

The Reason for the Rise of Zhang Ruoxu's Spring River Flower Moon Night from the Literary Point of View

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Abstract: Zhang Ruoxu's "Spring River Flower Moon Night" has remained dormant for a millennium, yet continues to radiate brilliance today. Like a pearl rediscovered after centuries of obscurity, its resurgence owes to two pivotal factors: the groundbreaking innovations in palace-style poetry and the work's unique artistic value. This paper explores these dual dimensions to reveal the reasons behind the renewed popularity of Zhang Ruoxu's timeless masterpiece.

Keywords: "Spring River Flower Moon Night"; Palace poetry; Artistic beauty

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1. The Redemption of Palace Poetry

Regarding the formation of palace-style poetry, Liu Shipai pointed out in **The History of Chinese Medieval Literature**, "Although the name 'palace-style' originated in the Liang Dynasty, its lyrical elements actually emerged during the Jin Dynasty. The Yuefu poems of the Jin and Song ^[1]dynasties, such as 'Peach Leaf Song' and 'Jade Song,' were characterized by licentious and melancholic tones that spread throughout Jiangdong. By the Xiao Qi period, these influences grew even more prevalent. The application of this style to five-character verse began between the Jin and Song dynasties, with Bao Zhao preceding Hui Xiu. It was particularly during the Liang Dynasty that this style reached its peak."

The emergence of Gongti poetry, which officially took shape during the Datong era of the Liang Dynasty in the Six Dynasties period, derives its name from Emperor Jianwen Xiao Gang. Historical records state:^[1]"Emperor Jianwen (Xiao Gang) widely recruited literary talents and showed endless appreciation... He had a refined taste for poetry. In his autobiography, he wrote: 'I developed a poetic passion at seven years old, which never waned as I grew older. However, my writings were criticized for being overly frivolous, hence the era's designation as 'Gongti'!" (History of the Southern Dynasties: Annals of Emperor Jianwen)

Palace-style poetry emerged during the Southern Dynasties, centered around imperial courts including Emperor Jianwen of Liang (Xiao Gang), Chen Shubao (Emperor Houzhu of Chen), Emperor Yang of Sui (Yang Guang), and Emperor Taizong of Tang (Li Shimin). This literary movement featured court literati like Xu Ling and his son Xu Dang, as well as Geng Jianwu and his son Geng Xin, whose poetic style became known as the "Xu-Geng style." While reflecting the era's hedonistic trends—"Immortal Wang Zijiao, hard to compare with" (from **Wen Xuan: Ancient Poetry** "Life span under a hundred")—these poets shifted focus from reclusive mountain retreats and immortality to embracing the pleasures ^[1]of the present. They celebrated life's vibrancy and emotional intensity, creating a prevailing social mentality of hedonism. The aristocratic trend of indulgence in wine and beauty, extravagance, and disregard for propriety directly fostered a culture obsessed with sensual pleasures. Literature inevitably became

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a tool ^[2]for glorifying such excesses, evolving into a style characterized by sensual allure, ornate elegance, and excessive flamboyance. This is particularly evident in descriptions of women's attire and beauty, as seen in the verse: "Slender waists rival Chu maidens' grace, Their light forms surpass Zhao Ji's charm. Collar ornaments gleam like grains of rice, Elbowlaces hang with pearl threads. Sleeves sway in graceful poses, Moving feet accentuate their charm. Eyes gaze sideways with lingering hesitation, Delicate glances betray hesitant delight. How ashamed to rise like a crane, How less than startled phoenixes" (*Yutai Xin Yong: Jiang Hong: Ode to a Dancer*). The poem vividly portrays the dancer's alluring features, ethereal dance movements, and opulent attire, epitomizing the decadent culture of sensual indulgence. Although some poets like the "Four Masters of Early Tang" attempted reforms to palace-style poetry, their efforts faced strong resistance from ^[3]high-ranking authorities, achieving only partial success. Palace-style poetry remained characterized by superficial elegance and soft, weak expressions, lacking profound ideological depth and emotional resonance. Zhang Ruoxu's "Spring River Flower Moon Night," while drawing on classical Yuefu themes, displays a delicate brushwork as clear as lotus blossoms emerging from water, evoking serene tranquility. The poem conjures a misty, tranquil spring river under the moonlight, where sincere emotions express the poignant sorrow of parting between lovers and philosophical reflections on life's brevity. Its language flows naturally like moonlit dew, refreshing like drinking sweet dew or savoring fine wine, delighting the senses. This work transcends traditional palace-style constraints, revealing cosmic philosophy and tranquil humanistic visions. With every four lines adopting a new rhyme scheme, it seamlessly blends scenery, emotions, and contemplation, offering a unique reading experience. Praised by Mr. Wen Yiduo as "the poem among poems, the pinnacle of pinnacles" (From "The Redemption of Palace-Style Poetry"), this masterpiece captivates readers with its poetic brilliance.

The Qing dynasty scholar Wang Kaiyun remarked: "Zhang Ruoxu's 'Spring River Flower Moon Night' employs the Xizhou style, standing as an unparalleled masterpiece that ultimately became a paradigm." Modern poet and scholar Wen Yiduo, in his essay "The Redemption of Palace-style Poetry," traced the evolution of this poetic form through the lens of spiritual transformation. He lavishly praised 'Spring River Flower Moon Night,' asserting ^[2]that despite undergoing reforms by the 'Four Masters of Early Tang' and Liu Xiyi, it was Zhang Ruoxu's work that finally redeemed the decadent palace-style poetry ^[3]prevalent since the Southern Dynasties. The poem's "intense cosmic consciousness and purified love transcended by cosmic awareness... redeemed palace-style poetry's century-long sins ." Concluding his analysis, Wen rhetorically asked: "Hadn't this single palace-style poem cleansed the darkest sins accumulated by the Liang, Chen, Sui, and Tang dynasties over a century?" This reveals how Zhang Ruoxu's groundbreaking work revitalized the moribund palace-style tradition through its fresh, unconventional style and profound naturalistic approach.

2. Unique Artistic Aesthetic Value

"Spring River Flower Moon Night" poignantly captures the profound longing between a wanderer and his beloved under the moon's tender glow, standing as a lyrical ode to love that radiates warmth, purity, clarity, and timeless beauty. Esteemed scholars have hailed it as an unparalleled masterpiece, with some even declaring it "the sole work that eclipses all Tang poetry." Having endured millennia, this timeless masterpiece has finally been rediscovered. While historical circumstances may have delayed its revival, its enduring significance ultimately stems from the profound value inherent in its essence.

(1) The beauty of language

"The spring river tide merges with the sea's ^[1]level, where the moon rises with the surging waves". This concise verse masterfully uses "merge" and "rise" to vividly depict the vast river landscape, where the mighty tidal currents surge and the moonlight dances with the water, painting a luminous scene of moonlit river tide. "The river and sky

blend into one color without a speck of dust, with the solitary bright moon shining through the air" 1. The crystal-clear water, pristine sky, and radiant moonlight create a serene harmony. The word "solitary" vividly captures the longing wife's loneliness, forming a natural contrast that brings sudden clarity to the reader. The poem demonstrates both emotional depth in portraying a wife's yearning for her wanderer lover, and philosophical insight in lamenting life's brevity through lines like "Generations of people never cease, while the river moon remains unchanged year after year" 1. These verses convey profound truths about cherishing the present and valuing time. The understated yet flavorful descriptions ^[2]perfectly capture the "unreasonable yet ingenious" artistic effect of the wife's moonlit longing in "At this moment we gaze without hearing each other, wishing to follow the moon's flow to illuminate you" 1 from "Spring River Flower Moon Night". The poem's language remains simple yet profound, with lingering charm like sweet dew. As Su Shi once praised Tao Yuanming's poetry for its "plain yet exquisite, lean yet rich" style, "Spring River Flower Moon Night" exemplifies this linguistic artistry.

(2) The beauty of structure

This poetic composition demonstrates a clear structural framework, comprising three interconnected sections: the depiction of a crystalline world formed by the moon and river, the expression of life's loneliness through the metaphor of "solitude", and the vivid, layered portrayal of a longing wife and wandering lover's sorrow. The narrative progresses ^[1]from moonlit river vistas to philosophical reflections on human existence, then to romantic yearning—a gradual unraveling like silk being drawn from a cocoon. It not only captures the pure affection between lovers but also embodies a profound sense ^[2]of time and cosmic awareness, as expressed in the verse: "Generations flow endlessly; the river moon remains ever the same" . All these elements unfold beneath the moon's radiance, where celestial wonders, life's profound truths, and tender longing blend like a scroll painting. The structure is meticulously organized with tightly-paced rhythms, presenting a captivating narrative that brings sudden clarity, echoing the poetic imagery of "mountains and rivers seem to block the way, yet willows and flowers reveal another village" (Lu You's "A Visit to West Mountain Village").

(3) The beauty of the picture

This poem unfolds in three interconnected scenes. The first vividly captures the grandeur of a moonlit spring river. The tidal waves surge toward the sea, merging with the moon to create a magnificent spectacle. A crescent moon rises with the tide, painting a breathtaking panorama. The word "rise" breathes life into both celestial and tidal elements. The opening four lines simultaneously depict the spring river, moonlight, tidal waves, and ocean, instantly transporting readers into a magical realm. The second scene focuses on the moon itself. Its hazy crescent and radiant fullness evoke contemplation of ancient wisdom. Facing this river moon, the poet reflects deeply, filled with melancholy and existential confusion. Against the interplay of sunset reflections on the riverbank and solitary moonlight from the tower, the poem masterfully blends spring scenery, river vistas, night skies, blossoms, and human presence. Under the solitary moon's glow, the poet gazes into the distance, contemplating cosmic questions while contemplating the harmony between heaven, earth, humanity, and the universe. The third scene portrays the longing between a wanderer and his beloved. The traveler drifts like a cloud toward the distant shore, while the woman gazes from the riverside pavilion. Moonlight guides their path to the lover's dressing table, crystallizing their separation. The luminous moon heightens the sorrow, making parting grief impossible to dispel. With mere words, the poem reaches its emotional zenith. The wanderer awakens in a foreign land, yearning for reunion while awaiting an uncertain return. The river flows ceaselessly toward the sea, carrying not only spring's warmth but also the traveler's unending longing for his beloved. These three pictures are interwoven with reality and abstraction, rich in ink, and layered and progressive, which are full of the charm of Chinese ink painting and the beauty of serene and elegant picture.

(4) Emotional beauty

The poem primarily focuses on the mutual longing between lovers, with the bright moon and surging tides

-serving as a backdrop for the contemplative reflections of the world, all contributing to the purity of the wanderer's love. The first two sections vividly depict scenes of the luminous moon, surging tides, and humanity's contemplation of life, the universe, and cosmic existence under the solitary moonlight, river moonlight, new moonlight, setting moonlight, moonlit buildings, and moonbeams. These scenes immerse the wanderers in a crystalline silver realm of ^[1]clarity and transparency, where their love blossoms with heightened purity and reverence for sacred affection amidst philosophical contemplation ^[2]and cosmic awareness. This exquisite sentiment offers profound enlightenment for future generations, echoing the timeless lament: "If two hearts are truly devoted, why must they meet day and night?" The concluding line "How many will return under the moon's glow" deeply explores Confucian culture's philosophy of universal compassion, embodying the inclusive, serene, and sublime nature of wanderers' love—a rare spiritual realm worthy of celebration.

(5) The beauty of philosophy

The poem's most distinctive feature compared to other palace-style verses lies in its philosophical depth, particularly evident in the second stanza: "Who first saw the moon by the riverside? In which year did the river moon first shine upon man?" and "Generations of mankind never cease; Year after year, the river moon remains unchanged." The poet first poses a question, contrasting time's passage with the eternal moon to provoke contemplation about humanity's relationship with nature and cosmic eternity. Then comes the poignant exclamation: "Generations of mankind never cease; Year after year, the river moon remains unchanged," revealing how fleeting time and mortal life contrast with the eternal river moon and enduring landscapes. The final line "Who waits for the river moon? Only to see the Yangtze send off flowing waters" further emphasizes this connection, lamenting how life slips through like a galloping steed. It urges people to embrace nature's rhythm, cherish the present, focus on immediate experiences, and nurture both love and harmony with the natural world!

(6) The beauty of the scene

The title "Spring River Moonlit Night" immediately unveils five distinct imagery elements, each fulfilling unique roles and carrying layered symbolic meanings. Spring embodies vibrant vitality; the river symbolizes the flow of time; flowers represent radiant beauty; the moon signifies crystalline purity; while night conveys profound serenity. Under the moon's guidance, these elements harmonize to naturally manifest a complex emotional tapestry: between life and transcendence, vastness and intimacy, clarity and solitude, transience and eternity, melancholy and hope. Bathed in moonlight, the poet expresses reflections on human existence, while the longing traveler and his beloved find solace in mutual yearning. Here, emotion, scenery, and philosophy merge into one. By embedding humanity's noble sentiments within nature's boundless expanse, this atmosphere overcomes darkness to welcome light. Through the ethereal glow of the moon, readers are guided to explore the moon's mystical realm, delve into cosmic mysteries, and contemplate the essence of transient existence—a journey that captivates both mind and spirit.

(7) The beauty of innovation

Though "Spring River Flower Moon Night" is an old title from the Yuefu poetry tradition, its profound philosophical depth and expansive spatial-temporal consciousness imbue this poem with a unique literary charm. The other six poems in the collection either feature monotonous themes, petty sentiments, or narrow perspectives—filled with flattery and ornate language that tastes as bland as chewing wax. Zhang Ruoxu's work stands in stark contrast: executed in one continuous flow, it brims with rich content, deep emotion, and visionary imagery. Its grand scale and sweeping scenes create a tidal wave of impact, refreshing readers' senses and provoking contemplation. This poem masterfully blends emotion, scenery, and philosophy, transcending the simplistic landscape descriptions and singular themes of typical scenic or love poems. It reveals emotions through scenery while naturally forming landscapes, embedding profound life philosophies and cosmic consciousness into its structure—transcending ordinary palace-style poetry. As a philosophical love poem elevated beyond conventional themes, it fundamentally

differs from the commonplace subjects of traditional works. By weaving philosophy throughout, it highlights the sacred purity of a wanderer's love for his wife, evoking profound reverence.

In summary, Zhang Ruoxu's "Spring River Flower Moon Night" developed and innovated through inheritance, marking a major turning point and reform in the palace-style poetry. In the dynamic development of palace-style poetry, it contributed profoundly to thought-provoking resonance, thus becoming what Mr. Wen Yiduo called "the redemption of palace-style poetry." Meanwhile, due to its immense artistic aesthetic value and innovative contributions, it has stood proudly through the vicissitudes of millennia in the Chinese literary world, celebrated and passed down by later generations. The saying "to wait until clouds part to see the moon bright" (from Shi Nai'an's "All Men Are Brothers") perfectly captures this essence.

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