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On the Formation of Li He's View of Life and Death and Its Influence on His Poetic Style

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Abstract: Li He, a poet of the Middle Tang Dynasty, was posthumously dubbed the "Poet Demon". His poetry often revolves around the symbolic themes of immortals and ghosts, reflecting a departure from mundane concerns to explore metaphysical and existential questions. His verses are characterized by their lush and eerie imagery, with frequent use of cold, ominous terms such as "blood", "tears", "ghosts", and "death". Through such imagery, Li He confronts the mysteries of existence, expressing his reflections on life and death during his brief lifetime, as well as his insights into humanity and the self. As the "Poet of Ghosts", he does not fear the supernatural but instead reveres the mysterious aspects of himself that remain unexplored. Analyzing Li He's poetry reveals the nascent seeds of self-awareness and independent personality among Middle Tang poets, and highlights the allure of the "self".

Keywords: Li He; view on life and death; ghost and deity imagery; personality awakening

1. Introduction

When we mention Li He, we always think of his title, "the Poet Demon". His poetry is magnificent and bizarre, describing all things in heaven and earth, using intense and gloomy imagery to convey the reflections of a marginalized intellectual on society, the self, and life. Li He died at the age of 27. Throughout his life, he was reclusive and arrogant, obsessed with poetry, yet also full of ideals, aspiring to achieve great things. Alas, life was too short to grant him sufficient time to create greater achievements or produce more works. Yet the turbulence of his life endowed his works with a sharp emotional intensity, making them immediately arresting and increasingly profound with deeper contemplation. Through his descriptions of spirits and deities, he explores the meaning of life and the self, offering insights worthy of deeper exploration and contemplation. "The extraordinary and fantastical beauty of color in Li He's poetry is a rare and vibrant flower in the garden of Chinese poetry, not only during the Tang Dynasty but throughout thousands of years of Chinese literary history. This has been recognized by literary critics throughout the ages. Li He's short life was ablaze with vivid imagery, and his poetry preserved that brilliance in enduring color. Li He's poetry is a treasure trove of life's colors" [1].

2. The Reasons behind Li He's Unique View of Life and Death

Li He's poetic style stands out as uniquely distinctive in the realm of classical Chinese poetry. The reason for this uniqueness lies in two key factors. First, having endured the pain of losing his father, he gradually developed a solitary and aloof disposition. Second, repeated disappointments in his official career led him to gain a profound understanding of the dark side of power and the chaos of society. These insights into his surroundings and self-awareness significantly influenced his values and worldview, particularly his profound understanding and exploration of the deeper aspects of life, which also exhibit a unique perspective.

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2.1. Drastic Changes in the Family

Li He's father, Li Jinsu, was a minor local official known for his integrity, honesty, erudition, and refinement. He was a rare example of an upright official during the mid-Tang Dynasty. The young Li He was greatly influenced by his father, developing a love for reading, a disregard for fame and fortune, and a strong sense of justice. However, when Li He was fourteen years old, in the 19th year of Emperor Dezong's Zhenyuan reign (803), the passing of his father, Li Jinsu, brought about a significant transformation in Li He.

Before the age of fourteen, Li He was known for his impulsive and uninhibited nature, both in his poetry and behavior. However, after his father's death, he "no longer acted on his whims, no longer indulged in recklessness, as if overnight, he had crossed the threshold from an ignorant youth into adulthood" [2]. The mature Li He no longer acted on impulse. Overnight, this family lost its pillar of support, and he knew that as the eldest man in the family, he had to take on all the responsibilities. However, Li He's external maturity did not signal a transformation in his inner character; he remained aloof and proud. It was precisely this reclusive personality that laid the foundation for his later austere and elegant poetic style.

At this time, he was full of youthful vigor and often focused on the hardships of the common people from a broader perspective. The year after his father's death, Li He took a spring trip to the streets of Luoyang. Looking at the peonies competing for beauty, He composed "The Peony Song", which already revealed his distinctive poetic sensibility and command of evocative imagery:

The lotus branches have not yet grown, and the old Qin Heng is gone. A horse carries gold and cuts the spring grass.

Water irrigates the fragrant mud and the moon disk, and overnight the green rooms welcome the white dawn.

The beauty speaks drunkenly amid the garden smoke; the evening flowers have scattered, and the butterflies have grown weary.

The King of Liang has grown old, but his brocaded robes remain; he waves his sleeves as the wind blows the strings of the Shu Kingdom.

The returning clouds drape the Shu tent in twilight; the crimson petals fall, having ceased to receive favor.

Where does the young man sleep with the maiden? The moon shines brightly on the tower, and the swallows chirp in the night [3].

On his spring outing, Li He occasionally came across two peony plants belonging to the owner of the house, one named "Liang Wang" and the other named "Luo Yi". Coincidentally, the city's high-ranking officials and nobles were also touring the peony blossoms and insisted on buying these two plants. The owner, who loved the flowers dearly, tried to hint that they were not for sale by offering an exorbitant price. Little did they know that the nobles would spend a fortune to uproot this "spring grass", leaving the heartbroken flower owner in silent despair. As an onlooker, Li He witnessed everything but could do nothing, only sighing in frustration. When composing his poem, He not only recorded what he saw and felt at the time but also incorporated natural and societal imagery to lament the fleeting nature of time and the inevitable decay of all things. All things will fade away, and he believed that these dark aspects of society would also eventually vanish.

It is clear that his father's passing shaped his increasingly reclusive personality, yet it did not extinguish his aspirations for the future or his reflection on society. The upheaval in his family made him more attuned to the turmoil of society, and in his early poems such as "The Peony Song", though there are no eerie or ghostly imagery, He began to explore individual subjects from sharp and unconventional angles, laying a foundation for his later supernatural themes, laying a solid foundation for his later works on supernatural themes and shifting his focus from the suffering of the collective to self-reflection.

2.2. Disappointment in Officialdom

To support his family and pursue his political aspirations and ideals, Li He had no choice but to pursue an official career. In the Henan Prefecture examination, he chose the topic "Twelve Months and the Leap Month" and, in the thirteen poems he composed, there were already some lines that borrowed from the realm of gods, ghosts, and immortals to express his reflections on life. For example, in "June", the line "The Red Emperor rides a dragon, chirping", captures people's vivid experience of the scorching summer sun, while also hinting at how natural phenomena influence life and inspire reflections on existence.

Li He had a strong desire to serve the world. In his early years, he sought to enter officialdom through personal recommendations and the imperial examinations. Given the prevalence of both poetry and prose in the imperial examinations during the Tang Dynasty, he must have been familiar with a large number of prose works from previous dynasties and the methods of prose composition.

Driven by a strong desire to serve the world, Li He sought official positions through personal recommendations and the imperial examinations in his early years. Given the prevalence of both poetry and prose in the Tang Dynasty's examination system, he must have been familiar with a large number of prose works from previous dynasties and the methods of prose composition [4]. In his official career, Li He first missed the examination due to observing a three-year mourning period for his father. In the next examination, he was disqualified because the character "Jin" in his father's name "Jin Su" was homophonous with the character "Jin" in "Jin Shi" (a title for successful candidates in the imperial examinations). At this point, Li He was depressed and frustrated, as expressed in his poem "High Chariot Passing By": "I now spread my wings to follow the shadowy swan; someday I shall not be ashamed to rise from a snake into a dragon", reflecting his disappointment and resentment toward the officialdom [3].

Being rejected in the imperial examinations marked a major turning point in the development of Li He's ghost-themed poetry. From then on, he began to focus more on the hardships of the common people and engaged in more intense self-reflection. At the same time, he incorporated some ancient fu and mythological allusions into his poetry, giving it a unique style and a touch of "mystical aura". For example, "Autumn cypresses rise over Xiangru's tomb; who among the Three Qins still cherishes eloquence?", "Upon reaching the Lan Tai, Song Yu has no soul to return. Two lines of faded characters, insects gnawing at the autumn grass [3]."

Having given up on passing the imperial examinations, he returned from Chang'an to Luoyang, but his aspirations for service had not yet entirely faded. In the sixth year of the Yuanhe era (809 AD), Li He was recommended by a relative and returned to the capital to take up a minor official post. The three years he spent in Chang'an allowed him to witness firsthand the social ills and the dark side of the ruling class, deepening his understanding of society and sparking his reflection on and appreciation for life. His concern for the suffering of the people is evident in lines such as, "Officials in the eastern regions are short of taxes, and strong oxen plow the black soil in spring", and "Who pities you? I hear that a strong man values his bones", which reflect his helplessness toward the dark rule [3]. On the surface, he cares about society and governance, but in essence, when faced with these matters, he repeatedly questions himself about the meaning of life and why we exist.

In the ninth year of the Yuanhe era (814 AD), Li He resolutely resigned from his official post and returned to his hometown of Changgu. Thereafter, he traveled extensively, serving as an advisor under Xi Shimei, the military governor of the Zhao Yi Army, for three years before returning to Luoyang due to illness. Although his official career was filled with ups and downs, it was after his resignation and return to Changgu that his enigmatic and bizarre poetic style — later celebrated by generations — began to fully mature. In Changgu, he drew upon the romantic and elegant style of ancient Chu Ci and

Yuefu poetry, absorbed and borrowed from the graceful and refined forms of contemporary Tang Dynasty poets such as Li Bai and Han Yu, and combined these with his own experiences to pioneer a romanticist school centered on supernatural beings and spirits.

3. The Poetic Style of Life and Death Takes Shape

Li He, a man of proud and aloof character who had fallen out of favor in official circles, initially focused his poetic gaze on the hardships of the common people after resigning from his post and returning to his hometown. Soon, however, he grew dissatisfied with the prevailing understanding of the term "depth" among literary figures of the mid-Tang Dynasty. Following the death of his wife, his own wanderings, and the numerous scenes of poverty he encountered along the way, he began to reflect on himself and explore the nature of personality and humanity. He expressed his unique understanding of life and death through exaggerated techniques and numerous ethereal imagery. This marked an important milestone in the maturation of his distinctive poetic style as the "Poet Demon".

3.1. Insights into Human Nature

Li He's penetrating insights into human nature served as the core of his poetic and prose expressions, often revolving around the motifs of blood, tears, ghosts, and death. He often likened himself to Cao Zhi, not only because of their shared aristocratic lineage but also due to the similar turbulent contexts they lived in — both the mid-to-late Tang and the Wei-Jin periods were marked by external warfare and internal strife. "Rulers sought military generals and strategists, while scholars who studied classics and advocated benevolence found no place to apply their talents or serve their country. Amidst widespread suffering, suppressed human nature found its voice, paradoxically giving rise to a flowering of inner freedom and personal expression [5]."

Thus, during the mid-to-late Tang Dynasty, a group of poets emerged whose works centered on themes of lamenting the decline of the nation and the hardships of the people, as well as pursuing freedom, beauty, and romance. Notable among them were Li He, Du Mu, and Li Shangyin. What set Li He apart was his rare capacity for self-reflection, even as he sought poetic beauty through imaginative and often otherworldly themes. For example, in "The Song of the Golden and Bronze Immortal Leaving Han", the lines "Withered orchids bid farewell to guests on the Xiangyang Road; if heaven had feelings, it too would grow old" combine humanity with the world, using a human perspective to speculate on the emotions of nature and all things, thereby achieving a higher level of understanding [3]. Another example is the sixth poem in "Thirteen Poems from the South Garden": "Searching for passages and phrases, an old wordsmith, the morning moon hangs like a jade bow behind the curtain [3]." While the imagery appears cryptic, it metaphorically describes the poetic process of crafting verses from classical references and elegant phrases.

From this perspective, Li He is a complex figure. He viewed the world through a transcendental lens, using fantastical and supernatural imagery to depict his unique vision beyond the confines of reality.

Li He viewed human nature as a connection between humanity and the world, evolving from the "greater self" (social ideology) to the "smaller self" (the individual), and from worldview to perspectives on life and death. Over the course of his brief 27 years, his process of awakening was a profound and enigmatic transformation. While his contemporaries focused on national sorrow and public suffering, Li He went further by infusing his poetry with deep personal introspection and philosophical contemplation of life and death. This is fully reflected in his poem "Dreaming of Heaven":

The old rabbit cries in the cold moonlight, the clouds half cover the slanting white wall.

The jade wheel rolls through the dew, wet with round light, and the phoenix pendant meets the fragrant cassia path.

Yellow dust and clear water under the three mountains, a thousand years of change like a galloping horse.

Gazing at the nine points of smoke in Qi Zhou, a pool of seawater spills into a cup [3].

The imagery in the poem is eerie and bizarre, rarely seen in the human world. Though it does not directly mention concepts of life and death, it uses these "strange objects" to express his reflections on human nature and the transience of the human world. "The old rabbit and the cold toad" mourn the desolate sky, while "the cloud-tower", "the jade wheel", and "the phoenix sash" reflect his imagination and longing for the realm of immortals. Finally, he uses the realm of immortals and their inhabitants to express the central theme of the harshness of human life and the ruthlessness of the world.

Li He's poems from his later period demonstrate an exceptionally profound understanding of human nature. It is precisely this combination of complex life experiences, leading to a profound understanding of human nature and inner reflection, that sets his poetry apart on the literary scene of the Tang Dynasty, elevating it to a new height.

3.2. *A Profound Understanding of Life*

Li He's reflections on life reveal a rare philosophical depth, interweaving personal experience with metaphysical inquiry. As one scholar notes, "Birth and death are inevitable and universal experiences that form a central paradox of human existence, compelling all philosophical inquiries into life to address them directly [6]." What matters in life is not only its beginning but also one's conscious attitude toward death while still living.

In a theocratic feudal society, it required great courage to openly confront themes of life and death and to articulate them through poetry. This intellectual and emotional bravery can be understood from three key dimensions.

First, there was a growing awareness of individual identity. This awakening fostered a personal consciousness independent of dominant ideologies or social expectations. His ability to question and challenge the norms of a rigid feudal system, despite being fully immersed in it, epitomizes this heightened self-awareness. As later scholars observe, Li He's poetry stands out for its innovative ideas, vivid imagery, and masterful symbolism, all of which reflect his self-awareness and creative defiance of convention [7].

Second, Li He drew significant inspiration from the stylistic and thematic features of Han Dynasty Yuefu poetry. Many of his works adopt the meter and cadence of Han Yuefu, reimagined with his signature eerie and spectral tone. Beyond formal elements, he absorbed Yuefu's reflections on society, as well as its existential meditations on life and death. The concept of life and death refers to one's views and attitudes toward the issues of life and death. A review of Han Yuefu poetry reveals that roughly a quarter of its corpus — over 40 out of 140 poems — explores themes of life and death. These works often convey a deep yearning for life and a visceral fear of death, reflecting the cultural ethos of the era [8]. Li He's poetic techniques clearly echo those found in Han folk songs, particularly in their shared use of mythic and supernatural imagery. Both traditions employ celestial imagery — immortals and heavenly palaces — to explore personal and societal themes. Likewise, they turn to ghostly realms and the underworld to portray worldly decay and human frailty before time.

Li He's distinctiveness lies partly in his Tang Dynasty context, an era marked by richer cultural pluralism and intellectual vibrancy than the Han. He integrated this imagery with refined aesthetic sensibilities, resulting in poetry that feels both emotionally resonant and stylistically balanced. Take, for example, his renowned poem "Li Peng's Kunghou Melody":

Wu silk and Shu paulownia resonate in the high autumn, while empty mountains gather clouds that linger without flowing.

Jiang E weeps at the bamboo, and the Pure Maiden mourns; Li Peng plays the kunghou in China.

The jade of Kunlun shatters, and the phoenix cries; the lotus weeps dew, and the fragrant orchid smiles.

Twelve gates bathe in cold light; twenty-three strings stir the Purple Emperor.

Where Nuwa refined stones to mend the sky, the stones shattered, startling the heavens and summoning autumn rain.

Dreaming of entering the divine mountain to teach the divine crone, old fish leap in the waves and slender dragons dance.

Wu Zhi sleepless, leaning against the cassia tree, dewdrops slanting down, wetting the cold rabbit [3].

He seamlessly fuses mythic symbols with his friend's musical virtuosity, crafting verses that vividly evoke both setting and emotional depth. By invoking allusions such as "Xiang Fei's tears" and "Su Nu's sorrow", Li He underscores the emotional richness and technical mastery of the performance. His use of classical allusions not only honors his friend's skill but also demonstrates a sophisticated poetic strategy that bridges feeling and form.

Although Li He's poetry frequently employs ghostly and divine imagery to reflect real-world phenomena, this aspect lies beyond the immediate scope of our discussion. Despite the obscure imagery and archaic diction, Li He's talent lies in his ability to transform fantastical and supernatural motifs into vivid, concrete poetic expression. This clarity of expression reinforces the thematic distinctiveness of his philosophical insights.

A significant source of Li He's existential perspective on life and death lies in his lifelong physical frailty. The years 814 to 816, corresponding to the final phase of the Yuanhe era, marked both the culmination of Li He's poetic career and the last chapter of his life. As one scholar observes, illness is a common human experience, yet poets — due to poverty, fragile health, erratic lifestyles, and emotional intensity — are especially susceptible [9]. In his final years, Li He experienced poverty, lived a wandering life, and frequently turned to alcohol for solace. His unfulfilled official ambitions, combined with chronic illness, left him physically exhausted by his mid-twenties.

Moreover, Li He devoted extraordinary emotional and intellectual effort to the craft of poetry.

The Northern Song Dynasty poet Tang Geng once commented: "Poetry is the most difficult thing to do. I do not find writing prose difficult, but composing poetry is very painful. I sigh sadly for days on end and put it aside for the time being. The next day, when I read it again, I found countless flaws, so I would mournfully recite it for days on end, making repeated revisions. Compared to before, it was slightly improved. After a few more days, I would take it out and read it again, only to find the flaws reappear. This process would repeat itself several times before I dared to show it to others, yet it still failed to be extraordinary. Li He's mother scolded him, saying, 'This child must vomit out his heart before he can stop'. This is not an exaggeration [10]." This illustrates the exceptionally rigorous standards Li He imposed on his poetic composition.

Such relentless demands undoubtedly exacerbated his already fragile health. Many of Li He's most poignant meditations on life and death were composed during his final, illness-ridden years. Examples include "The Sickness of Zhang Dazhai in Luzhou" and "The Drum on the Official Street". Ultimately bedridden by severe illness, he spent his final days immersed in contemplation of life's ultimate questions. Unlike most, Li He faced recurring episodes of severe illness, often hovering near the brink of death. In his brief twenty-seven years, Li He endured more proximity to death than most, and this constant confrontation profoundly shaped his philosophical outlook. His brief official service also acquainted him with systemic injustice and the moral decay of the ruling elite. Consequently, his later works transcend personal themes, incorporating sharp satire against authority and empathetic portrayals of the common folk. His poem "The Bitterness of a

Short Day" exemplifies this thematic fusion, using metaphor to express existential anxiety and critique social values:

Flying light, flying light, I urge you to drink a cup of wine.

I do not know the height of the blue sky or the thickness of the yellow earth.

I only see the cold moon and warm sun, boiling away human life.

Eating bears makes one fat, eating frogs makes one thin.

Where is the divine lord? Where is the Supreme One?

In the east of heaven there is the tree of life, beneath which lies the dragon holding the torch.

I will cut off the dragon's feet, chew its flesh, so that it cannot return by day or rest by night.

Thus the elderly will not die, and the young will not weep.

Why wear gold and swallow jade?

Who is like Lord Ren, riding a blue donkey in the clouds?

Liu Che's Mausoleum of Maoling is filled with bones, and Ying Zheng's cedar coffin is wasted on fish sauce [3].

The opening lines lament the brevity of life and the relentless passage of time, while the closing lines employ historical allusions to critique the futility of imperial pursuits of immortality. Even as his language grew simpler in his final works, Li He continued to rely on enigmatic imagery — serpent deities, mythic forces — to metaphorically render the complexities of the real world. These symbols suggest that Li He's introspective engagement with society and the self-persisted until his final days. As Qian Zhongshu observed in *Talks on Art*, the Changgu Collection reveals not only Li He's frustration and sorrow, but also a persistent meditation on the transience of time, the impermanence of life, and the inescapability of death [11].

4. "Magnificent and Bizarre" Poetic Style and Its Influence on Later Generations of Poets

Li He, with his unique approach to self-awareness and his profound understanding of life and death, created a large body of poetry that is both mysterious and enigmatic. He stands out as a unique and extraordinary "poetic genius" in the history of ancient Chinese literature.

Over the centuries that followed, his poetic style was studied and imitated, and poets of different eras attempted to incorporate it into their own writing styles. For example, the poetry of late Tang Dynasty poets such as Li Shangyin and Du Mu was, to varying degrees, influenced by Li He's poetry.

From the most distinctive expressive techniques to the influence and inspiration he had on future generations, there are discernible patterns and logical analyses that can be traced in Li He's poetry.

4.1. *The Specific Manifestations and Techniques of a Unique Poetic Style*

Li He's concern for society and reflection on the self are profound. During the mid-to-late Tang Dynasty, the surface appeared calm, but beneath the surface, turmoil was brewing: eunuchs held power, powerful officials colluded, the people bore heavy taxes, and border regions were restless. This social environment did not provide literary creators with overly intense or explicit creative soil. Thus, poets either lamented or subtly criticized, with few daring to speak openly. As a poet, Li He's works were more bizarre and profound than others, and exhibited a distinct positive deviation.

This transformative quality stems from his profound understanding of the concept of life and death, which was largely gained through his deep insight into society. Living amidst the chaos of the world, Li He wrote extensively about the affairs of heaven, earth, and the supernatural. While his works often used metaphor and satire to critique society and expose social phenomena, they primarily depicted his own profound reflections on

life and death. He yearned for the immortality of the immortals in the celestial palaces and did not fear death; due to his frail health and frequent struggles between life and death, he felt the impermanence of the world and the cyclical nature of natural laws. However, he ultimately desired life, as humans naturally fear the unknown and prefer to live in familiar environments.

Li He's longing for life was not because he feared death, but rather stemmed from his innate attachment to the things of life and his regret over the many unfulfilled aspirations he still harbored. This reflects his profound sense of life. "Li He's intense sense of life manifested itself in his profound understanding and experience of life and death. This sense of life, as an abstract concept, permeated his poetry throughout" [12].

It was precisely this unique concept of life that gave him the courage to confront the topic of death, which has always been taboo. In just 27 years, he gained sufficient life experience. He burned his life to create poetry because he believed that human life has value and meaning comparable to that of gods and ghosts.

In Li's poetry, there are also many obscure and gloomy images that are particularly obscure and gloomy. These images are not inherently strange; it is the author's use of imagery to create a cold and sorrowful atmosphere that makes them seem eerie and terrifying, such as "cold toad" and "copper camel". It cannot be denied that in his later works, his excessive pursuit of the bizarre style led to a lack of logical rigor in the structure of his writings. For example, the well-known "Su Xiaoxiao's Tomb":

The dew on the orchids is like tears. Nothing can bind our hearts together; the flowers are too fragile to be cut. The grass is like a carpet, the pines like a canopy. The wind is my robe, the water my sash. The oil-lacquered carriage waits for me at dusk. The cold green candles, their light dimmed. At the foot of the Western Ling, the wind blows and the rain falls [3].

Each line of the poem contains imagery that is not closely related to one another, ranging from flowers and grass, wind and water, to cars and candles. The placement of these unrelated images in a poem may seem somewhat jarring, as they do not seamlessly form a coherent logical system. However, this approach also has its advantages. The simple connection between what is in the mind and what is seen with the eyes becomes increasingly emotional and aligns more closely with his understanding of life and death — that life is impermanent, and the beloved has become a tomb of the ages. Why then should one be overly meticulous in dealing with the impermanence of life?

From the preceding text, it can be seen that Li He's poetry is not about ghosts or simply about the supernatural. Rather, he uses various ethereal and mysterious imagery to describe social issues, such as in "The Day Is Too Short", where he writes, "Liu Che's Mausoleum is filled with bones, and the coffin of Ying Zheng is adorned with abalone." These lines use historical allusions to criticize the present, employing metaphors and symbols to satirize the bizarre actions of those in power seeking immortality, while also expressing a profound lamentation over the nature of life.

4.2. A Profound Influence on the Poetry World of Future Generations

Li He's poetry provided a new form of expression and style for future generations of poets. Among later poets, many were clearly influenced by Li He's style in their works, such as Li Shangyin and Shi Yinian.

Li He's poetry was distinctive and often obscure, and the imagery he used tended to be mysterious and enigmatic. Following Li He and the Middle Tang poetry scene, many later poets inherited Li He's unique creative approach of freely unleashing his imagination and not shying away from themes of life and death in his poetry. They incorporated Li He's poetic style and skillful use of imagery into their own work, thereby exploring a variety of unique styles that were completely transformed, such as Shi Yinian's "Ancient Pine" and Li Shangyin's "Jinshi".

Li Shangyin lived in an era closer to Li He's, and during his lifetime, he expressed strong admiration for Li He. In "The Brocade Zither", Li Shangyin demonstrated a poetic style and technique similar to Li He's:

The brocade zither has fifty strings without reason, each string and pillar evoking thoughts of youth.

Zhuangzi's morning dream was confused by butterflies, and the emperor's spring heart was entrusted to the cuckoo.

The moon over the sea shines on pearls with tears, and the warm sun over the blue fields produces smoke.

This feeling can be remembered, but at that time, it was already vague [13].

This work draws heavily on classical allusions and tales of the supernatural, such as Zhuangzi's butterfly dream and the legend of the Emperor Wang and the cuckoo. However, unlike Li He, the poetic style here is gentler, with a far greater emphasis on melancholy than on anger or satire. There is no overt harshness, but rather a use of mythological allusions to express a relatively genuine and peaceful sense of lamentation.

Such examples are numerous, but need not be listed in detail. However, upon careful examination from the late Tang Dynasty through the Song Dynasty and even into the Ming and Qing Dynasties, one often discovers traces of works influenced by Li He's poetic style [14]. These works are bizarre, oppressive, and obscure, yet they are also passionate, imaginative, and rich in romanticism, while subtly revealing criticism and reflection on society, such as Yuan Mei's "Zi Bu Yu" and Pu Songling's "Liaozhai Zhiyi" from the Qing Dynasty [15].

Setting aside Li He's pioneering use of ghosts and spirits to satirize contemporary affairs, his work significantly challenged traditional notions of life and death, inspiring countless later generations to reflect on life and death, immortals and demons, and thereby gain a clearer understanding of the society in which they lived. This is beyond doubt.

5. Conclusion

In feudal China, most people avoided discussing topics such as life, death, and the supernatural, but Li He had his own unique perspective. The world he saw was different from that of others. Compared to the later poet Yi An Jusi, who expressed his reflections on life and death in the lines, "In life, one should be a hero; in death, a mighty spirit", and Su Dongpo's reflections on life and death in his poem to his deceased wife, "Ten years of life and death, both vague and distant. I do not think of you, yet I cannot forget you", Su Dongpo's understanding of life and death appears even more profound, reaching a new height that transcends human ethics. When he uses obscure imagery to write about ghosts and gods, he is actually alluding to the contradictions of real society and people's greed for life and fear of death. From the age of fifteen to twenty-seven, Li He became more open-minded and tolerant due to various unfair experiences, seeing through the good and evil of the world and forming a persistent pursuit of a bizarre and strange poetic style. In his view, the mortal world is essentially equal to the mythical, imaginary heavenly palace and underworld.

In terms of poetic form and content, he did not adhere to the traditional rhythms and meters of classical poetry, instead prioritizing spatial depth and sensory impact in his work. His bold use of obscure words and imagery, though it resulted in some logical and structural flaws in his poetry, did not overshadow its merits. His rich imagination and vivid imagery often vividly conveyed his central themes. What he consistently sought to express was that wherever life exists, there will be phenomena of life activity. The celestial palace, the underworld, and the human world are all the same. One should approach life and death, as well as ghosts and gods, with a calm and ordinary mindset. In an era when humanity had not yet fully awakened to enlightenment, he undoubtedly possessed great pioneering spirit and courage. His ability to narrate the affairs of heaven and earth from

the perspective of an ordinary person is the best proof of his equal attitude toward ghosts, gods, the universe, and all things. The courage this pioneering spirit demonstrates is most directly manifested in his writing about ghosts and gods amidst the dust of the world. He depicted the world as he saw it with a fearless attitude toward ghosts, gods, life, and death, rendering it vividly and authentically, as if drenched in blood.

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