

Awareness in Du Mu's Works and Their Reflection of the Late Tang Dynasty Atmosphere

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Abstract

Du Mu was a representative literatus of the Late Tang Dynasty, who personally witnessed the decline of the Tang Empire. His poems, rhapsodies, and prose not only possess literary charm but also profound ideological connotations, rather than just being full of gorgeous rhetoric. Centering on Du Mu's works, this paper focuses on "cultural identity" and "historical awareness", analyzes their core essence and specific manifestations, and further explores the style of the Late Tang Dynasty, for his writings embody the traces of that era. The study reveals that Du Mu's cultural identity is distinctive. He both adhered to the Confucian tradition of "governing the state and benefiting the people" while keeping up with the times. He cherished the culture of the Early and High Tang Dynasties and insisted on an elegant and implicit aesthetic pursuit in his creation, refusing to follow the prevalent flashy trend. His historical awareness is equally prominent. He reflected on the rise and fall of dynasties, critically examined history, delved into the considerations behind the choices of historical figures, and admonished the ruling class of his time through historical allusions, showing deep concern for reality. These two aspects are intertwined in his works, depicting the contradictions and perseverance of literati in the declining age and reflecting the social and cultural changes as well as the era style of the Late Tang Dynasty, thus making Du Mu's works a classic mirror reflecting the atmosphere of the Late Tang Dynasty.

Keywords

Du Mu; Late Tang Dynasty Atmosphere; Cultural Identity; Historical Awareness; Literary Creation.

1. Connotation and Expression of Cultural Identity in Du Mu's Works

1.1. Inheritance and Innovation of the Confucian Literati Tradition

The core of Du Mu's cultural identity is deeply rooted in the Confucian ideological system. The traditional literati spirit with "governing the state and benefiting the people" as its essence has built a solid spiritual foundation for him. However, he did not adhere rigidly to the existing framework of traditional Confucianism. Instead, based on the specific circumstances of the Late Tang society, he carried out innovative development of the Confucian cultural tradition in line with the times.

Born into a Confucian scholar - official family, Du Mu was deeply influenced by Confucian culture from an early age. His grandfather, Du You, spent years compiling *Tongdian* (Comprehensive Canon of Institutions), a classic that embodies a distinct pragmatic ideology, emphasizing that knowledge should serve practical governance. This concept exerted an indelible influence on the shaping of Du Mu's thought. Since childhood, Du Mu grew up immersed in Confucian culture, and the ideal of "cultivating one's moral character, managing the family, governing the state, and pacifying the world" has long been integrated into his spiritual blood became the core criterion of his life pursuit. Throughout his creative career,

he always closely linked his personal official aspirations with the rise and fall of the country, never deviating from the sense of responsibility of a Confucian scholar - official.

In his political essays, Du Mu fully demonstrated the practical character of the Confucian spirit of engaging in society. Faced with the worsening social ills of the Late Tang Dynasty, such as the escalating separatist regimes of feudal towns and the decline of military construction, he directly pointed out the drawbacks in his famous works such as *Zui Yan* (Critical Words) and *Shou Lun* (Treatise on Defense), unflinchingly analyzed the crux of social problems, and put forward a series of practical governance strategies and military countermeasures. These works are not empty theoretical elaborations but are full of profound reflections on practical governance, demonstrating the sense of responsibility of Confucian scholars who "take the world as their own responsibility" and confirming his firm adherence to the core values of Confucianism.

More commendably, Du Mu was not confined by the rigid elements in traditional Confucianism but carried out epoch - making innovations from a developmental perspective. In the Late Tang Dynasty, political corruption was rampant, social morality declined, and the traditional hierarchical concept gradually revealed its anachronistic side. In response, Du Mu took the initiative to weaken the strict hierarchical order in Confucianism, shifting his focus to the people - centered awareness and pragmatic spirit that rulers should have, making Confucianism more in line with the social reality needs of the Late Tang Dynasty.

In *Zui Yan* (Critical Words), by criticizing the improper governance in history, he indirectly denounced the governance drawbacks of the rulers of the Late Tang Dynasty, calling on those in power to put the people first and govern pragmatically. This combination of the traditional Confucian thought of "the people are the foundation of the state" with the social reality of the Late Tang Dynasty endows ancient Confucianism with new epochal vitality. Du Mu's cultural attitude of "upholding the core and reforming the drawbacks" not only reflects his reverence and adherence to the core values of Confucian culture but also shows the ideological vitality of literati in the Late Tang Dynasty who actively adjusted their ideological cognition and responded to the challenges of the times, providing a typical example for the inheritance and development of traditional culture in the context of social changes.

1.2. Emotional Nostalgia for the Splendid Culture of the Early and High Tang Dynasties

"The High Tang Dynasty was a period of prosperity marked by external territorial expansion and the unification of the Central Plains. Internally, it was a peaceful era of breaking the monopoly of aristocratic families and promoting openness and stability. This enabled people at that time to have an upward and forging spirit. Achieving meritorious deeds, pursuing fame and fortune in life, and benefiting the whole world became the common aspirations of poets. Those frontier poems are full of heroic spirit: "Don't laugh if we lie drunk on the battlefield; how many warriors have returned from battles since ancient times?" (Wang Han) and "Please don't talk about the reward of marquis; one general's success is built on the bones of ten thousand soldiers." (Cao Song) These two lines clearly show different views on war. The former is full of confidence, while the latter is only filled with sorrow and hesitation.

Although the poems of Li Bai and Du Fu go to two extremes, they both possess the lofty and broad perspective unique to the High Tang Dynasty. They cared about the world rather than personal gains and losses, and were free and unrestrained. Therefore, the atmosphere of the High Tang Dynasty gives people a sense of unrestrained joy, like drinking and singing heartily, showing a vibrant and prosperous vitality[1].

The prosperous atmosphere and splendid culture formed in the Early and High Tang Dynasties constituted the core spiritual sustenance in Du Mu's cultural identity system. His poems and prose are always permeated with deep nostalgia and affectionate recollection of this historical

golden age. The overall style of political clarity, strong national strength, and cultural prosperity presented in the Early and High Tang Dynasties form a sharp historical contrast with the declining and dilapidated situation of the Late Tang society. This significant era gap and realistic predicament prompted Du Mu to frequently recall the prosperity of the past in his creations to place his cultural ideals and spiritual aspirations. His representative work, *Three Quatrains Passing Through the Huaqing Palace*, artistically depicts the court life scenes during Emperor Xuanzong's reign. While implicitly criticizing historical events and the actions of the ruling class, it also contains deep nostalgia for the atmosphere of the High Tang Dynasty. The classic line in the poem, "Looking back at Chang'an, it is like a pile of embroidery; the thousands of gates on the mountain top open one after another," reproduces the prosperous scene of the Early and High Tang Dynasties through vivid scene descriptions, essentially reflecting Du Mu's deep yearning for the magnificent demeanor and cultural spirit of this historical period, and highlighting his adherence to the traditional prosperous culture in his cultural identity.

In literary creation, Du Mu consciously inherited the fine traditions of Early and High Tang literature. His poetry shows the elegance of Li Bai, the depression of Du Fu, and at the same time possesses the skill of constructing landscape artistic conception like Wang Wei and Meng Haoran. *A Quatrain on the Spring of the South of the Yangtze River* - "For a thousand miles, orioles sing, green leaves set off red flowers" - Among the four hundred and eighty temples, how many are veiled in the mists and drizzles?" - This line depicts the beautiful spring scenery in the south of the Yangtze River with a broad perspective and vivid brushwork, continuing the grand aesthetic characteristics of Early and High Tang poetry. *Walking on the Mountain* - "The stone path winds up the cold mountain slope; where white clouds rise, there are dwellings" - integrates delicate emotions into the description of scenery, possessing both the artistic conception beauty of High Tang poetry and the sentiment beauty of Middle Tang poetry.[2].

This emotional nostalgia for the culture of the Early and High Tang Dynasties is essentially a reflection of Du Mu's search for spiritual comfort and cultural belonging in the declining Late Tang Dynasty, and also reflects the collective recollection of the prosperous culture by literati in the Late Tang Dynasty.

1.3. Adherence to Aesthetic Pursuit in Literary Creation

In terms of aesthetic orientation in literary creation, Du Mu always adhered to the core pursuit of elegance and implicitness, resisting the flashy and extravagant trend of some works in the literary circle of the Late Tang Dynasty, and forming a unique literary style, which is also an important manifestation of his cultural identity. Du Mu upheld the creative proposition of "devoting painstaking efforts to poetry for the sake of excellence", adhering to the independence of literary aesthetics. His poetic language is concise and implicit, with... His profound and lasting artistic conception avoids the drawbacks of excessive refinement and explicitness in the Late Tang poetry. He also creates the beauty of sound and painting through neat antithesis, euphemistic rhyming, and the ingenious use of numbers and colors. At the same time, he uses a large number of allusions and other techniques to enrich the cultural connotation, fully showing the aesthetic pursuit of elegance and implicitness.

According to statistics, there are nearly 300 groups of verses in his poems with the characteristics of neat antithesis and euphemistic rhyming, scattered in 126 poems, all of which are quite distinctive. These rigorous poems are extremely rich in color beauty and musical beauty, such as 'Four hundred and eighty temples in the Southern Dynasties; how many pavilions and terraces are hidden in the misty rain' and 'Stopping the cart, I love the maple forest at dusk; the frost - stained leaves are redder than the flowers in spring'. These verses are neatly antithetical and easy to recite, with the hazy beauty of 'ancient temples' and 'misty rain', and the dazzling splendor of 'maple forests' and 'frost - stained leaves'.

In addition, the use of allusions in his poems is very dense. According to research, there are about 500 surviving poems by Du Mu, among which about 70% use allusions, mostly concentrated in themes such as historical nostalgia poems, political lyric poems, and farewell poems. For example, in *Chi Bi* (Red Cliff), 'If the east wind had not favored Zhou Yu, Qiaoyun and Qiaomei would have been locked in the deep Copper Sparrow Terrace. 'East wind', 'Copper Sparrow Terrace', and 'the two Qiaos' are associated with the historical events of the Battle of Red Cliff and Cao Cao building the Copper Sparrow Terrace to house his concubines.

Another example is "*Mooring on the Qinhuai River*": "The singing girls know not the sorrow of a fallen nation; across the river, they still sing 'The Song of the Jade Tree in the Backyard'." Here, 'The Song of the Jade Tree in the Backyard' refers to the poem written by Emperor Chen Shubao of the Southern Chen Dynasty, which is regarded as a tune of national subjugation.

In "*Ti Wujiang Ting*" (Inscription on the Wujiang Pavilion), 'committing suicide at Wujiang' refers to the historical event of Xiang Yu refusing to cross the river and committing suicide after his defeat.

These allusions serve the purposes of using the past to satirize the present, criticizing social ills, deepening emotions, expressing aspirations, simplifying writing, enriching implications, enhancing cultural connotation, and highlighting the poetic style. Each allusion endows the poem with rich cultural connotation, increasing the expressiveness and charm of the poetry, and fully reflecting his adherence to the aesthetic pursuit of elegance and implicitness in poetry.

2. Connotation and Expression of Historical Awareness in Du Mu's Works

2.1. Critical Reflection on the Rise and Fall of Dynasties

Du Mu's historical awareness is reflected in his profound insight and critical reflection on the laws of the rise and fall of dynasties. He broke away from the objective narration of traditional historiography, made value judgments on history from moral, political, and people's livelihood perspectives, and used the historical events of the rise and fall of dynasties such as the Qin, Han, and Sui to warn about the reality of the Late Tang Dynasty. "*A Fang Gong Fu*" (Ode to the Epang Palace) is a typical embodiment of his thought of learning from history.

In reflecting on the history of the Tang Dynasty itself, Du Mu paid special attention to the Anshi Rebellion as a historical turning point, believing that it was the key node for the decline of the High Tang Dynasty. The second poem of "Three Quatrains Passing Through the Huaqing Palace" - "Green trees in Xinfeng stir up yellow dust; several riders of the Yuyang spy return. On the peaks, a tune of 'Rainbow Feather' is sung; it is not until the Central Plains is destroyed that they come down" - criticizes Emperor Xuanzong's indulgence in pleasure and neglect of state affairs with sharp brushwork, revealing that the hedonism and political corruption of the ruling class are important incentives for the war. [3] This critical reflection on the rise and fall of dynasties is not mere historical nostalgia, but through the summary of historical laws, it provides a mirror for the rulers of the Late Tang Dynasty, reflecting Du Mu's strong sense of historical responsibility.

2.2. In-depth Exploration of the Fates and Choices of Historical Figures

The in-depth exploration of the fates and key choices of historical figures is an important and distinctive component of Du Mu's historical awareness system. He broke away from the simplistic cognitive framework of traditional historical evaluation that divides people into good or evil, meritorious or sinful. Starting from the complexity of human nature and the uniqueness of specific historical contexts, he carried out three-dimensional and multi-faceted interpretations of historical figures, showing a historical insight beyond his time.

In Du Mu's literary creations, the portrayal and evaluation of historical figures present rich emotional dimensions and ideological levels: there are sincere praises for the loyalty and sense

of responsibility of loyal ministers and good generals, deep sympathy for historical figures with ill-fated lives and unfulfilled aspirations, and in-depth analysis of the underlying motivations behind their actions and choices.

In the poem **Ti Shangshan Sihao Miao** (Inscription on the Temple of the Four Hermits of Shangshan), Du Mu focused on the special group of the Four Hermits of Shangshan during the late Qin and early Han dynasties. The sharp assertion in the poem-"The Southern Army did not bare their left sleeves; the four elders who stabilized Liu's regime actually destroyed it"-broke the simplistic positive image of the four hermits as "assistants". In traditional cognition, it is about "assisting the Han Dynasty and stabilizing the world". He deeply analyzed the choice of the four hermits to end their seclusion and assist Crown Prince Liu Ying, affirming their historical role in stabilizing the court with their reputation and prestige. Meanwhile, he pointed out that this choice indirectly laid the foundation for Lu Hou's usurpation of power and the turmoil of the Han Dynasty, demonstrating a profound understanding of the complexity of the consequences of historical figures' actions and avoiding simplistic value judgments.

In interpreting historical figures of the Wei and Jin dynasties, Du Mu also presented a unique perspective. The poem implies a dialectical reflection on historical figures adhering to their original aspirations and realizing their self - worth in the power structure. It emphasizes the restrictive and shaping role of the era environment on personal choices, as well as the counter - effect of personal choices on the historical process.

This in - depth exploration of the fates and choices of historical figures is essentially Du Mu's philosophical speculation integrating reflections on human nature, inquiries into fate, and insights into the times. He no longer regarded historical figures as flat symbolic existences, but restored their real situations and inner struggles as "people", making historical interpretation more warm and in - depth. This unique cognitive method not only greatly enriches the connotation of his historical awareness, but also endows...His works, with ideological depth and artistic appeal that go beyond literary aesthetics, provide a valuable reference paradigm for the creation of historical literature in later generations.

2.3. Warning of the Political Crisis of the Current Dynasty through Historical Allusions

Du Mu's historical awareness has always been closely linked to the social reality of the Late Tang Dynasty. Using historical allusions to warn of the political crisis of the current dynasty is the most practical expression of his historical awareness. In the Late Tang Dynasty, feudal towns were fragmented, eunuchs monopolized power, party strife persisted, and social contradictions were acute. Du Mu implicitly criticized the realistic politics and called on the rulers to carry out reforms by embedding historical allusions in his poems and prose. *"Mooring on the Qinhuai River"* - "Mist shrouds the cold water and moon shrouds the sand; at night, I moor near a wine - shop on the Qinhuai River. The singing girls know not the sorrow of a fallen nation; across the river, they still sing 'The Song of the Jade Tree in the Backyard'" - uses the historical allusion of Emperor Chen Shubao's "The Song of the Jade Tree in the Backyard" (a symbol of national subjugation) to criticize the corrupt trend of the ruling class of the Late Tang Dynasty indulging in sensual pleasures and ignoring national disasters, warning of the impending crisis of national subjugation. [4]

In his political essays, Du Mu directly quoted historical allusions... He used historical examples as arguments to enhance the persuasiveness of his political propositions. In *Zui Yan* (Critical Words), he cited the historical experience of dynasties such as Zhou, Qin, Han, and Sui in dealing with border issues, criticized the appeasement policy of the Late Tang court towards the feudal town problem, and put forward the proposition that "the best strategy is to govern oneself". In *Shang Li Situ Xiang Gong Lun Yong Bing Shu* (A Letter to Prime Minister Li on Military Affairs), by reviewing the military strategies of famous generals in past dynasties, he provided specific

references for the military construction and border defense governance of the Late Tang Dynasty. [5] Du Mu's use of allusions is unique, characterized by dense allusions, multiple uses of one allusion, double allusions, and allusions tailored to the subject matter. It not only makes the language of the works more implicit and concise, but also effectively deepens the theme of realistic criticism, fully reflecting his pragmatic spirit of "learning from history".[6]

3. The Reflection of Cultural Identity and Historical Awareness on the Atmosphere of the Late Tang Dynasty

3.1. The Spiritual Dilemma and Value Persistence of Literati in the Declining Age

The interweaving of cultural identity and historical awareness in Du Mu's works profoundly reflects the common spiritual dilemma and persistent value persistence of literati in the declining Late Tang Dynasty. In the Late Tang Dynasty, imperial power declined, politics was dark, the official aspirations of literati were difficult to realize, and traditional values were impacted, putting them in a spiritual dilemma of "advancing but having no way to realize their aspirations, retreating but being unwilling to sink". Du Mu's official career was rough throughout his life, and he was demoted and transferred to remote areas many times. His works not only contain expressions of frustration and self-consolation such as "Ten years of dreams in Yangzhou; I have won the reputation of a heartless man in the green mansions", but also show persistence in ideals such as "All my life, I have held the five-colored thread, hoping to mend the clothes of Emperor Shun", vividly showing the complex and contradictory spiritual world of literati in the declining age.[7]

In the dimension of cultural identity, Du Mu's persistent adherence to Confucian ideals and deep nostalgia for the magnificent cultural atmosphere of the Early and High Tang Dynasties are essentially a silent resistance to the chaotic social order and collapsed value system of the Late Tang Dynasty. Faced with the flashy trend prevalent in the literary circle of the Late Tang Dynasty, he always adhered to the aesthetic criterion of elegance and implicitness, using the independent character of literary creation to resist the erosion of vulgar trends. In the dimension of historical awareness, through critical reflection on history and warnings to reality, he tried to influence the political trend with the ideological power of literati and save the precarious fate of the dynasty. This spiritual state of adhering to ideals in difficulties and seeking hope in despair is a collective portrayal of literati in the Late Tang Dynasty. Du Mu's works embody this spiritual dilemma and value persistence in a concrete and textual form, becoming a vivid mirror of the spiritual world of literati in the Late Tang Dynasty.

3.2. Reflection of Social and Cultural Changes in the Late Tang Dynasty

From the perspective of social structure, the Late Tang Dynasty had entered a historical stage of declining centralization of power. The chaos of feudal town separation continued to escalate, and the traditional social order was facing the crisis of disintegration. This era change left a distinct mark in Du Mu's literary creations. In his famous political essays such as *Zui Yan* (Critical Words) and *Zhan Lun* (Treatise on War), he frequently focused on the core social contradiction of feudal town separation, analyzed the crux of the imbalance of power between the central and local governments with precise insight, and directly presented the turbulent situation of the political structure in the Late Tang Dynasty. The sharp criticism of the extravagant life of the ruling class in works such as *A Fang Gong Fu* (Ode to the Epang Palace) and *Three Quatrains Passing Through the Huaqing Palace* implicitly coincides with the extravagant trend of the ruling class in the Late Tang Dynasty, indirectly revealing the realistic dilemma of the growing gap between the rich and the poor and the increasingly acute class

contradictions at that time, and becoming a literary footnote to the imbalance of the social structure in the Late Tang Dynasty.

From the perspective of cultural development, the culture of the Late Tang Dynasty was in a critical period of transition integrating the old and the new. It not only inherited the spiritual core of the cultural tradition of the Early and High Tang Dynasties, but also nurtured new cultural characteristics emphasizing realistic criticism in the era of change. Du Mu's creation is exactly a vivid epitome of this cultural transition feature: his works are full of nostalgia for the magnificent atmosphere of the Early and High Tang Dynasties, showing the continuity of traditional culture; and through the innovation of Confucian tradition and the criticism of social reality with poems and prose, they reflect the epochal reform of culture. At the same time, the strong sense of historical reflection in his works echoes the generally awakened historical awareness of the literati group in the Late Tang Dynasty and the era trend of "learning from history", truly showing the spiritual desire of literati in the turbulent times to explore realistic paths through historical mirrors, and writing a vivid footnote to the cultural transition of the Late Tang Dynasty.

3.3. Reflection of Aesthetic Orientation and Literary Trends in the Late Tang Dynasty

Du Mu's cultural identity and historical awareness are not only a concise expression of his personal spirit, but also an important window to observe the evolution of aesthetic trends and the changes of literary thoughts in the Late Tang Dynasty, clearly outlining the development context of literature in this era. Compared with the magnificent and grand atmosphere of High Tang poetry and the depressed and sorrowful style of Middle Tang poetry, the aesthetic characteristics of Late Tang poetry gradually tended to be gorgeous, exquisite, implicit and subtle. Du Mu's creation accurately conforms to this trend. His poems such as *A Quatrain on the Spring of the South of the Yangtze River* and *Walking on the Mountain* construct elegant language with neat antithesis and euphemistic rhyming, possessing the "charm of quiet beauty and late fragrance", fully showing the pursuit of exquisite language art in Late Tang poetry. At the same time, the sense of historical vicissitudes and realistic anxiety contained in the poems endows the gorgeous rhetoric with a profound emotional core, ultimately forging a unique artistic style of "elegant, bright and sharp", becoming a typical representative of the aesthetic trend of the Late Tang Dynasty. In terms of literary thoughts, the spirit of realistic criticism in Late Tang literature became increasingly prominent, and "using literature to benefit the world" became a common value pursuit of the literati group. Du Mu's creation can be called a typical example of this trend. His poems, rhapsodies, essays and other works all have distinct realistic pertinence, often using historical criticism to warn of reality, and fully exerting the social function of literature to serve practical purposes. The prevalence of historical nostalgia themes in the Late Tang Dynasty is closely related to the general awakening of historical awareness among the literati group. Du Mu's historical quatrains are not only numerous in quantity, but also have remarkable artistic achievements. His famous historical poems such as *Ti Shangshan Sihao Miao Yi Jue* (A Quatrain Inscribed on the Temple of the Four Hermits of Shangshan) and *Chi Bi* (Red Cliff) carry profound historical philosophy and realistic concern in a concise and condensed form, pushing the artistic expression of historical themes to a new height. This creative paradigm that integrates aesthetic pursuit, realistic concern and historical awareness has profoundly influenced the development trend of Late Tang literature, and also reflects the persistence of literati in the turbulent times to adhere to their ideals and realize their self-worth through literature, injecting lasting spiritual power into Late Tang literature.

4. Conclusion

Du Mu's works are undoubtedly treasures of Late Tang literature, with rich connotations and unique values, serving as a living mirror reflecting the atmosphere of the Late Tang Dynasty. The core of his cultural identity is the Confucian literati tradition. He cherished the prosperity of the Early and High Tang Dynasties, adhered to the aesthetic of elegance and implicitness in his writing, and did not follow the flashy trend of the Late Tang Dynasty. This not only maintained the root of traditional culture, but also showed that literati in the Late Tang Dynasty were not complacent and were always exploring innovations. Du Mu had a certain sense of historical awareness, with a clear understanding of the rise and fall of dynasties; he always used historical allusions to remind the rulers of his time, caring about politics with sincere realistic concern, which showed that his insight and sense of responsibility were ahead of his time. These two aspects are mutually reflected and complementary in his works. His rational spirit of "learning from history", pragmatic attitude of "serving practical purposes", and adherence to cultural tradition can still provide useful enlightenment for contemporary society. From an academic perspective, the cultural identity and historical awareness in Du Mu's works provide a solid textual basis for the study of the social and cultural history of the Late Tang Dynasty; from a practical perspective, his pragmatism and adherence to cultural tradition can also give us a lot of inspiration today. Moreover, in the context of international academic exchanges, in-depth study of Du Mu's works can not only make Chinese classical literature known and recognized by more foreigners, but also provide an important reference for the study of the relationship between literati's works and the era atmosphere.

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