Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Art, Design and Social Sciences
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38244

Expurgation, Interpretation, and Imitation: The Reception of Li Bai's Poetry in the Qing Dynasty

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Abstract. The Qing Dynasty marked a stage of systematic transformation in the history of the literary reception of Li Bai. This paper examines the historical landscape and profound implications of Li Bai's reception in the Qing Dynasty from three dimensions: textual expurgation, poetic interpretation, and creative imitation. The study shows that: at the textual level, the tendency to pare down Yuefu and ancient-style poems in accordance with the rules of regulated verse, and the voices opposing such expurgation, constituted a poetic contestation; at the evaluative level, Li Bai studies broke through the traditional framework of "the merits of Li Bai versus Du Fu", giving rise to multiple paths of interpretation, and the image of the poet shifted from a moral reference point to an independent academic and spiritual symbol; at the creative level, the imitation of Li Bai by Qing-dynasty writers diverged into three paths: spiritual inheritance, implicit allusion to imagery, and reversal of conception. Examined through the lens of cultural memory theory, the reception of Li Bai in the Qing Dynasty was essentially a cultural practice of reconstructing the canon. It not only reflected the pluralistic pattern of Qing-dynasty poetics, but also refracted the political logic by which the dynasty constructed its ruling legitimacy through the interpretation of classics.

Keywords: Li Bai, Qing Dynasty, literary reception, cultural memory

1. Introduction

This paper takes the literary reception of Li Bai in the Qing Dynasty as its research object, and develops its discussion from three dimensions: text, evaluation, and imitation. In the Qing Dynasty, classical Chinese scholarship entered a period of comprehensive synthesis, with various poetic schools flourishing, and the literary reception of Li Bai entered a new phase accordingly: there emerged not only monumental works of textual collation such as Wang Qi's *Complete Works of Li Taibai*, but also poetic controversies surrounding textual expurgation, as well as a multi-dimensional evaluation system and rich practices of creative imitation.

Existing studies on the reception history of Li Bai mostly focus on the canonization process in the Tang and Song dynasties, leaving insufficient exploration of the integrity and underlying logic of his reception in the Qing Dynasty. In particular, few studies examine poetic phenomena in conjunction with Qing-dynasty culture and politics as a whole. In fact, the reception of Li Bai in the Qing Dynasty was not merely an aesthetic activity, but was closely linked to the construction of the dynasty's cultural orthodoxy.

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38244

This paper takes "evaluation and transformation" as its core thread, unfolding the discussion from three levels: textual expurgation, poetic interpretation, and creative imitation. Combining specific works with the practices of different receptive subjects, it presents the pluralistic landscape of Li Bai's reception in the Qing Dynasty; drawing on Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory, it reveals the interactive relationship between literary aesthetics and political power therein, offering a new perspective for understanding the reproduction mechanism of classics in the Qing Dynasty.

2. Expurgation and anthologization of Li Bai's poetry in the Qing Dynasty

Works such as *Leaving the White Emperor Town at Dawn* and *Song of the Midnight Hour* underwent frequent line deletions and character alterations in the Qing Dynasty, with their semantics reconstructed accordingly [1]. Taking such variant readings and revisions as the entry point, one can intuitively examine the reception of Li Bai in the Qing Dynasty.

Take *Song of the Midnight Hour* as an example. Li Bai's original work was titled *Ballads of the Four Seasons at Midnight* or *Song of the Midnight Hour*. Its original Yuefu form reads: "The moon shines bright o'er the capital, ten thousand wives are pounding clothes all. The autumn wind blows as of yore, it brings my grief to the Jade Gate evermore. When shall we beat the Tartar foe, and our men come back from the frontier, we know? In the Qing Dynasty, Tian Tongzhi deleted the last two lines in his *Xipu's Comments on Poetry*, altering the entire poem into a five-character jueju (quatrain).

In the case of *Three Songs of the Pure Tune*, later anthologies often retained only the first piece, "Clouds would dress her as flowers would her face", stripping it from the context of the original song cycle and turning it into an independent quatrain praising the beauty of Lady Yang.

As for *The Moon over the Mountain Pass*, the poem had long maintained its complete twelve-line form from the Tang Dynasty onward. It was not until the Ming Dynasty that scholar Lu Shen first made a wholesale abridgement, directly removing the last four lines and forcibly truncating the original twelve-line Yuefu ancient-style poem into an eight-line five-character regulated verse [2]. This practice was even continued in the Qing Dynasty.

There has never been a shortage of opposition to such expurgatory practices of trimming poems, most notably by Emperor Qianlong. When compiling *The Imperial Anthology of Tang and Song Poetry*, Qianlong explicitly refuted these expurgations. Regarding the deletion of the last two lines of *Song of the Midnight Hour*, Qianlong sternly criticized: "Those who delete the last two lines to make a quatrain fail to see the chaste heart and noble integrity of the woman—how then can they edify the world and shape social mores?" In his view, deleting the two lines expressing longing for peace would make it impossible to highlight chaste integrity, and poetic criticism must be subordinated to the construction of political correctness and cultural orthodoxy [3]. As for the removal of the last four lines of *The Moon over the Mountain Pass*, Qianlong highly praised the complete version for its "lofty style and vigorous spirit, with a dual-closing structure that brims with untrammeled charm", explicitly affirming the core artistic and emotional value of the deleted final four lines [4].

In fact, after expurgation, poems were transformed from Yuefu ancient-style works into five-character regulated verses or quatrains, with their artistic conception significantly narrowed [5]. Taking *The Moon over the Mountain Pass* as an example, the original text forms a complete thread of "scene–history–emotion". The last four lines draw the perspective back to specific frontier soldiers and their wives left at home, using individual sorrow of separation to embody a grand narrative, which aligns with the original theme of "lamenting separation" in the traditional Yuefu topic. After the forced deletion of the last four lines, however, the poem remains only at the level of

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38244

historical reminiscence and frontier scenery, losing its most precious concern for real life, and its ideological depth is considerably weakened as a result.

Beyond line deletions, there were also alterations of individual characters. For instance, the third line of *Leaving the White Emperor Town at Dawn*, "With monkeys' cries the riverbanks resound without cease", was changed to "With monkeys' cries the riverbanks resound without rest". Variants such as "the light boat has passed" versus "has passed in an instant", "between rosy clouds" versus "between crimson clouds" in the first line, and "back in one day" versus "back in one night" in the second line also constitute an important part of the poem's textual evolution.

Studies of the aforementioned works—*Song of the Midnight Hour*, *Songs of the Pure Tune*, *The Moon over the Mountain Pass*, and *Leaving the White Emperor Town at Dawn*—reveal that Qing-dynasty scholars' abridgement of Li Bai's poetry was related to their conceptions of poetic genre hierarchy, strategies for the canonization of Tang poetry, and orientations of literary reception.

From the perspective of poetic thought, there was a prevailing trend in the Qing Dynasty to frame poetry within the structure of formal rules. Trimming *The Moon over the Mountain Pass* and *Song of the Midnight Hour* into quatrains or regulated verses was an attempt to discipline the "freedom" of ancient-style poetry with the "formal rules" of regulated verse, so as to meet the aesthetic standard of "pure and proper form". Wu Changqi's praise for the expurgated version of *The Moon over the Mountain Pass* precisely aligned with the contemporary orientation toward artistic refinement.

Nevertheless, Qing-dynasty poetics actually presented a pattern of plural coexistence. The contradiction between deletion and retention represented different orientations of aesthetic dimension. Opponents of expurgation argued that Li Bai's value lay precisely in his "unruliness" and unrestrained spirit. In this contest between expurgation and anti-expurgation, the image of Li Bai evolved from singularity to plurality.

3. Evaluation of Li Bai and poetic interpretation

The Qing Dynasty was the first period in the reception history of Li Bai that saw systematic and large-scale specialized research. The achievements of textual collation represented by Wang Qi's *Annotated Collection of Li Taibai's Poems* marked the entry of Li Bai studies into a comprehensive synthesis phase. There are four distinct hallmarks:

First, independent monographs on Li Bai emerged in the Qing Dynasty. For example, Pan Deyu compiled three volumes of *Yangyizhai's Notes on Poetry of Li Bai and Du Fu*, with the first volume devoted exclusively to Li Bai.

Second, Li Bai's ranking in poetic commentaries rose. For instance, in the first ten volumes of Zhao Yi's *Oubei's Notes on Poets and Poetry*, which discuss ten poets individually, Li Bai is prominently placed first, followed by Du Fu [6].

Third, there emerged a professionalized trend in the project of annotating Li Bai's collected works in the Qing Dynasty. For example, Wang Qi spent thirty years compiling and annotating the thirty-six-volume *Complete Works of Li Taibai*.

Fourth, textual authentication and philological collation of Li Bai's poetry were carried out in the Qing Dynasty. For instance, during the Daoguang reign, Gong Zizhen "identified 122 authentic poems by Li Bai" and wrote *Selected Records of Li Bai's Collection*; Zhao Yi, in *Oubei's Notes on Poets and Poetry*, also judged works such as *Song of the Youth* as not written by Li Bai, based on the criteria of "transcendent spiritual insight" versus "vulgar tone".

It can be seen that the Qing people attached unprecedented importance to Li Bai [7]. At the same time, their evaluation of Li Bai also took multiple distinct interpretive paths: the textual scholarship

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38244

path represented by Wang Qi, the style-school path represented by Shen Deqian, the official path represented by Emperor Qianlong, the spiritual ethos path represented by Gong Zizhen, and the personality-spirit school path represented by Zhao Yi, among others.

This paper takes *Bring in the Wine* and *Mount Skyland Ascended in a Dream: A Song of Farewell* as entry points for its research. These two works have two entirely different characteristics: *Bring in the Wine* was included in contemporary anthologies and became a classic as early as the Tang Dynasty, while *Mount Skyland Ascended in a Dream: A Song of Farewell* completed its canonization through the commentaries of many scholars only in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Comparing the reception histories of the two can not only present the curve of literary reception from the Tang to the Qing Dynasty, but also highlight the uniqueness of Qing-dynasty interpretation.

Bring in the Wine has been regarded as a classic since its creation, with numerous commentaries across dynasties. Before the Qing Dynasty, commentaries mostly focused on its expression of "heroic spirit" but were scattered and unsystematic. It was not until the Qing Dynasty that systematic interpretation was basically completed. The reception of *Bring in the Wine* in the Qing Dynasty unfolded simultaneously on three levels:

In terms of anthologization, Shen Deqian's *Anthology of Tang Poetry*, which took Li Bai and Du Fu as its guiding models, included this poem. Shen commented on Li Bai's seven-character ancient-style poetry: "His ideas soar beyond the heavens, his forms evolve spontaneously. Like a great river calm on the surface yet waves surging of their own accord; like white clouds drifting from the void, shifting and vanishing with the wind. This is almost a gift from heaven, beyond the reach of human effort." Shen was an anthologist who upheld formal rules as the standard, attributing what exceeded formal measurement to divine endowment.

In terms of academic research, Wang Qi's *Complete Works of Li Taibai* was noted for its "balanced arguments, compiling three schools of commentary, discarding shortcomings and adopting merits, citing original sources with utmost caution". Wang also openly questioned critics of Li Bai: "When commenting on Du Fu, they are mostly lenient and full of excessive praise; when commenting on Li Bai, they mostly scrutinize deeply and find fault" [8]. As a textual scholar, Wang Qi no longer participated in the debate over the relative merits of Li Bai and Du Fu, but instead took the "debate over merits" itself as his research object.

In terms of critical commentary, Qing-dynasty critics offered far more detailed analyses. Jiao Yuanxi remarked on the line "Only the drinker leaves his name behind": "Uttering this unconventional truth is what makes it marvelous; to imitate it would instantly make it vulgar", pinpointing Li Bai's "marvelousness" at the syntactic level as inimitable. Wu Yan analyzed its structure of "first consoling oneself then persuading others", discerning characters and layers in the wine-song text. Wu Rulun highlighted its "driving and sweeping spirit", approaching the inimitability of Li Bai's song-poetry through the classical prose critic's framework of "vital energy", and rendering it identifiable as a tangible momentum.

Mount Skyland Ascended in a Dream: A Song of Farewell likewise reached the peak of its reception history in the Qing Dynasty:

School anthologies: Shen Deqian's *Anthology of Tang Poetry* commented: "Feigning a dream journey, it exhausts form and appearance to depict the fantasticality of the 'cave heaven'; yet upon waking, the mist and clouds vanish instantly. One realizes that worldly pleasures are but a dream—how could one bow to power and nobility in a dream? I shall depart instead, roaming famous mountains to live out my days. Though the poetic realm is wondrous, its vein of reasoning is exceedingly fine." This is a typical practice of the Style School interpreting Li Bai through the lens of formal rules, discerning profound meaning within the magnificent and bizarre dreamscape.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38244

Imperially authorized anthologies: In the 15th year of the Qianlong reign, *The Imperial Anthology of Tang and Song Poetry* placed Li Bai first among the six masters, selecting 375 of his poems. The imperial commentary on this piece reads: "Seven-character song-poetry originated from the *Songs of Chu* and Yuefu; it was not until Taibai that it exhausted the power of the brush, reaching the sublime realm of excellence… This piece is graceful and bizarre, defying neat categorization. Yet it proceeds from language to dream, from dream to enlightenment, from enlightenment to farewell, each section following from the last in perfect order. If the middle part seems blurred and dreamlike, it is merely the grand and grotesque quality of the wording. Hu Yinglin claimed it was 'without beginning or end, obscure and dim'—this truly shows one cannot speak of dreams." Using the argument of "sequential progression", it refuted the Ming-dynasty judgment of "without beginning or end", interpreting the unruly song-poem as an orderly organism.

Academic research: The Qing Dynasty completed a critical step beyond previous dynasties. Weng Fanggang stated in *Tonal Patterns Passed Down by Zhao Qiugu*: "Although its syntax and sound patterns are extremely varied, they all naturally fall into rhythm, not arbitrarily disordered." This defended Li Bai's "unruliness" from the perspective of prosody. Fang Dongshu analyzed its structure in *Zhaomei's Comments on Poetry*; Yan Junshou examined its rhyme scheme in detail in *Common Talks of an Old Scholar*. Qing-dynasty commentators advanced the impressionistic praise of the Ming Dynasty, rooted in aesthetic dimension, into analyzable, transmissible technical criticism.

The reception of Li Bai's poetry is closely bound up with the transformation of his image. Compared with previous generations, who regarded Li Bai as morally inferior to Du Fu, Qing scholars treated Li Bai as an independent object of academic research and a spiritual symbol: textual scholars authenticated and annotated his works; the Style School acknowledged a "divinely endowed" creativity beyond formal rules; the Personality-Spirit School saw in him "transcendent spiritual insight"; the Texture School analyzed his structural coherence; and the Poetry-Teaching School sought to incorporate him into orthodoxy.

The breakthrough of Qing-dynasty discourse on Li Bai lies precisely in the fact that Li Bai studies no longer took Du Fu as its frame of reference. Zhao Yi placed Li Bai first among ten poets, with no need to compare everything to Du Fu; Fang Dongshu interpreted Li Bai through the grammar of Zhuangzi. There existed differences between the views of Emperor Qianlong as ruler and those of mainstream Qing scholars: while Qianlong affirmed Li Bai's artistic achievements, he believed Li Bai fell short of Du Fu in ideological and didactic value. In contrast, mainstream Qing scholars such as Wang Qi opposed the practice of "scrutinizing deeply to find fault" with Li Bai; Pan Deyu explicitly stated: "When discussing Li and Du, one should not debate their merits. To revere Du and belittle Li is already to miss the point; to revere Li and belittle Du is even more contrary to moral cultivation."

The shift from "Li and Du mentioned side by side" to "discussing Taibai independently" marked a profound transformation of Li Bai's image completed in the Qing Dynasty. Its underlying driving force was the professionalization of Qing-dynasty scholarship and the pluralization of poetics. The textual scholarship principle of "not believing what lacks evidence" laid the philological foundation for Li Bai studies; the stylistic innovation of poetic commentaries enabled Li Bai to be discussed independently of Du Fu. The coexistence of multiple poetic doctrines in the Qing Dynasty—style, romantic spirit, personality, texture, and so on—provided multi-faceted interpretive space for Li Bai. When no single poetics could monopolize Li Bai, he was no longer confined to any comparative framework, but became a brand-new image confronted by the entire poetic tradition.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38244

4. Imitation of Li Bai by Qing-dynasty poets

Qing-dynasty poets frequently imitated Li Bai. Such imitation mainly took multiple paths, such as matching rhyme in emulation, adapting imagery, and reversing conception. For example, Qianlong composed a poem on rivers and mountains using the rhyme scheme of Li Bai's *The Hard Road to Shu*; those who adapted imagery drew on its images and spirit—for instance, Zhang Wentao adapted lines such as "The moon over Emei Mountain shines half the autumn" and "I entrust my sorrowful heart to the bright moon", recreating a Li Bai-style poetic realm in the expression of true disposition. These two tendencies, one manifest in court circles and the other in literary circles, precisely represent the different stances of official versus individual, style versus personality in Qing-dynasty reception of Li Bai. By examining the works and views of Qianlong and Zhang Wentao, one can investigate the specific features and profound implications of Qing-dynasty poets' imitation of Li Bai.

4.1. Zhang Wentao: spiritual inheritance under the doctrine of personality-spirit

Zhang Wentao, one of the three great masters of the Personality-Spirit School in the Qing Dynasty along with Yuan Mei and Zhao Yi, often adapted Li Bai's poetry. Zhang Wentao held that as long as one writes from true disposition, "ancient poets may coincide with me by chance, but one cannot generalize them all". In Zhang Wentao's own poetic system, adapting Li Bai's lines was an unintended encounter with ancient sages when "natural sound resounds of itself", and he drew a clear line from formalist imitation at the very theoretical starting point.

In terms of imagery adaptation, Zhang Wentao repeatedly entered into dialogue with Li Bai's poetic sensibility of the Shu region. Li Bai's *Song of Emei Mountain* weaves a travel map out of five place names: Emei, Pingqiang, Qingxi, the Three Gorges, and Yuzhou. Traveling through the same waters, Zhang Wentao wrote *Drinking with My Brother Haibai to Dispel Grief While Emei Mountain Is Out of Sight on the Boat at Qingshen*: "Before Qingshen County the river bends, white clouds shroud Emei Mountain out of sight." Like Li Bai, he sails on Pingqiang waters and looks for Emei but cannot see it. Where Li Bai wrote of the melancholy of the moon following the traveler, Zhang Wentao teases: "Emei avoids me on purpose—after all, I am strange to the mountain, not it to me" and "Now I know ancient poets often spoke in exaggeration, a momentary inspiration not a heartfelt conviction". He transforms the classical image into playful banter with the ancient sage.

The same is true of *On the Boat at Jiading*: "The Pingqiang River flows green and far, dreams chill with Emei's snow unmelted so far." It directly embeds two classic geographical landmarks from Li Bai's poetry—the Pingqiang River and Emei Mountain—yet depicts the scenery before his eyes through implicit allusion, overlapping and blending the Shu landscapes of two eras. Not a single word is copied, yet the shadow of Li Bai lingers everywhere. *Receiving a Letter from My Ailing Wife* reworks the syntax of "I entrust my sorrowful heart to the bright moon". Li Bai entrusts abstract sorrow to the moon, personifying the moon as a messenger—the epitome of romanticism. Zhang Wentao writes: "Dreams are far, pillow aslant, cloud-like hair in coils; / I send my sorrow by letter on the wild goose's bill". Retaining the core action of "sending sorrow", he replaces the medium from the moon to a letter, shrinking from the cosmic imagery of the High Tang to the private sphere of the Qing Dynasty—a typical case of "learning the conception without copying the wording".

Imitating not a single word yet capturing the entire spirit, Zhang Wentao's case demonstrates that Qing-dynasty imitation of Li Bai took place precisely under the theoretical banner of "anti-imitation".

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38244

4.2. Wang Shizhen: implicit application of imagery

Wang Shizhen's *To Zhu Fang'an at Emei, with Thoughts on Compiler Jiang Huchen*, a seven-character regulated verse collected in Volume 12 of *Yuyang's Poetry Collection*, reads: "Meeting in a far-off land, we grieve at graying hair, lines of tears fall at the sad frontier flute's air. In grief, dusk clouds close over Wu Gorge deep; gazing out, the moon slants o'er Emei in autumn sleep. By the abbot's lamp, who inquires after illness? A lone sail ten thousand li away, the traveler comes home at last. Old friends so near yet cannot meet, my dreams haunt the banks of the Pingqiang River fleet."

The couplet in the middle, "Gazing out, the moon slants o'er Emei in autumn sleep", adapts the line "The moon over Emei Mountain shines half the autumn". It takes three elements—"Emei", "mountain moon", and "autumn"—and introduces them with "gazing out", transforming "half the autumn" into "the moon slants in autumn". The character "slant" not only indicates the hour of late autumn night with the moon tilting west, but also subtly conveys the poet's posture of gazing at the moon while yearning for a friend. Not a single character is copied verbatim from the original, yet it fits perfectly with the imagery structure of the original line. It is an adaptation through "smelting", merging the original imagery with one's own meaning without a trace of stitching. The closing line, "My dreams haunt the banks of the Pingqiang River fleet", implicitly alludes to "Its shadow falls into the Pingqiang River and flows along". The phrase "Pingqiang River" is kept intact, while "flows" is changed to "banks"—a one-character alteration that is the very eye of the poem: Li Bai writes of the dynamic moon shadow flowing with the river, while Wang Shizhen writes of the static dream soul lingering by the Pingqiang River banks. Turning motion into stillness, the river's "flow" becomes the water bank's "stillness", which precisely corresponds to the poem's sentiment of longing for an old friend so near yet unreachable.

Li Bai's original poem takes Emei moon and Pingqiang River as its opening motif and concludes with "longing for you but cannot see you", a quatrain expressing longing for a friend through the landscapes of Shu. Wang Shizhen transplants this entire imagery framework into the framework of a regulated verse on longing for a friend. The first four lines depict scenery and convey longing, while the latter four shift to actual events. Applying Li Bai's imagery system, he composed a work of longing uniquely belonging to the Qing Dynasty.

4.3. Qianlong: emulation and appropriation from the emperor's perspective

Qianlong composed a poem following the original rhyme scheme of *The Hard Road to Shu*, with the preface ending: "If Li Bai saw this, he would surely be delighted and admit that the hardships of the Shu road he wrote of were nothing compared to what he never witnessed." Meaning that even Li Bai would have to admit, after reading it, that he had never seen true perils. The poem strictly follows the order of the original rhyme scheme, with corresponding rhyme for rhyme, achieving an almost verbatim precision of imitation, yet forming an extreme reversal in content.

Li Bai writes of the "hardship" of the Shu road, highlighting the individual's helplessness before heaven and earth. Qianlong, by contrast, portrays the Shu road as a triumphant ode. Every rhyme correspondence is a reversal of content. Behind the two lie different spiritual outlooks: Li Bai's "hardship" points to the perils of the universe and human life, while Qianlong's "ease" from the imperial perspective is a proclamation of imperial power over the empire's territory. He uses his status as monarch to overshadow the poet's imagination—formally a tribute and archaistic imitation, but substantively a negation and assertion of authority [8].

Even more intriguing is the line in the preface: "Taibai would surely split his sides laughing at this." Qianlong unilaterally prescribes Li Bai's reaction, using imperial power to completely rewrite

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38244

the traditional relationship in "archistic imitation", where later generations typically look up to their predecessors. Imperial power enables him to invite the banished immortal to "split his sides laughing" from a position of equality, even condescension. This completes an inversion of the relationship between the imitator and the imitated.

In summary, the Qing people's imitation and reception of Li Bai in poetic creation divided into three paths: transforming imagery, implicit application, and reversing original meaning. Zhang Wentao, Wang Shizhen, Qianlong, and others together constitute the complete framework of Li Bai's reception in the Qing Dynasty, demonstrating that Qing-dynasty poets' imitation of Li Bai was a poetic dialogue in which each took what they needed, rather than mere formal imitation of words and lines.

5. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, the reception history of Li Bai in the Qing Dynasty unfolds from three levels: expurgation and annotation of texts, evaluation and interpretation, and creative imitation.

At the textual and evaluative levels, the Qing Dynasty witnessed intense contention surrounding the "deletion" and "retention" of Li Bai's Yuefu poems. The expurgations by figures such as Tian Tongzhi and Lu Shen attempted to discipline the freedom of ancient-style poetry with the formal rules of regulated verse. In contrast, Qianlong's refutations and Wang Qi's annotations anchored the defense of textual integrity in didactic function. Meanwhile, Li Bai also completed a transformation of identity in the Qing Dynasty, shifting from an object of moral scrutiny in the Song and Ming dynasties to an independent academic object and spiritual symbol, appropriated by schools of style, personality-spirit, and others.

Introducing Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory provides a deeper interpretive framework. Assmann points out that cultural classics are not merely literary relics, but the ultimate source of a group's moral norms and legal order. Cultural memory sustains a group's collective identity and social recognition, and the power to interpret cultural memory is itself core cultural power—whoever can filter, annotate, and define the classics can implant their own ruling order into the group's collective consciousness.

At the same time, we also note that Emperor Qianlong, as ruler, carried out extensive refutations of and interventions in Li Bai's poetry. His actions essentially reflect a deeper question: how rulers establish their own authority through the shaping of cultural memory. The Qing Dynasty, established by the Manchus who entered the Central Plains, did not inherently possess orthodox status in the sense of Han Chinese culture. It therefore had to actively integrate into the Han Chinese cultural memory system centered on Confucian orthodoxy. This was not only the Qing imperial family's profound identification with Han culture, but also a practical ruling necessity: without being incorporated into this cultural memory framework, the dynasty would struggle to shake off the negative narrative of "barbarian invasion", and would fail to gain general recognition from the gentry and the common people. The compilation of *The Complete Tang Poems*, the imperial authorization of *The Imperial Anthology of Tang and Song Poetry*, and the appearance of Wang Qi's annotated edition were all essentially comprehensive state takeovers and systematic sorting of the classical cultural memory of Han Chinese culture.

Nevertheless, sharing cultural memory is not equivalent to passive and wholesale assimilation. Taking Qianlong's official interpretation of Li Bai as an example, the ruler was in fact reshaping the position of cultural memory—determining textual selection based on didactic value, disciplining free poetic style with legal order, redefining the poet's image with imperial power, and ultimately

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38244

completing the power construction of its own ruling legitimacy against the background of Manchu-Han integration.

The reception of Li Bai in the Qing Dynasty was not merely a literary phenomenon, but also refracted the deep-seated interaction between Qing-dynasty academic aesthetics and political power. Behind the three dimensions of textual retention and deletion, evaluative transformation, and creative imitation lie the convergence of pluralistic aesthetics and class demands in the Qing Dynasty, as well as the underlying logic by which the Qing dynasty reshaped classics through cultural identity, thereby consolidating the legitimacy of its regime and the foundation of its rule.

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