetic Ghost."

A key reason why Li He's poetry exudes a ghostly aura lies in its embodiment of sublime beauty, a quality exceedingly rare in contemporary Chinese literature of his time. The aesthetic theory of the sublime was successively interpreted, revised, and refined by Longinus, Edmund Burke, and Immanuel Kant, thereby enriching the aesthetic categories of Western thought. This paper begins with Longinus's definition of the sublime and examines how Li He's use of surreal imagery and poetic language generates both ghostliness and a sense of the sublime. It further draws on the theories of the sublime and the beautiful articulated by Burke and Kant to analyze the spiritual and intellectual dimension of sublimity in Li He's poetry—exploring how, even a millennium later, his work resonates with Western philosophical thought.

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2. Research background

2.1. The poet Li He

Contemporary research on Li He's poetry is extensive and can be broadly categorized into three main approaches:

The first category focuses on stylistic analysis. Li He's poetic style is characterized by defamiliarized use of color, imagery, and rhetorical techniques. Through these elements, his poetry breaks away from conventional modes of composition, offering readers a fresh and novel aesthetic experience [1]. Scholars such as Cai Feng, Zhong Tingting, and Jiang Xiaofan support this perspective [2]. The second category centers on the analysis of the emotional and ideological dimensions of his poetry, such as its realist elements, self-representation, and tendencies toward formalized expression [3]. Song Yifan, for instance, argues that Li He's poetry exhibits an emotional structure of "detached tenderness," wherein the poet's compassionate concern for humanity emerges through a tone of cold-eyed observation [4]. The third category comprises comparative studies between Li He's works and those of other literary figures. Examples include comparisons between Li He and Baudelaire in terms of symbolic expression, between Li He and the French poet Rimbaud, and studies on the shared death-related themes in the poetry of Li He and Edgar Allan Poe.

It is worth noting that Li He's poetry often expresses the insignificance and powerlessness of the individual in the face of history. For instance, in *Jin Tong Xianren Ci Han Ge* the tears of the bronze immortal figure are in fact a poetic embodiment of collective sorrow for history. The poet's perception and understanding of time—an intangible force—are remarkably unique. Deeply aware of life's brevity, Li He aspired to endow finite existence with infinite meaning. Embedded within this sensibility is a distinctive form of sublime beauty.

2.2. Western theories of the sublime

This study primarily focuses on the theories of the sublime proposed by Longinus, Edmund Burke, and Immanuel Kant.

Longinus defined the sublime as noble, transcendent, and emotionally stirring—an elevated mode of expression capable of uplifting the soul. For Longinus, the most crucial criterion for the sublime is its capacity to withstand the test of time, to remain deeply embedded in the hearts of readers, and to evoke a profound sense of meaning.

Edmund Burke, on the other hand, located the source of the sublime in fearsome phenomena found in nature and identified it as the most intense emotion the human mind can experience. Burke's notion of the sublime is grounded in the idea of liminal experience—the perception of life-threatening danger and proximity to existential limits, while remaining within the bounds of safety, thus allowing for aesthetic contemplation. He revised Longinus's dual-cause theory of "thought and emotion" into a single-cause theory centered on emotion alone. This conceptual shift expanded the scope of the sublime in a liberating way: greatness, nobility, and glory were no longer prerequisites. Instead, terror and awe were granted legitimate aesthetic value. Burke thus provided a philosophical foundation for negative emotions and the complex aesthetic experience of pain interwoven with pleasure.

Immanuel Kant viewed the sublime as fundamentally characterized by absolute magnitude and infinity. In his theory of the dynamically sublime, two conditions must be met: a display of overwhelming power, but without any coercive force. Only when one is free from actual fear and can contemplate such power with inner composure does the feeling of the sublime arise.

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3. The sublime beauty in Li He's poetry

By drawing on the three key stages in the development of the theory of the sublime, one can analyze the sublime beauty embedded in Li He's poetic works.

3.1. The Longinian mode: rhetorical transcendence and sublime beauty

Longinus emphasized that the sublime originates from the greatness of thought and the magnificence of rhetoric. In *Li Ping Konghou Yin*, Li He constructs a cluster of surreal images —"Kunshan yu sui fenghuang jiao, furong qi lu xiang lan xiao"—employing hyperbole, metaphor, and synesthesia to transcend conventional language. In *Tianshang Yao*, he creates an otherworldly space with lines such as "Tianhe ye zhuan piao hui xing, yin pu liu yun xue shui sheng," thereby subverting the boundaries of ordinary poetic expression. In *Meng Tian*, the line "Yao wang Qizhou jiu dian yan, yi hong hai shui bei zhong xie" produces a uniquely overwhelming experience—perhaps the first instance in classical Chinese poetry where a poet adopts a cosmic perspective to look down upon the human world, suddenly realizing that ancient China, in the vastness of the universe, is but a mere speck.

Li Ping Konghou Yin best exemplifies Li He's passion for breaking harmony. The poem transforms music into a surreal synesthetic feast through the layering of mythological imagery and rhetorical twists. With the talent of the "Poetic Ghost," Changji elevates the sound of the konghou beyond artistic boundaries, turning it into a natural, mighty force that connects humans and gods and reverberates through heaven and earth. This extreme portrayal of the "ineffable beauty" and the relentless rhetorical pursuit of "startling the audience or ceasing to write" perfectly align with Longinus's assertion that "the sublime is the echo of a great soul."

Longinus points out in *On the Sublime* that "the majesty, grandeur, and power of persuasion partly arise from imagery, for some say that imagery is the expression of mental vision." Within his framework of the sublime, the conflict and opposition between spirit and body, reason and emotion, justice and evil give rise to a sublime beauty that surges with the individual's questioning of life's meaning and value [5][6]. Li He's poetry embodies this elevated sense of individual consciousness and the value of subjective life. He not only depicts the external world but also deeply examines and struggles with his own existence, resonating closely with Longinus's pursuit of the heights of the human spirit.

3.2. The Burkean mode: the terror sublime through the transformation of pain

Burke believed that the sublime arises from the perception of danger that remains within the bounds of control, thus allowing for a composed aesthetic experience. Li He's poetry frequently features death imagery (in *Qiulai*, "Qiu fen gui chang Bao jia shi"), blood-red landscapes (in *Yanmen Taishou Xing*, "Sai shang yan zhi ning ye zi"), and alienated life forms (in *Jin Tong Xianren Ci Han Ge*, "Yi jun qing lei ru qian shui")—all constituting a symbolic system of life-threatening signs [7]. In *Gong Wu Chu Men*, the terrifying scene of "Du qiu xiang shi zhen jin huan" depicts society as a beast's den, where the powerful are venomous dragons wearing golden rings, and the common people are lambs awaiting slaughter—suffused with a strong sense of oppression. The social chaos of the mid-Tang period, marked by warlord separatism and eunuch dominance, is artistically distanced and controlled by the poet, transforming physical pain into aesthetic shock and thereby anticipating Burke's theory [8].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2025.HT25559

Under Li He's pen, youth does not fade away slowly; it collapses abruptly. In *Jiang Jin Jiu · Liuli Zhong*, he writes: "Kuang shi chunqing ri jiang mu." The phrase "kuang shi" is harsh and cold, adopting an almost inhuman perspective that looks down upon life rapidly decaying in the wasteland of time. There is no trace of pity—only a calm narration of fate's inevitability. Immediately following this is the line "Taohua luan luo ru hong yu," where falling peach blossoms, which often symbolize the poet's tenderness and pity, are depicted instead as chaotic, violent, and meaningless disintegration. The words "luan luo" and "hong yu" literally convey a dense, intermittent, and overwhelming rhythm; visually, this evokes a blood-red spread, swirling and chaotic, like a storm of bloody rain sweeping everything away. This rapid and fierce rhythm mirrors the unstoppable, irreversible passage of youth. The imagery is intense yet elusive, depicting youth being utterly destroyed in a grand, blood-stained tempest.

The spring days depicted by Li He are magnificent yet ruthless. They follow the scenes of "dongfang feng lai man yan chun" and "taohua luan luo ru hong yu" with swift withering and overwhelming melancholy—an untimely death after great beauty. In February, as grass grows and orioles fly to bid farewell to friends, the lines "er yue yin jiu cai sang jin, pu ru jiao jian feng ru xun" evoke a festive, fragrant scene; yet suddenly turn to "jiu ke bei han nan shan si," where a drinking guest dies cold on the southern mountain [9]. Everyone enjoys their own pleasures and meets their own death—amid the warm spring, there are also decaying bones. Readers follow Li He's godlike perspective to observe the human world.

Li He does not treat nature as a gentle companion, a source of comfort, or a symbol of life. The nature he depicts is neither reliable nor affectionate; it is meaningless, directionless, and devoid of goodwill—a cold, violent, and ruthless force of destruction. This, in turn, gives rise to another kind of sublime beauty: "The sublime may intimidate us, causing us to submit in fear, but it also secretly awakens our desires, leading us to obey willingly" [10].

3.3. The Kantian mode: the sublime beauty of rational infinity

Kant reveals the human spirit's transcendence inherent in the feeling of the sublime—through reason, humans overcome the limitations imposed by nature and affirm their own dignity. Although Li He's poetry does not engage in Kantian philosophical construction per se, the aesthetic realm he reaches through imagery and language resonates across time and space with Kant's theory of the sublime. Kant emphasizes that the sublime arises from reason's transcendence over sensibility's limitations. He posits that the sublime is the subject's courageous resistance to external forces and environments without fear, ultimately achieving victory, both spiritually and in momentum. When the power of the external object exceeds that of the subject, the subject must pay an extremely high price—even bloodshed and sacrifice—to overcome it; thus, the sublime contains tragic undertones [11].

3.3.1. The hypothesis of the true and false Dragon's cry

Jia Long Yin Ge features deliberately complex and obscure diction, with every word painstakingly refined to the extreme. The line "Lianhua qu guo yi qian nian, yu hou wen xing you dai tie" references the Lotus Dragon King—also known as the True Dragon. According to legend, the Dragon King here stirs up storms, and people cast "suppressing iron" into the water to quell its wrath. The world struggles to discern the true from the false, unaware that the real Dragon King has long since departed. Li He uses this allegory to represent himself—an untapped talent misunderstood and out of sync with his time.

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It is worth highlighting the character “wen” for its ingenious use, characteristic of Changji’s style. What is “wen” (perceived by smelling) here is the glorious feat of suppressing the Dragon King a thousand years ago—yet in a rainstorm a millennium later, it is the acrid scent of rust that is perceived. This act of “wen” constructs an intimate and dangerous sensory scene. Confucianism advocates “do not look at what is improper, do not listen to what is improper,” but it does not forbid “wen.” The subtlety of “wen” lies in its physiological nature: eyes can be closed, ears can be blocked, but breathing is an uncontrollable instinct. The acrid smell is not actively “sniffed” but rather “wen” — semi-passively and semi-voluntarily perceived, subtle yet irresistible.

When people passed down the tale of dragon cries here, they anxiously discussed how the violent suppression of the Dragon King was an event that happened a thousand years ago—long lost to the vicissitudes of time and beyond verification. Yet Li He coldly responds: “No, the rust or the dragon’s blood can be smelled with the next rain.” This is the work of the Poetic Ghost. Through a technique of blending reality and illusion, Li He subtly satirizes the “false dragons” in positions of power and the hypocrisy and injustice of society. At the emotional core of this lies a complex intertwining of pride, struggle, and disillusionment.

3.3.2. The resentment of ghosts singing together

Li He writes of ghosts: “Qiu fen gui chang Bao jia shi.” This means that on autumn nights at the graveyard, ghosts chant the poems of the Bao family. Normally, ghosts would be chaotic, disorderly, and restless—more likely to “cry,” “wail,” or “howl.” Yet here, the ghosts do not break into confusion; instead, they “sing” in an orderly and rhythmic manner. The act of “singing” conveys a sense of rhythm and order, even evoking associations with rites, ceremonies, and rituals. This “abnormality within order” is more terrifying than pure chaos, imparting a feeling that the world beyond death forms its own system, distinct and alienated from that of the living. There is also a strange elegance in the word “sing”—like spirits softly reciting, neither hurried nor slow, which deepens the eerie atmosphere and chills the spine.

The imagery of ghosts chanting signifies that Li He’s poetry transcends life and death, continuing to be recited even after death. At the same time, it serves as an ironic commentary on reality—unappreciated during his lifetime (“Shui kan qing jian yi bian shu”), only the ghosts become his true audience, highlighting the poet’s solitude and misunderstanding. Li He aestheticizes motifs of death, ghosts, and decay, forming his distinctive style of “poignant beauty and eerie splendor” (e.g., “gui deng ru qi”, “gui yu sa kong cao”). These are not symbols of horror, but spiritual carriers that exist in the liminal space between life and death. While Qu Yuan’s river suicide was a declaration of loyalty, and Li Bai’s “Da Peng fei xi zhen ba yi” pursued freedom and transcendence, Li He chooses to dance with ghosts—seeking poetic meaning in the netherworld. This reflects a uniquely introverted form of resistance characteristic of mid-Tang literati.

3.3.3. The cry at the feast of ultimate bliss

“Peng long pao feng yu zhi qi” — in *Jiang Jin Jiu: Liuli Zhong* (“Toast to the Feast · The Glazed Bell”), Li He depicts a wild fantasy of an ultimate feast. On the surface, “peng long pao feng” (“cooking dragon and roasting phoenix”) is a metaphorical description of rare delicacies, but its deeper meaning is not about satisfying appetite; rather, it symbolizes approaching and possessing the sacred and untouchable through the act of “eating.” The poet is not literally eating dragons and phoenixes, but “tasting the flavor of dragons and phoenixes,” a power desire disguised as a gustatory experience: the poet longs to savor the essence of the divine, thereby positioning himself above the

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gods. Yet "yu zhi qi" ("jade fat weeps") suddenly injects emotion into this sensory experience — it is not fragrance but "weeping." This creates a sensory dissonance: at the supposed pinnacle of human joy, at the moment of greatest satisfaction, how can one hear the sound of weeping?

The pleasure of the senses and the shock of emotions actually stem from a sense of distance—from that which is unattainable and intangible. When you can have everything, experience everything, and even the sacred, the forbidden, and the ultimate become easily accessible, those feelings that should inspire awe become numb, repetitive, and hollow. The pleasure of "consuming the divine" is essentially an extreme act: one breaks through order in pursuit of pleasure, momentarily feeling free. Yet, the greater the pleasure, the more fragile the self becomes—because this transgression is not freedom, but the prelude to emptiness. You lose your rules but gain no answers. Thus, at the end of bliss lies not joy, but "yu zhi qi"—even pleasure itself weeps, indicating that life has lost its meaning even in enjoyment. Marx once said: "The more insignificant your existence, the less you express your life, the more you possess, the greater your externalized life, and the more accumulated your alienated essence." [12] Li He's verses and Marx's statement converge in deep logical foundation, though through opposite argumentative paths. Marx points out that human life expression is replaced by "possession"—the less you express, desire, and own, the "richer" you are. This is a paradox of alienation. Li He, however, reaches near nihilism through maximum expression: you consume "dragons and phoenixes," your pleasure peaks, yet you hear "yu zhi qi." Extreme bliss is not fulfillment but collapse. One moves from lack into alienation; the other falls from excess into nothingness. Ultimately, both point to the same truth: "The more you possess, the less life you have." From this perspective, Li He's self-comfort is remarkably modern.

In Kant's conception of the sublime, the individual experiences pain from their own smallness yet takes pride in the awakening of reason. Li He, highly sensitive to the passage of time due to personal circumstances, repeatedly expresses through images like "jia long" (false dragon) and "lei ma" (withered horse) the individual's powerlessness and resentment before fate (e.g., "wo dang ershi budeyi, yixin chou xie ru ku lan"). Therefore, while Kant's sublime ultimately returns to rational order, Li He's sublime aligns more closely with Nietzschean "Dionysian revelry," using poetic indulgence to resist reality.

4. Why Li He's poetry possesses sublime beauty

4.1. The "poetic ghost" and the aesthetics of the terror sublime

Edmund Burke pointed out that the core of the sublime lies in fear and astonishment. Li He's poetry is filled with this shocking and even terrifying rhetoric. While previous poets described tears as "tears falling like strings of pearls" or "tears flowing like threads," Li He's imagery is "tears falling like surging waves." He not only explicitly mentions "death" but also depicts it in absolute terms. For example, in the line "Bao jun huang jin tai shang yi, ti xie yu long wei jun si," death is portrayed with total sacrifice—devoting one's liver and brain, entrusting life and death as transient. One poem ends abruptly, hanging on the word "death," unwilling to say more. Another example is "Ji hui tian shang zang shen xian, lou sheng xiang jiang wu duan jue," where traditionally death was understood as a fate reserved for mortals, while immortals remained deathless. Life is short, like morning frost, so one should seize joy while one can. But Li He asserts that even immortals die and must be buried, and the dripping sound of the bronze water clock never ceases. This scenario evokes strong oppression and even terror, making it difficult to entertain the usual "life is short, seize the day" mindset. Li He deeply understands the impermanence of life and recognizes death as the ultimate destiny of all existence, thus developing an early intimacy with the afterlife. Later readers, as

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sublime subjects, are emotionally moved spectators rather than agonizing experiencers, which allows them to experience a sublime aesthetic appreciation of Li He's unique awareness of death [13].

4.2. The "words of the ghost-immortal" and the bitterness of reality

Li He's life was fraught with hardships. He was expelled from the imperial examinations because his father's name contained a character that violated naming taboos. Later, he gained a low-ranking official post through patronage, but his position was minor and lacked prospects for promotion. Throughout his life, he hoped for national stability, yet he died prematurely on the eve of reunification. In his youth, he once wrote light-hearted lines such as "kuai zou ta qing qiu", but the majority of his poetry leaves an impression of splendid sorrow and bitter hardship—deeply connected to his ill-fated life full of injustice and suffering.

Burke, in the social dimension of the sublime aesthetic, consistently invokes the dual principles of "self-preservation" and "sympathy," aiming to integrate the emotions of "fear" and "compassion" so that aesthetic experience can encompass both political and ethical concerns. The "principle of self-preservation" protects individual interests and desires, while sympathy's social perspective helps overcome the selfishness inherent in self-preservation [14]. Often, people fail to perceive others' suffering simply because they have never truly experienced it themselves. The "psychological mechanism of self-preservation" numbs people, causing them to avoid hardship whenever possible. Li He's delicate sensitivity seems destined to record the "greed, anger, and ignorance" of the human world. Like a precious jade, even after witnessing all the splendors of Chang'an, when fallen into darkness, he remains pure. Nothing can tarnish his eyes, sharp as a torch, or his heart, transformed into crimson blood. This is why his poetry is permeated with a chilling, ghostly aura that shakes the reader.

5. Conclusion

Li He's poetry constructs a uniquely Chinese poetic sublime through the radical transformation of everyday imagery, the paradoxical intertwining of pain and pleasure, and the heterogeneity of time and space that breaks the boundaries of reality. This sublime beauty not only engages in a dialogue with Western theories but also preserves the characteristic quality of Chinese poetry as "mysterious yet grounded in the human world." Amidst the pervasive ghostly aura, it reveals the vitality of life; within the confined cosmos, it manifests the vastness of spirit—ultimately accomplishing a poetic transcendence over the harsh realities of existence.

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