

# An Analysis of Li Bai's Maritime Perspectives in His Poetry and Prose

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## Abstract

The Sea in Li Bai's poetry and prose possesses different characteristics across various dimensions. From the perspective of natural ontology, the Sea in Li Bai's conception is vast, perilous, and yet crystal-clear. As an abstract carrier of emotions in humanity, the Sea embodies the vicissitudes of the world, shelters bruised spirits, and bears his wild and fanciful ideas. Meanwhile, the "emptiness" of the sea in his poetry also allows him to constantly see himself, achieving spiritual growth and freedom.

## Keywords

Li Bai; poetry and prose; maritime perspectives.

## 1. Introduction

Li Bai's poems and prose works are innumerable, with over a thousand pieces surviving to this day, making literature a second life for him. In his writings, the ocean is ever-present, continuously churning and unceasing. When exploring marine imagery in ancient Chinese literature, Ji Anxian paid special attention to the oceanic motifs found in Li Bai's works, noting that the poet's "rich imagination, bold exaggeration, fresh language, and exuberant style" resulted in a plethora of oceanic imagery. Among the various collections of Li Bai's poetry and prose available today, one that stands out for its significance and widespread influence is *Chronological Annotation of the Complete Works of Li Bai* (Zhonghua Book Company, 2020), edited and annotated by An Qi, Xue Tianwei, Yan Qi, and Fang Rixi. This paper examines the poems and prose pieces related to the Sea in this collection, combining them with Li Bai's life experiences to analyze the maritime perspectives expressed in his ocean-themed works, seeking insights and guidance from scholars and experts.

## 2. The Cognition of Sea by Ancient People

The earliest instance of the character Sea seen so far appears in the inscription on the Xiaochen Mi Gui, a Western Zhou bronze vessel unearthed in Xun County, Henan Province in 1931, which reads "cutting the sea eyebrow". The ancient script scholar Chen Mengjia interpreted "sea eyebrow" as meaning the coast or seashore. The general cognition of the Sea by ancient people can be found in the *Er Ya*, which records that "the Yangtze, Yellow, Huai, and Ji rivers are the four great rivers. These four rivers originate from here and flow into the sea." The *Shi Ming* distinguishes between the four rivers and the sea, noting that "sea means dim, as it mainly receives impurities and its color is dark and dim." The *Shuowen Jiezi* explains it as "a celestial lake that receives all rivers." It can be seen that the ancient Chinese people had a relatively vague understanding of the natural form of the ocean and often associated the vast and unexplorable ocean with mystical creatures.

The natural form of the ocean is the ontology of the Sea. Besides, the Sea also carries many abstract meanings. The Tang dynasty's Chuxue Ji records "small waters named as seas",

referring to some inland lakes as "seas", such as Pulai Sea, Qinghai, Luhun Sea, Tanmi Sea, and Yangchi Sea. [Xu Jian, Chuxue Ji, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2004, p. 115.] Zou Yan, a pre-Qin thinker, proposed a geographical theory of the Nine Great Provinces, stating that "what the Confucians call China is only one-eighty-first of the whole world. China is called the Red County of the Divine Land. Within the Red County of the Divine Land, there are nine provinces, which are the ones sequenced by Yu. They cannot be counted as provinces. Outside China, there are nine other Red Counties of the Divine Land, making up the so-called Nine Provinces. Each of these is surrounded by a minor sea, and people, animals, and birds cannot communicate across them. Each of these enclosed areas is considered a province. There are nine such provinces, surrounded by a vast ocean, marking the end of the heavens and the earth." [Sima Qian, annotated by Pei Yin, Sima Zhen, and Zhang Shoujie, Shi Ji, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1982, p. 2344.] Based on the fundamental understanding that the Central Plains are the center of the world, Zou Yan believed that the sea surrounds the land on all sides, marking the edge of the land, thus giving the Sea the meaning of a boundary.

Zou Yan further combined the boundary meaning of the Sea with the Five Elements theory, giving rise to the concept of the "Four Seas". The names of the "Four Seas" are not fixed. The *Shi Ming* explains that "the North Sea is to the north of it; the West Sea, to the west; the South Sea, to the south—it should be called the Southern Ocean, but to align with the names of the Four Seas, it is called the South Sea; the East Sea, to the east of it." The *Er Ya*, on the other hand, interprets it as "the Nine Yi tribes to the east, the Eight Di tribes to the north, the Seven Rong tribes to the west, and the Six Man tribes to the south, collectively known as the Four Seas." Guo Pu annotates that "the Nine Yi are in the east, the Eight Di in the north, the Seven Rong in the west, and the Six Man in the south, corresponding to the Four Wildernesses." The "Four Seas" thus transcend the limitation of oceans and encompass land as well. *The Xunzi Wang Zhi* chapter states, "In the North Sea, there are horses and barking dogs, yet China can domesticate and use them." The Tang scholar Yang Jing believed that "sea refers to remote and desolate places, not necessarily reaching the actual sea." The Sea not only refers to the ocean but also to coastal lands. Through the layered derivation of the "Four Seas", the cognitive scope of the Sea by ancient people expanded, encompassing not only the ocean but also sea areas, ethnic groups, border regions, and coastal areas.

Li Bai accepted the various cognitions of the Sea by ancient people, which resulted in the Sea in his sea-related poems taking on multiple forms. For example, he writes, "The sea tide flows south past Xunyang, and Niuzhu is as dangerous as Madang" (*Second of the Six Hengjiang Poems*), "The sea god passes by, and the evil wind turns back; the waves strike the stone walls of Tianmen and open them" (*Fourth of the Six Hengjiang Poems*), and "The moon's halo shrouds the sky, the wind and fog do not lift; the sea whale pushes back the hundred rivers to the east" (*Sixth of the Six Hengjiang Poems*). The entire poem depicts the vastness of the Sea, yet it is titled "Hengjiang". Hengjiang, or Hengjiangpu, is located in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River in today's Anhui province. According to the Tang dynasty's coastline, it faces the sea to the east, but it is still over a hundred li away from it. Again, he writes, "Within others' hearts, there are thousands of mountains and seas" (*Song of the Konghou*), "Horses and cows roam the North Sea, and slicing fresh meat is like a tiger feasting" (*Song of the Hu Horse Traders of Youzhou*), and "You uphold the southern frontier and pay homage to the East Sea" (*Sacrifice to Song Zhongcheng at Jiujiang*). Although the Sea is frequently mentioned in these poems, in the context, it mainly refers to the vast and expansive heavens and earth.

### 3. The Natural Sea in Li Bai's Poems: Ontological Forms

Li Bai's portrayal of the natural form of the sea focuses on the sea's ontology, the objectively existing ocean that meets the eye. He exhibits a multifaceted understanding of the natural sea, primarily from three perspectives: its grandeur, its danger, and its clarity.

The sea in its ontological form presents a vast and expansive scene. For instance, when writing about rivers flowing east into the sea, Li Bai pens, "Myriad crevices howl in unison with the wind, all streams converge into the ocean" (*Inscription on the Dharani Stupa of the Buddha's Ushnisha Vijaya at Chongming Temple*), and "Like clouds following the dragon, all waters rush to the sea" (*Ode to the Mingtang*), capturing the majesty of the sea embracing all rivers. Similarly, in describing the vastness where the sea meets the sky, he writes, "The sea turtle leaps, mountains and seas tilt, the four oceans surge with mighty currents" (*First of Two Poems on Parting from Scholar Jia*), and "The sun sets beside the sea, waters flow toward the horizon" (*To Secretary Cui Zongzhi*), boldly blurring the boundaries between the sea, heaven, earth, and mountains. Through this shifting of perspectives, Li Bai creates an interplay between reality and the imagined world.

While aware of the sea's grandeur and expansiveness, Li Bai is also well acquainted with its latent dangers. For example, when writing about sea waves, he states, "If the long wind fans the sea, it surges with waves of the deep blue ocean" (*Song for Ceng Zhengjun at Minggao*), revealing a fear of the formidable and unknown power in the towering waves. He also writes, "With one surge of the terrifying wave, the three mountains tremble" (*Sixth of the Six Hengjiang Poems*), "The deep waves toss the sun" (*Poem to a Friend to Dispel Slander*), and "Waves and tides vie in tumult, spirits and strange creatures flit in and out" (*Viewing the Dawn from Tiantai Mountain*), depicting scenes as if the heavens and earth were overturning, spirits and strange beings descending, and disaster imminent. Furthermore, he writes, "The sea water plunges straight down for ten thousand li, who does not speak of the sorrow of this parting?" (*On a Long Separation*), suggesting that even when the sea's surface is calm, its depths remain unfathomable and unpredictable.

Li Bai, while familiar with the sea's dangers, also strives to depict its serene clarity. For example, he writes, "When leaves fall, the sea water is clear, and one can see the legendary Fangpeng on the back of the sea turtle" (*To the Lu Zhengjun Brothers*), where the clarity and calmness of the sea evoke images of fairy mountains on the sea, captivating the imagination. Similarly, in *Sending Off Brother Changdong as the Magistrate of Poyang at Xunyang*, he writes, "People ride on the moon over the sea, sails descend into the sky on the lake," where the moonlight reflected on the sea transcends the mundane, dispelling any fear of the sea within. Sun Hong, analyzing the use of Sea motifs in Li Bai's poetry, offers an observation: "In Tang dynasty poetry depicting the sea, there are almost no poems like Li Bai's that show the sea's clarity and purity". Indeed, it is a distinctive feature of Li Bai's sea-related poetry to establish a strong association between the Sea and clarity and purity.

### 4. The Mundane Sea in Li Bai's Poems: Embodiments of Worldly Sentiments

The ocean exists not only in its natural form but also carries cultural significance. The sea in the cultural context is a secondary product created by humans around the ocean, reflecting strong human subjectivity and cultural coloring. Unlike the ocean in its natural state, this cultural representation is not entirely separate from it. In human-dominated social relations, the sea transcends its natural constraints and is endowed with numerous emotional and conceptual meanings. The various aspects of social relations and worldly affairs become embodied through the sea.

Li Bai utilizes the sea to depict a glorious era, as seen in the line "With a shout, the four seas tremble, and mighty waves surge up" (*Song of Ascending to the Clouds*). He also employs the sea to symbolize life's pursuits, such as in "How can I obtain a sword that reaches the sky, to cross the sea and slay the great whale?" (*Song of the Prince of lingJiang*). Through the "sea," he portrays the arrogance of Prince Yong, as evidenced in "The long wind fills the sails, and the ship's course cannot be turned back; the sea roars and mountains crumble, and the ancient moon is shattered" (*Eleven Songs on Prince Yong's Eastern Expedition - Eighth Song*) and "Flames of beacon fires spread across the mountains and reach the sea; flags flutter on both sides of the green mountains" (*Eleven Songs on Prince Yong's Eastern Expedition - Sixth Song*). He praises the talent and strategies of renowned generals like Ge Shuhan and the recluse Pei Shisi, with lines like "His vast and profound strategies surge like the sea and rivers; his unrestrained spirit races like wind and thunder" (*Narrating Virtues and Expressing Feelings to General Ge Shu*) and "The Yellow River falls from the sky and flows into the East China Sea, its vastness inscribed in my heart" (*To Pei Shisi*). His praise for the achievements of Gao Shi and General Sima reaches such heights as "General Gao guards the Huaihai region, laughing off evil influences with ease" (*Sending Zhang Xiucui to Visit General Gao Zhongcheng*) and "With an electric sword that reaches the sky, he slices through the great whale, and the sea waters part" (*Song of General Sima*). Matsuura Tomohisa believes that Li Bai's poetry possesses a unique sense of radiant splendor, primarily due to his strong longing and pursuit of bright and glorious things. The ocean, with its grandeur and magnificence, allows him to entrust all things that are magnificent and brilliant to its waves.

The sea also enables Li Bai to depict the brutality of war. He writes, "The sea roils as the giant turtle remains unslain, and fish and dragons rush about in unease" (*Song of the Fierce Tiger*), reflecting the turmoil before the onset of war. His lines "Drumbeats resound over the sea, and the military's aura fills the clouds" (*Song of a Soldier*) showcase the soldiers' heroism. In "Last year, we fought at the source of the Sanggan River; this year, we battle at the Conghe Channel. We wash our weapons in the waves of the Tiaozhi Sea and graze our horses on the snowy grasses of the Tianshan Mountains" (*Song of the Southern City at War*), he captures the desolate helplessness of ceaseless warfare spanning vast distances. He also writes about ordinary people in war, revealing their anxiety and fear, as in "The sea roils, and people suffer like fish caught in a net" (*A Poem of Deep Resentment Addressed to Official Wei*) and "My worried face mirrors the sea's color, and my short robe is changed to foreign attire" (*Five Poems Written on the Road of Escape - Second Poem*). Like them, he too is a fugitive, forced to leave his homeland due to war. Li Bai embeds the fierce dangers he perceives in the world into his poems involving the sea, corroborating historical records of the times.

Furthermore, Li Bai employs the sea to symbolize the bonds between people. He expresses blessings for a friend's smooth voyage across the sea in "I say that you will sail across the vast sea without encountering strong winds" (*Meeting Di Botong in Donglu*). He conveys the sorrow of parting, as seen in "The tides return to the sea, and the exiled person returns to Wu. We meet and ask about our sorrows, and our tears turn into pearls from the southern seas" (*Two Poems for Wei Junwei, the Military Officer of Jingzhao, Who Has Been Transferred to Dongyang - First Poem*) and "The sky is clear, and a solitary goose flies far; the sea is vast, and a lonely sail moves slowly" (*Sending Zhang Shezhi to Jiangdong*). He expresses the longing and disappointment of not being able to meet someone in "The waves flow towards the sea, and there is no way to see you again" (*Twelve Poems to a Distant Lover - Sixth Poem*). He also envies the tranquility and freedom of figures like Monk Ye and Monk Xingrong, as reflected in "Serenity is his joy, as he wanders leisurely by the sea" (*In Praise of Monk Ye of Lu Prefecture*) and "He rides a boat on the vast sea, following the waves wherever they take him" (*To Monk Xingrong*). He writes about his own disappointments in his official career and his melancholy, "The distant sea stirs with the wind, blowing my sorrow to the ends of the earth," and laments that his achievements "are like

a dream." He also sincerely praises the younger generation, such as Pei Shiqi, stating, "Pei is indeed outstanding, rising with great talent" (*An Early Autumn Gift to Pei Shiqi Zhongkan*). In Li Bai's works, these bonds are like streams converging into the sea, constructing the human world and supporting magnificent tales and oceans.

## 5. The Extrawordly Sea in Li Bai's Poems: A Shelter for the Spirit

The sea also serves as a repository for Li Bai's extraordinary and whimsical thoughts. The sea carries his endless imagination of fairylands, as evidenced in lines such as "Seafarers speak of Yingzhou, but it's hard to seek through the misty waves" (*Farewell Song after Dreaming of Mount Tianmu*) and "In the high hall, on the whitewashed wall, a picture of Penglai and Yingzhou; Before the candle, one glimpse reveals the clear waters of Cangzhou. The surging flood, the towering mountains, bright as if viewing Red City across the sea from Danqiu" (*Song on Viewing the Landscape Mural with My Cousin, an Officer in Jincheng*) and "Picturing the exotic birds of Penglai Mountain, imagining the ethereal Yinghai" (*In Praise of the Crane Painted in the Hall of Magistrate Xue of Jinxiang*). The fairy islands of Penglai and Yingzhou are constantly on his mind. He also writes of his admiration for immortals and his interactions with them, such as "The tower seems to rise from the sea of Penglai, the crane flies as if to the Jade Capital" (*Inscription on the Wall of Mr. Ziyang of Suizhou*) and "The sea waters are shallow and clear, where I seek the Peach Blossom Spring" (*The Immortal Riding the Colorful Phoenix - Imitating the Ancients, Poem 10*) and "Soaring over the three mountains of the sea, resting on the five sacred mountains of the land" (*The Future is Full of Hardships*). He wanders among the immortals, meets with them, and is advised by them to cultivate immortality, promising to traverse seas and mountains. Some scholars believe that Li Bai's life is closely linked to mythology. In fact, the sea in his poetry is largely associated with "wandering among the immortals". In these poems, he is the true protagonist of this journey. On the vast and clear sea, immortals ride the clouds and winds, exquisite fairy islands and mountains float, and seekers of immortality wander far from the earthly world, their thoughts soaring with the sea waves alongside the poet's.

At the same time, when Li Bai faces setbacks and disappointments in the mundane world, the Sea becomes a shelter for his spirit. When he feels frustrated in reality, he wants to run to the seaside. Perhaps he seeks "medicines hidden in the seas and mountains, mining lead on the banks of the Qingxi River" (*The Phoenix Flies Nine Thousand Feet High - Ancient Style Poem 4*) to gather herbs and refine elixirs, devoting himself to cultivating the Tao. Or he dreams of "clouds and mountains rising above the sea, people reflected in the mirror-like waters," and "tomorrow, I will shake off my robes and join the flock of seagulls" (*To Judge Wang, as I Return to My Retirement in the Screenfold Mountains of Lushan*) becoming a recluse, living by the clear, mirror-like seaside, accompanied by seagulls, withdrawing from the world. He might even consider simply leaving, as in "It is said that on the sea there is the island of Penglai," and "I wish to depart from here, never to return" (*Miscellaneous Poems*) and "Turning to see the seafarer unfurl his cloud-white sails, I want to follow him to the vast ocean" (*Song on Viewing the Landscape Mural with My Cousin, an Officer in Jincheng*). Seeking fairy mountains, heading towards the sea, he can do anything as long as he never returns to the world. In these poems, the sea tolerates his despair, his loud lamentations, and his grievances, allowing him to roam freely and exhibit chivalrous spirit despite the constraints of his time. It props up his "dignity" as a real-life failure and becomes his spiritual homeland where he can vent his frustrations and escape reality.

## 6. The Empty and Silent Sea in Li Bai's Poems: Seeing Oneself through the Sea

Indeed, the sea can embody the myriad forms of life in the world and provide Li Bai with an extraordinary spiritual experience. However, the sea is still too vast and too "empty" for humanity, and neither reality nor imagination can fill it. In an interview, Liu Weixiong analyzed the heaviness and vastness of the ocean and the insignificance of humanity in front of it, saying, "I always feel that facing the sea, I can't lift it, I can't move it. That kind of very heavy thing, you can't lift it... Even if you feel sunny and bright at this moment, soon the vastness and heaviness of the sea will envelop you," and "On such a sea, a solitary boat. The power of the sea is so strong that your efforts will all be in vain. Human life is so insignificant in front of it." In front of the sea, the true self has nowhere to hide. Li Bai could vigorously display his uniqueness, romance, and bright, high-spirited nature to others in his poems, but in the emptiness and silence of the sea, he had to honestly face and analyze himself.

He once compared himself to many extraordinary and rare seabirds and animals. For instance, in "Drinking from the Cangwu Spring in the morning, resting in the mists of the Azure Sea at night" (*To Zhang Sui of Raoyang*), he likened himself to a phoenix sleeping in the vast Azure Sea; and in "Behold the crane on the sea, how unlike the quail in the cage" (*Farewell to Zhang on His Return to the Capital After Completing His Term*), he was a free crane soaring over the sea. "The phoenix sings in the Western Sea, seeking a rare tree to rest upon in vain" (*Standing on the High Terrace, Ancient Style Poem 54*), he was the phoenix that traversed the vast Western Sea. "Crossing the layered clouds, traversing the great oceans. Stirring up the three thousand worlds to rise, swiftly soaring towards the nine ten-thousands" (*The Song of the Roc*), "Raising its head, it sprays snow from three mountains, lowering its head, it swallows the waters of a hundred rivers. Swimming with the tides, spreading its wings with the wind" (*In the Northern Sea There is a Giant Fish, Ancient Style Poem 33*), he was also the Kunpeng, capable of all things, soaring through heaven and earth. He said of himself, "I use the heart of heaven and earth alone, the floating clouds are my body" (*Facing the Snow, Bidding Farewell to the Six Fathers of Rencheng on Their Return to the Capital*), with heaven and earth as his heart and floating clouds as his body, he was filled with self-importance and desired to unfold his grand plans, yet things never went as he wished. When he was a phoenix, "Returning to fly over the distant sea, sleeping alone in the cold frost of heaven" (*The Hungry Phoenix Does Not Peck at Millet, Ancient Style Poem 40*), he was solitary, flying alone over the vast sea; as the Kunpeng, despite "The great roc soars, shaking the eight regions," it could not change the fact that "In mid-heaven, its strength fails" (*Song at the Roadside*). In his poems and essays, he repeatedly spoke of the conflict between the caution and stability needed to realize his aspirations and the arrogant freedom in his personality, which he could neither let go nor abandon, leaving him in an awkward, embarrassed, and indignant state, able only to cast everything into the vast, empty sea.

What about seeking immortals and Taoist? In the vast, boundless sea, he knew full well the emptiness of pursuing immortality. "Songzi nest in Jinhua, Anqi ascends to Penglai; these were ancient immortals, but where lies their ultimate transformation?" (*Drinking and Walking*). "I vainly visited the Emperor of Cangwu, and sought in vain for the immortals of the Minghai sea. I have heard that the Penglai sea is shallow, yet have I seen the three peaches ripen?" (*Autumn Reflections at Yimen*). The seas of immortals and the immortals themselves are utterly unfindable; the pursuit of immortality and Taoist are all in vain, mere indulgence in imagination and escape from reality. He once said, "At fifteen, I learned swordsmanship and visited all the dukes and marquises; at thirty, I matured in literature and presented myself to high officials and ministers" (*Letter to Han Jingzhou*). He traveled the whole country, visited all the dukes and marquises, and presented himself to high officials and ministers, hoping to unfold his grand plans, yet he constantly oscillated between hope and disappointment. In the eighth year of the

Kaiyuan era, Li Bai visited Su Ting and was praised as "a brilliant talent with an unstoppable pen", yet around the eighteenth year of the Kaiyuan era, he visited Pei Zhangshi multiple times and was ultimately rejected (*Letter to Pei Zhangshi of Anzhou*). He attempted to visit Princess Yuzhen and other high-ranking officials, all to no avail; in the twenty-second year of the Kaiyuan era, he visited Han Chaozong during a spring trip to Xiangyang, but again to no avail. In the first year of the Tianbao era, he was appointed as a "Royal Scholar-in-Waiting," but was dismissed and sent back just three years later. In the second year of the Zhide era, he joined the staff of Prince Yong, but was imprisoned and exiled to Yelang that same year due to the army's defeat. When all this was over, both reality and imagination lost their charm, and he had to face his own insignificance, the brevity of life, his unfulfilled ambitions, the swift passage of time, and boundless loneliness in the vast, lonely sea. He had to contemplate himself, time, and life. "The sea trader rides the celestial winds, taking his ship on a distant journey. Like a bird in the clouds, he disappears without a trace" (*The Merchant's Song*). He lamented his own uncertainty and loneliness, drifting like the merchant. He also "once played with the seawater and sighed at its three changes" (*To Wang Hanyang*), stirring the seawater and lamenting the vicissitudes of life. Fame, sorcery, and shackles gradually left him, and so "I grew old and lay by the sea, rejoicing once more in the clear sky and earth. Sick and idle, I have long been lonely, while the world's creatures flourish in vain" (*Visiting Xie's Mountain Pavilion*). Li Bai became a plain old man by the sea, neither joyful nor afraid. All he could see was a clear and silent world of sky and sea, and himself gradually aging under the natural laws of life and death. The emptiness that he once covered with imagination and avoidance was filled by experience and understanding. The sea reflected his figure, and in it, he achieved the unity of nature, reality, and imagination, reaching true spiritual freedom.

## 7. Summary

In general, sea has a strong relationship with Li Bai's feelings and life. In Li Bai's writing, the sea is vast, clear and dangerous. The diverse characteristics he gave to the sea make the sea embody the whole state of the world he saw, protect his frustrated spirit in reality, and carry unrestrained ideas, whether enthusiastic, unrestrained, ethereal or frustrated. And the emptiness brought by the vast sea also makes him constantly see and discover himself, so as to achieve spiritual growth and freedom.

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