Journal of Language, Culture and Education; Vol.3, No.6; 2026
E-ISSN: 3006-3213 P-ISSN: 3006-3205
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70267/jlce.v3n6.2736
Published by: Zeus Press

A Comparative Study of the Heroic Boldness Style of Li Bai and Su Shi—From the Perspective of Religious Spirit

Ruiting Huang*

School of Chinese Language and Literature, University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (UCASS), 102488, Beijing, China

**Corresponding author: Ruiting Huang.*

Abstract

The poetry of Li Bai and Su Shi is renowned for "heroic boldness" (haofang), yet their spiritual orientations are distinct. From the perspective of religious poetics, this research examines how the Daoist spirit and the Confucian-Buddhist-Daoist syncretism dominated by Chan Buddhism shaped different styles of their heroic boldness, focusing on spatial experience, temporal consciousness, and identity. This paper argues that Li Bai developed a "breaking-free" heroic boldness from the Daoist identity of the banished immortal, in contrast, Su Shi formed a "settling-in-place" heroic boldness through the integration of the three teachings. The two modes of heroic boldness represent different aesthetic orientations of the Tang and Song dynasties, offering two complementary spiritual paths for later Chinese literati. By researching literary creation styles via religious thought, this study attempts to understand the spiritual world of Tang and Song literati and to reveal the transformation of the zeitgeist behind.

Keywords

Li Bai, Su Shi, heroic boldness, religious poetics, comparative study

1. Introduction

Since time immemorial, the writings of Li Bai and Su Shi have served as the center of literary criticism due to their unique heroic boldness style, but "heroic boldness" is expressed by different spiritual temperaments in their writings (the concept of heroic boldness as presented in this paper is based on the aesthetic principles of "heaven winds howling, seas and mountains vast" in Sikong Tu 24 modes of poetry, which means that the poet views the limits of space and time and identity binding as transcendent, and the associated language). The current literature has largely accounted for the divergence in two ways that is, the first one is ascribed to the change in the spirit of life in High Tang into a Song-style culture, whereas the second, based on the differentiation of the external and internal alchemy in Daoism [1], the youxian (roaming immortal) tradition, or even the impact of Chan Buddhism [2], is that the method of religious cultivation played a role in their literary writing. Nevertheless, these works either take on a macroscopic description or discuss a singular belief, and have not yet demonstrated the connection between religious spirit and poetic style in a systematic way. With this in mind, the current paper will start with the point of view of religious poetics and pay attention to the significant role of religious spirit in the process of literary creation and consider how Daoism and the three-teaching syncretism led by Chan Buddhism defined the diverse heroic boldness styles of Li and Su.

© 2026 The Author(s). Authors retain copyright in their articles.

This paper will follow the logic of the argument based on the phenomenon in the cause, the form, and the spirit: initially, a research question will be formulated and literature on the topic will be surveyed; subsequently, the spiritual origins of the heroic boldness of Li and Su will be examined in three areas- spatial experience, time consciousness, and identity; lastly, the research results will be generalized and the constraints and future of the research outlined.

2. Religious Spatial Experience and the Morphological Differences of Heroic Boldness

The experience of space plays a vital role in poetic style formation. The two different images of the heroic boldness of Li Bai and Su Shi can be explained by the fact that there is a structural disparity between the celestial viewpoint and the earthly dwelling of their internalized spatial experiences. The next section of this chapter will begin with religious spirit and then explain how it is merged with the essence of poetic categories, realized as poetic methods, which ultimately define the physical manifestation of heroic boldness style. The article discusses the way Daoist youxian provided Li Bai with the perspective of "observing things from heaven," and the three-teaching syncretism led Su Shi to the way of "observing things through things."

2.1 Li Bai's Celestial Perspective

In the poetry of Li Bai, the poet usually watches the human world on high and his heroic boldness comes from the heavenly perspective of the youxian tradition in the Daoist faith. It is very similar to the concept of the free spirit in Daoism, which is "roaming the mind in the great void,", which guides the poet to imagine soaring to the top, to look out across the universe, to ride on clouds and cranes. After such images recur in works, it becomes natural to the poet that he should overlook things at a distance, observe them far away and even look back down to the earth at a distance.

On the technical level of poetry, Li Bai frequently shifts easily between the world of humans and celestial spheres, embodied by a chain of images like "ascending heights, gazing afar, and soaring upward." The ascent of Li Bai is not the act of standing on a mountain summit and looking down at the earth, but rather the use of one as a springboard to the cosmos (the Huainanzi·Qisu Xun states: "The past, present, and future constitute the zhou; the four directions and above and below constitute the yu"; in this paper, "cosmos" refers to this formulation, which means the sphere of infinite time and space and the unity of heaven and mankind). His first half of the poems tends to lie within the human world, but in the second half, it takes off to the cosmos. Upon the shift in point of view, the poet finds himself wandering alone in the ninth heaven, whilst the physical body usually remains behind, creating a sense of breaking free of the body, where "body in the dust, mind roaming the great void." "Ascending Mount Taibai" as an example, "Taibai speaks to me, opening the heavenly gate for me" [3] - the poet does not clarify, under what conditions he has arrived at the celestial sphere, but he just passes the space through the dialogue; in "A Song of Dreaming of Mount Tianmu and Leaving Farewell," "Feet clad in Xie Gong's clogs, I climb the cloud ladder. Halfway up, I see the sea sun; in the air, I hear the heavenly rooster" [3] is even more characteristic: the poet unexpectedly depicts mountain climbing in terms of rising into the celestial world, de-emphasizing the description of the ascent process and immediately presenting its outcome.

Such spatial experience comes out of the conception of the otherworld [4] of the Daoist youxian. In the Daoist universe, the heavenly realm is a real reality; immaterial beings, jade maidens, jade towers, and jade mansions all form a place that is radically separate from the world of humans. This image was internalised by Li Bai into the spatiality of poetry; the poet flies through the air, and his heroism is expressed by releasing himself from the bonds of the human world. However, such study of the Daoist spirit does not end here; he also assimilated other ideas like external alchemy, internal alchemy, and visualization of the Shangqing school, allowing him, during his quest for ascent, never to forget the pain of the earthly world. "Song of the Dingdu Protector," "Setting out upstream from Yunyang, both banks abound with merchants. When the Wu oxen pant at the moon, how bitter the towing of boats" [3]- a straightforward description of the labor of the boat trackers, the canal banks are very narrow and tight, with no trace of ascent. Li Bai speaks about the sad trivialities of the human world; his desire to rise and his attachment to the human world are tearing them apart, and sometimes this gives his heroic style a more complicated tragic appearance.

© 2026 The Author(s). Authors retain copyright in their articles.

2.2 Su Shi's Settling within the Human Realm

In contrast to Li Bai, who was outwardly breaking free, Su Shi would select the inner path of convergence as his heroic boldness. Such a spatial experience can be defined as "settling within the human sphere", which means that the poet has become aware of unlimited meaning in the limited human world of everyday life. It is a result of the integration of Chan Buddhism's idea of "ordinary mind being the way", Daoism's "shaping according to things," and Confucianism's "acting according to one's position."

According to Mazu Daoyi, "The ordinary mind is the Way" (Jingde Chuandeng Lu, Vol. 28), bringing enlightenment to the mountains and forest and reclusion to normal human relationships, so Su Shi did not seek transcendence like Li Bai did- that was the ontological foundation of the spatial experience in his creation. As he wrote in "Reply to Bi Zhongju's Letter": "In the past, Chen Shugu loved discussing Chan and considered himself to have reached the highest level, disparaging what I said as shallow. I once told Shugu: 'What you discuss is like food—dragon meat; while what I have learned is pork. Between pig and dragon, there is a difference, but while you talk of dragon meat all day, it is not as good as my eating pork, which is truly delicious and truly satisfying.'" [5] - focusing on the functional application in everyday life, "responding to situations and interacting with the world - all is the Way". On the methodological plane, Su Shi adopted the Daoist flexibility of shaping things based on their nature, and in the Zhuangzi•Dechong Fu, the concept is explained by Guo Xiang, who interpreted it as each following their nature. He converted this idea into the literary device of giving shape to things based on things, not forcibly altering the natural condition of objects to satisfy subjective feelings- this stands in a very stark contrast to the exaggeration methods used by Li Bai in his poems.

Moreover, Confucian thought served as an ideological basis of this spatial experience. "The noble person acts according to his position and does not desire what is beyond it" (Doctrine of the Mean, chapter 14). This idea was incorporated in the life practice of Su Shi, who, regardless of being in court or in exile, was able to accomplish what needed to be done without grumbling at fate or faulting others. Confucian thought of practical statecraft had a profound effect on Su Shi in his youth, but he eventually embraced the comfort of his soul in Chan Buddhism and Daoism as a result of disappointments in his governmental work and several exiles. These three teachings slowly permeated him, and Su Shis spatial experience became a combination pattern of "Chan as substance, Dao as function, Confucianism as realm"- Chan Buddhism defined the main trend of perfection in the world of people, Daoism offered the particular form of conformity to the world, and Confucianism offered this option an ethical foundation. Using "Calming the Wind·Pay No Attention to the Sound of Rain Beating Through the Forest" [5], it shapes things based on things, and let the wind, rain, bamboo staff, straw sandals etc., take their natural forms without any exaggeration or distortion, nor by inflicting the author's personal feelings. There is no change of things due to human desire and there is no passivity of man under the pressure of things; in such a writing there is no opposition between the subject and the object, therefore, the poet is not subjugated by the material conditions and retains his own high spirits and calmness even in the middle of wind and rain.

To sum up, the three teachings had a joint impact on how Su Shi fell into the human world, namely Chan Buddhism provided the primary cognition of the everyday being the Way, Daoism gave the practical way of adapting things, and Confucianism gave it the moral quality of not complaint and blame. This spatial experience causes Su Shi's heroic courage to acquire a harmonious shape, not to avoid restricted space, but to perceive the infinite in the finite.

2.3 Differences in Spatial Experience and the Divergence of Heroic Boldness Forms

The various means of spatial experience may eventually be expressed in terms of the distinction between Li Bai and Su Shi, i.e., the breaking-free heroic boldness and harmonious heroic boldness respectively.

In terms of poetic features, the discrepancies in the two could be seen in the following areas: To begin with, Li Bai favors large spectacles, including the sun and moon, the Milky Way, Kunlun, Penglai, immortals, jade maidens, among others, magnifying the space to infinity; Su Shi loves ordinary things, including river water, bright moon, cultivated fields, wine cups, mountain colors, stream sounds, showing the infinite in the finite. Secondly, Li Bai is used to leaping vertically between heaven, earth, human beings and gods, fast in pace and without any logical connection, whereas Su Shi would usually give the progression of scenes on the same plane using coherent and natural transitions. Thirdly, the mixed-line verse style of Li Bai allows the turbulence

© 2026 The Author(s). Authors retain copyright in their articles.

of space to occur both in ascending and descending directions; Su Shi has a relatively regular rhythm in all forms of heroic boldness poetry, and this is where the impression of spatial stasis comes to mind.

Nevertheless, this duality is merely a separation of the prevailing trend, but not a strict binary division. The gentle meditation and stillness of Li Bai are reflected in the phrase: "Gazing at each other without tiring, only Mount Jingting"; Su Shi is also seen as having the universal outlook: "The great river flows east, waves washing away the gallant figures of a thousand ages." Nevertheless, the main features of their heroic boldness styles can still be quite distinct: Li Bai, in his heroic boldness, always has such an urge to escape the human world, whereas Su Shi, in his heroic boldness, is the openness to still feel the infinite when stepping on the earth. They are both called the same, heroic boldness, but due to the essential difference in the space experience they have different forms - dynamic and static, ascendant and descendant, liberating and harmonic.

3. Religious Temporal Consciousness and the Emotional Undertone of Heroic Boldness

Time representation in a poem tends to be an expression of the poet's feelings. The heroism of Li Bai and Su Shi is also different, one sorrowful and one calm, in the emotional undertone that is associated with their perception of time.

3.1 Li Bai's Instantaneous Cosmos

Among the most popular motifs in the works of Li Bai is the passage of time. He keeps writing images of the flowing river, fleeting light, and passing traveler, and thus he portrays the feeling of lamenting about the transience of life. It can be related to Daoist philosophy. The statement was made by Zhuangzi: "Between heaven and earth, human life is like a white colt passing through a crevice—gone in an instant" (Zhuangzi·Zhibei You), and also: "The birth of things is like a gallop, like a race; nothing moves without changing, nothing passes without shifting" (Zhuangzi·Qiushui). The awareness of time, the passage of time, to a certain degree, is an extension of the Daoist perception of time. In the entire course of his life, both in the quest for immortality and the investigation of the Way, Daoist ideas "were fused into his poetry, imprinting the 'Dao' seal on his poetry from ideological content to artistic style" [6]. He amplified this mourning over the shortness of life in Daoist thinking to a pressing concern in his poetry.

In Daoism, it is believed that one may live long and see forever by cultivation, which is not bound by time limits, but this longevity ideal paradoxically made Li Bai even more restless. The direct expressions of sorrow over the fleeting nature of time constantly recur in the poetry of Li Bai, "Ancient Airs": "The countenance is like flying lightning, the scenery like drifting wind. The grass turns green, then frost has already whitened; the sun sets in the west, the moon rises again in the east," and also "How short the white day is; a hundred years are bitterly easy to fill" [3]. "I fear the rosy countenance will shift" [3]. The poet often employs such words as fear and bitter in regard to time, which discloses the restlessness of the poet when perceiving the gap between the ideal and the reality. The more he had faith in longevity, the lesser tolerable was the brevity of a hundred years that were bitterly easy to fill [3]. It is a desire that is still unrealized, but, as they say, time waits on none and in a moment silk is already formed [3] - individual existence keeps slipping away and the dream of longevity becomes the opposite source of anxiety. Here, he again and again writes in his poems the sadness of not being able to match Master Guangcheng, riding the clouds and driving light swans [7]. In this contradiction, he was able to express his inner turmoil only through poetry; hence, his heroic boldness was exactly the result of this agitation it is the strong emotion brought about by the discrepancy between the ideal and the real.

The fact that life decays quickly made Li Bai anxious, which led to a lyrical rhythm in his poetry. He was well versed in seven-character songs, particularly the mixed-line form where lines had different lengths. As Ye Jiaying notes about the mixed-line songs of Li Bai: unpredictable in change [8]; this is an open form that exactly suits the emotional shifts of Li Bai - sometimes rising, at other times stalling. As an illustration, one may refer to the four lines of the poem "Bring in the Wine," the four lines "Do you not see the waters of the Yellow River coming from heaven, rushing to the sea never to return? Do you not see the bright mirror in the high hall grieving over white hair—at dawn like black silk, by dusk turned to snow" [3] The lengths of the lines interweave, sometimes tense, and sometimes relaxed, contrasting the speed of the ten-thousand-mile-long Yellow River and the white hair at dawn and dusk; one majestic and heroic, the other turning into a profound lament and helplessness. In contrast to the deliberate development of an idea, the flexible and variable

© 2026 The Author(s). Authors retain copyright in their articles.

mixed-line form is more effective at representing the author in their intense emotional turmoil in the face of the reality of the rapid decline of life and its immediate void.

Although he knew very well that life was ephemeral and longevity difficult to come by, Li Bai wrote with a tragic tint of intense struggle, which makes sorrow an undercurrent emotion to his heroic boldness. The tighter you hold on to longevity, the greater the suffering caused by the shortness of real life; however, Li Bai did not sink under this pain, he made it a source of life bursting outwards. “When life is merry, one must fully enjoy; do not let the golden goblet face the moon empty” [3] - despite knowing that everything will disappear, Li Bai would allow himself to go all-out. His heroic boldness is a kind of vigorous bragging prompted by the emergency caused by the tragedy of life; exactly since the tragedy of life is short-lived and irreversible, the poet takes the present more passionately; this tragic heroism of knowing it can be done but doing it anyway is the internal motivation behind his heroic boldness.

3.2 Su Shi’s Present-Moment Perfection

In contrast to the anxiety of Li Bai, Su Shi has been observed to have a sense of calm as regards the nature of time. In the poem Sent to Canliao, Su Shi suggests a poetic perspective that says, in stillness, one can understand all motions, and let the myriad things speak their own principles by ending the agitation within [2]. The notion is very similar to the spirit of Chan Buddhism; Chan suggests the idea of giving rise to the mind without residing in the past, without being anxious about the future, but resting exclusively in the present. Once time is no longer perceived by the poet as a linear path, there is no need to run away from the passage of time or be fearful of its course. Moreover, the principle of Daoism, which is the acceptance of the times and accommodation to the situation, and the principle of Confucianism, which is acting in accordance with one's status, also seep into the manner in which Su Shi perceives time. Su Shi combined three schools of thought, and when he was perceiving time, he did not adhere to the notion of time. That is why his works are mainly characterized by a balanced relationship between self and time.

This harmonious coexistence is illustrated in the works of Su Shi with an example that can be considered relatively common, namely: “Viewed from the perspective of what does not change, then things and I are both inexhaustible” [5] - starting with the clinging to the flow of time to realizing the eternity of the moment, the poet thus transcends spatiotemporal constraints, and in the dialectical reflection of change and non-change, he harmonizes himself with the world, equalizes people and phenomena, and enters the enlightenment of the present moment, transforming the small joys and sorrows into the great transformation of the cosmos, gaining a broad-minded approach of going with the situation and having joy in all places. This change could be made more obvious by combining it with Su Shi’s experiences of life. Upon reaching Huangzhou in the first place, “Startled, I turn back, with regret no one understands” [5]—the time of exile was long and hard to endure; later, “Eating three hundred lychees a day, I would not decline to remain a Lingnan native forever” (“A Quatrain on Huizhou”) (A Quatrain on Huizhou) - also an exile, but the author paid attention to the current moment, rather than taking the past or the future as objects of spiritual reliance, and reached a compromise between self and time, so the lines are filled with an ideal mental condition that is satisfied with the present.

However, this does not imply that Su Shi was not hurt or sad during hard times. Neither of these sentiments is hidden in his writings, such as in “The Cold Food Observance,” “The lord’s gate is nine layers deep, the ancestral graves ten thousand li away. I too would weep at the end of the road, but dead ashes cannot be blown to life,”: and in “Reply to Li Duanshu’s Letter,” he states: “Since my offense, I have deeply isolated myself… Of all my lifelong relatives and friends, not a single word has reached me; letters sent to them also receive no reply” [5] - both describe the feeling of loneliness that there is no way to serve the country and no path to return home, reflecting the powerlessness of the poet and his vicissitudes in the face of real challenges. In his suffering, Su Shi had a sense of impermanence in the world, but his heroic boldness eventually returned to stillness; this calm came about after an ongoing struggle, which stems back to his inner peace after coming to terms with and living alongside time. The inner strength is probably the personality basis of Su Shi heroic boldness, which allowed him to be at peace with himself, focus on the perfection and happiness of the present, avoid the eternal future in order to not be bound by the passage of time. Su Zhe recorded his brother in “Epitaph of the Late Elder Brother Zizhan Duanming”: “Toward others, when he saw goodness he praised it, as if fearing he might fall short; when he saw evil he rejected it, as if fearing he might not do so thoroughly; when he saw righteousness he was brave enough to act, without regard for his own harm”—inner fortitude may be the

© 2026 The Author(s). Authors retain copyright in their articles.

personality foundation of Su Shi's heroic boldness, enabling him to maintain inner peace, focus on the perfection and happiness of the present, not pursue an eternal future, and thus not be trapped by time's passage.

Moreover, the Qing dynasty scholar Yang Tingzhi wrote commenting on Twenty-Four Poetic Modes: "In hao, I have what can cover the world; in fang, things cannot fetter me" (Shipin Qianjie), the heroism is not in the tone, nor in the momentum, it is in the spirit unbound. Su Shi can be said to have heroic boldness because its spiritual essence is no more external breaking-free but internal unboundness. Time cannot bind him; by settling in the present he achieves a perfection that is not dependent on external questing this perfection may be viewed as an escape of time. Thus, Su Shi does not express his anxiety by rushing the tempo, but rather gives himself permission to have his feelings come naturally, free of restraint.

3.3 Differences in Temporal Consciousness and the Divergence of Heroic Boldness Emotions

The perception of time by Li Bai and Su Shi are different. Li Bai tries to achieve longevity as a means to overcome the passage of time, trying to overcome the limits of time itself; Su Shi does not see time anymore as something that can be conquered, but rather chooses to embrace the present moments. Time passing causes Li Bai anxiety; Daoism offered him the idea of longevity, but it also rendered him particularly vulnerable to the rapid passing of time- this anxiety takes on the form of a frenzied lyrical tempo and a melancholy emotional undertone in his work. The perception of time by Su Shi is more focused on the perfection of the present moment; Chan Buddhism offered him the attitude of non-attachment to life, which comes across in his writing as a peaceful and tranquil emotional undertone.

There are two perceptions of time, there are two styles of heroic boldness, behind each of them lies a different understanding of time of different religious spirits. Daoism means eternity and seeking longevity, therefore brevity is the cause of anxiety. Chan Buddhism considers the present as stabilizing, thus passing the time is no longer an oppression to human beings. The emotional differences in the modes of perceiving time finally end in the differences in the styles of heroic boldness of Li and Su-the first one has a sorrowful struggle, and the second one has a calm transcendence.

4. Religious Identity and Literati Self-Positioning

The poetical identity is one of the significant roots of the heroic boldness poetic style of the poet. Besides the disparity in spatial experience and temporal consciousness, the difference in heroism and boldness styles of Li Bai and Su Shi is also very much associated with their own identities. In response to secular authority, Li Bai employed the Daoist-provided identity of the banished immortal to go beyond the human order of power, whereas Su Shi, in the three-teachings syncretism that was dominated by Chan Buddhism, made himself a scholar. The difference in identity finally takes the form of the varied appearance of Li and Su's heroic boldness.

4.1 Li Bai's Banished Immortal Identity

Banished immortal is a somewhat central self-presentation of Li Bai. "One meeting in Chang'an, and he called me a banished immortal" [3]- this title is believed to have been coined by He Zhizhang; Li Bai accepted, used, and developed this title. He was referred to as "the lay Buddhist Qinglian, a banished immortal, hiding my name in wine shops for thirty springs" [3], and also stated "I aspire to the manner of Guangcheng, wandering in the floating world, always receiving the precious instructions, becoming a subject beyond the thirty-six emperors" [3]—he transcended the court and called himself a subject of the immortal realm, thereby opposing the secular power order and not being bound by human monarch-subject relations.

The exiled immortal identity can be seen as being effectively synonymous with using superior power to eliminate inferior power, the former referring to the celestial hierarchy in the Daoist immortal genealogy, the latter to the human monarchy. It allowed Li Bai to remain calm and distant in his actual politics; the arrogance of the fact that even the Son of Heaven would call and he would refrain from climbing aboard the boat may derive exactly from it. The classic significance of Li Bai's poetry "lies in his works' expression of personal sentiments and experiences… especially the integrity, moral character, and personality strength displayed by the literatus's independence above power" [9]. The identities of commoner and banished immortal resonate in Li Bai-the former is not part of the power structure of the court, the latter does not conform to human codes; the two identities are mutually supportive of the heroic attitude of Li Bai towards equality of the princes;

© 2026 The Author(s). Authors retain copyright in their articles.

whether it was “At fifteen I loved swordsmanship, visiting all the feudal lords. At thirty I completed my writings, successively calling on ministers and prime ministers” [3], or “How can I bow and scrape to serve the powerful, making me unable to be happy” [3]-all these unrulinesses rest on the basis of the banished immortal identity of Li Bai which transcends both human reality; he is able to flee the constraints of the earthly power order through the banished immortal identity, which is far more than ordinary literati pride could ever compare to.

However, there is a discrepancy between the commoner and the exiled immortal: the real-life Li Bai is a literary figure and has no official rank, whereas the Li Bai in the spiritual world is an immortal who is exiled to the earth to live among humans. His identity as a commoner is what marginalizes Li Bai in the political elite and is a massive contradiction with his political dream of being able to expound the discourses of Guan and Yan and plot the art of emperors. The effect that the banished immortal identity had on Li Bai is more complicated: “The crown prince’s guest He, upon seeing me at the Ziji Palace in Chang’an, called me a banished immortal… spoke of me to Emperor Xuanzong, who summoned me to the Golden Bells Hall to discuss current affairs, and I presented a eulogy. The emperor bestowed food and personally adjusted the soup for me, and issued an edict appointing me to the Hanlin Academy” [3]. During his successful career, this had been his support in achieving political acknowledgment; once he had been returned home with gold, it became the solace of the poets spiritual ascendance. In the absence of actual political concepts, Daoism gave him an entire spiritual world as a counterpart to the real power hierarchy; the banished immortal identity became his refuge and the way towards freedom, therefore, he would be able to seek the immortals in the five holy mountains without shrinking the distance, and love to wander around the renowned mountains throughout his life [3].

However, the exiled immortal personality was also subject to some transformations during the course of Li Bai life. Starting with the detachment of the poem, “Afar I see immortals in the colored clouds, holding lotuses and facing the jade capital,” to the sigh of “Great thieves carve up the realm like the wind sweeping autumn leaves. I am not one who can save the age; for now I hide by the screen-folded peaks”-Li Bai confidence and self-arrogance were slowly tainted with a certain self-mockery as he kept changing his sense of self-identity amidst the turbulence of the times and events in his personal life - sometimes elevating himself through the aloofness of the banished immortal, at others letting it be known that he was mocking himself and helpless because of real failures. His identity fluctuated between commoner and banished immortal, and the identity of the banished immortal itself was constantly evolving as life unfolded. The heroism of Li Bai is exactly based on this platform: the commoner excludes him from power, the banished immortal excludes him from power; the combination of the two brings about this particular heroic manner of neither entering into the bureaucracy nor being satisfied with the ordinary.

4.2 Su Shi’s Literati Identity

As opposed to Li Bai, Su Shi lived closely with the identity of being a literati. In case political ideals were not achieved, Li Bai would use a transcendent identity to extricate himself of actual predicaments whereas Su Shi was more interested in reaching self-settlement through the literati identity. During his stay at Huangzhou, even when he had become an outcast as an official and was unable to sign official papers, he still helped Prefect Xu Junyou with the relief work and burial of human remains privately, without losing the literatus sense of social responsibility due to his downfall.

Since Confucianism had a benevolent heart and a wish to benefit everyone, which allowed Su Shi to preserve the literatus attitude towards the country and the population during hardships, the Buddhist Chan idea of giving rise to the mind without abiding assisted Su Shi in attaining spiritual liberation. Huangzhou is indeed the bottom of a well, but where my mind is peaceful, that is the pure land. The non-abiding of Chan Buddhism may be taken to mean the absence of attachment to an identity, a situation, or an outcome; it was through this wisdom that Su Shi retained the court desire of helping the ruler to be like a Yao or Shun, but also paid attention to the everyday life of having a bowl of food and a gourd of drink.

“Li Bai is an emotional poet; weaving poetry with emotion is the main characteristic of his creation” [10], hence his style is called “expressing heroic boldness through emotion” [10]. In contrast, Su Shi’s heroic boldness may be likened to emotional representation following rational sedimentation. After reading Zhuangzi, Su Zhe reported that Su Shi "sighed deeply and said: Before, I had insights inside me but my mouth failed me.

© 2026 The Author(s). Authors retain copyright in their articles.

Now, I have read Zhuangzi, which has taken over my mind." Since Su Shi had learned the meaning of Zhuangzi, which was to break free from the constraints of fame and position, he felt something internally, and when this was put into verse, it could only be naturally serene as he stepped into peril as though it were safe ground, and showed the heroic boldness of his character when faced with the weight of his destiny in a gentle voice. This old man will risk a young madness, with the left hand guiding the yellow hound, the right hand directing the grey hawk, wearing a brocade cap and a sable fur, a thousand riders sweeping across the level plain [5]; Returning to that gloomy place where I started, there is no wind, no rain, and no clarity on the way back [5]- the author inserts heroic boldness into reason, using the quiet language and deep feelings of most of the writing, which is written in soft tones to depict painful experiences, masking emotional shifts with reason, and then conveying the sedimented feelings in a more condensed form, as a literatus spirit that does not cave in or give up when faced with adversity. His heroic boldness does not focus on the overwhelming momentum, but rather on the refusal and the calm of the spirit in times of adversity.

4.3 Differences in Identity and the Cultural Implications of Heroic Boldness

Li Bai and Su Shi are the personifications of two styles of literati self-positioning, and it also indicates the spiritual transition between the High Tang and the Northern Song. The spiritual world of the literati of the High Tang was expansive and open, romantic and confident, it was not inconceivable that princes would be matched by commoners. Song-type culture, on the other hand, is marked by the civilized awareness of the politics of taking turns as hosts and guests, the moral and literary self-assurance of reproaching oneself by the Way, and the personality climate of the gentleman as breezy and moonlit [11]; the liberty possessed by Song people is inner strength and stability.

The poet Li Bai was known as a banished immortal, and he used the Daoist transcendent identity to leave the secular power order and adopt a heroic posture beyond the human world. His courage has a unique self-color that defies the mighty through personal talent and his courage is based on a spiritual affiliation that stands beyond human power. The identity of Li Bai cannot be divorced with High Tang culture since he dwelled in a period of confidence and creativity, and therefore, he had the courage to go beyond secular identity and refer to himself as a banished immortal. Su Shi, on the other hand, found self-settling in the literati identity, and attained spiritual freedom in real life predicaments. The combination of righteous sentiments of literati and the wisdom of Chan, together with his heroic boldness, allowed him to find inner freedom in more complicated circumstances of institutionalized literati politics in the Song dynasty, where the spirit of non-abiding in Chan gave exactly this opportunity, which made it possible to retain literati responsibility without being attached to personal honor and disgrace, and obtain inner freedom and heroic boldness.

The various personal identities of Li and Su are associated with two distinct social conditions that had significant impact on their varied styles of heroic boldness- the first was associated with the High Tang and its soaring as well as growth, the second with the introspection and maturity of the Northern Song; this distinction may also be extrapolated to a microcosm of how the culture in China has changed over time, shifting its focus inwards rather than outwards.

5. Conclusion

Both as two high points in the history of Chinese literature, Li and Su possess their own aspects of heroic boldness. Li Bai turned Daoism notion of rising above the material world into lines that release themselves of chains and defy existence itself, piercing the restricted personal existence in the three spatial dimensions, time, and personhood; with the unmatchable momentum of genius, he penned the soaring High Tang spirit. Su Shi reconciled with his own life in poetry via the three-teaching syncretism wisdom under the influence of Chan Buddhism, and preserved the literati spirit in adversity; with sedimented rational emotion, he created another option of heroic boldness in the Song poetry. The heroic boldness of Li Bai is won by emotion, and Su Shi by reason- neither are superior. Based on this distinction, there is a way to see one of the aspects of the change of Tang and Song cultural attitude.

“From the Way returns the qi, dwelling in attainment, one is wild.” According to Sikong Tu, Twenty-Four Poetic Modes, heroic boldness was originally described as a condition of transcending the finite using spiritual liberty. The paper will compare the differences in Li and Su styles of heroic boldness in three dimensions of space, time, and identity, and the ultimate source of these differences is the different perspectives of the two

© 2026 The Author(s). Authors retain copyright in their articles.

towards the finite: Li Bai yearned to escape the confines, and thus flew into the higher worlds, sought longevity and even referred to himself as a banished immortal, and finally obtained spiritual freedom; Su Shi remained in the present, and therefore did not need to go anywhere else, but only had to change his own position in place, similarly acquiring calmness.

The heroic boldness of Li and Su are not sequentially replaced in the history of Chinese literature but instead illuminate and complement each other. It is exactly that these two ways of heroic boldness gave posterity two different spiritual roads why later writers venerated both Li Bai and adored Su Shi. Since the Song dynasty, both have been running side-by-side without any contradiction; From Xin Qiji's "Drunk, I trim the lamp and look at my sword; dreaming, I return to the camps with horns sounding," entrusting his grief over unrealized ambitions to dreams, to Lu You's "Where mountains and rivers seem to end, there is a village of willows and flowers," grounded in the present to observe life as ups and downs and become self-encouraging - both have had unparalleled spiritual worth.

References

[1] Liu, Z. (2015). Tang-Song transition in Daoism and its impact on literati writing: Li Bai and Su Shi as case studies. Journal of Hebei University of Engineering (Social Science Edition), 32 (1).

[2] Zhou, Y. (2017). Su Shi's poetics of "stillness reveals all movement" and Chan Buddhist śamatha-vipaśyanā. The Northern Forum, (3).

[3] Li, B. (1980). Li Bai ji jiaozhu (Q. Qu & J. Zhu, Eds.). Shanghai Classics Publishing House.

[4] Li, F. (2010). You yu you: Liuchao Sui-Tang xiandao wenxue. Zhonghua Book Company.

[5] Su, S. (2021). Su Dongpo quanji (Z. Zeng & D. Shu, Eds.). Zhonghua Book Company.

[6] Feng, F. (2012). Ecological poetics and personality in Li Bai's "Dao-discourse" poetry. Literature and Art Criticism, (2).

[7] Peng, D. (Ed.). (2008). Quan Tangshi. Zhonghua Book Company.

[8] Ye, J. (Lecturer), Yu, J. (Comp.), & Lin, D. (Comp.). (2022, July 15). Why Li Bai's "breakthrough" is good. Xinhua Daily Telegraph, p. 10.

[9] Zhan, F. (2017). The canonization of Li Bai's poetry during the Tang and Song dynasties. Literary Heritage, (5), 51–64.

[10] Kang, H. (2009). An interpretation of Li Bai's boldness and unrestraint. Journal of Mianyang Teachers' College, 28 (1).

[11] Han, J. (2017). The integrated generation between the pattern of Song cultural personality and the artistic transformation from the Tang to the Song dynasties. Chinese Culture Research, (3), 14–31.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project.

© 2026 The Author(s). Authors retain copyright in their articles.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author (s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

© 2026 The Author(s). Authors retain copyright in their articles.