



Article

The “Yao” in Li Bai’s Poetry and Its Emotional Implications

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Abstract: In Li Bai’s poems, the term *yao* or medicine is frequently employed as an idea-image. The meaning of *yao* can be further divided into four distinct types, each corresponding to its functions in different contexts. It represents the elixir found on Penglai Island, having the power to elevate a person to immortality; the elixir stolen from the Queen Mother of the West by Heng’E; the immortal herbs pounded by the Jade Rabbit; and the medicine used for treating diseases. In addition, Li Bai’s poems also contain elixir liquid (*danye* 丹液), potable gold (*jinye* 金液), and other substances referred to as *yao*. Unlike specific terms like “cinnabar”, these names are more general in nature. The medicines, their names, and the general terms in poems carry different emotional implications, e.g., his admiration for immortality, and a means to criticize his own time, to express his aspirations and lamentation over the passage of time. The “Yao” also serves as a symbol of healing and nourishment, especially in the context of friendship. All these points deserve to be meticulously explored.

Keywords: *Yao*; Li Bai’s poetry; emotional implications

1. Introduction

The study of Li Bai’s poetic images has long been a topic of great importance for discussion among scholars. Numerous research papers, such as Li Hao’s “Bird image in Li Bai’s Poems” (H. Li 1994, vol. 3, pp. 38–43), Zhan Furui’s “Time Image and Li Bai’s Understanding and Expression of the Nature of Life” (Zhan 2020), and Lu Yanxin’s “The Transmutation of the Image ‘Huma’ in Han and Tang Poetry—On the Characteristics of the ‘Huma’ Image of Li Bai’s and Du Fu’s Poems” (Lu 2017), have delved into various aspects of images in his poems. However, despite the extensive research, the image of *yao* or medicine and its emotional implications in Li Bai’s poems have not been thoroughly investigated. This article aims to investigate the different types of *yao* mentioned in Li Bai’s poems and bring to light the emotional implications conveyed between the lines.

2. “Yao” and Its Implications in Li Bai’s Poems

Li Bai’s poetry exhibits a striking recurrence of the *yao* motif, with a total of nineteen poems closely linked to this theme. Through an intricate examination, these poems can be classified into four overarching categories, revealing the multifaceted meanings embedded within the concept of *yao*.

First is the elixir on Penglai Island (*Penglai xiandao* 蓬莱仙岛). For example, the third of “Ancient Style” (*Gufeng* 古风) reads:

秦王扫六合，虎视何雄哉……
尚采不死药，茫然使心哀……
髻鬣蔽青天，何由睹蓬莱。
徐市载秦女，楼船几时回。
但见三泉下，金棺葬寒灰。

The Qin Emperor had swept the world of his foes,
Looking around like a tiger he rose
He sought elixir of immortality,



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These contradictory deeds puzzle me.
 Its dorsal fin might cover azure sky.
 How could they see the Penglai?
 Xu Shi with Qin maidens went to sea.
 When could their galleys come back?
 We but see buried in the three springs,¹
 The ashes cold, of Emperor of Qin in coffin made of gold. (B. Li 1977a, vol. 1:2, pp. 92–93)

To fully grasp the implications of the “elixir” stated in the poem, it is of vital importance to analyze the references to “The Emperor had swept the world of his foes” and “Xu Shi with Qin maidens went to sea.” In this context, the “Emperor of Qin” refers to the First Emperor of Qin (221–206 B.C.), renowned for his role in unifying China. The phrase “sweeping the world of his foes” implies his accomplishment of quelling unrest in the empire. This line is quoted from the “Basic Annals of the First Emperor of Qin” (Qin Shihuang Ben Ji) in *Records of the Historian (Shiji)*.

及至秦王，续六世之余烈，振长策而御宇内，吞二周而亡诸侯，履至尊而制六合，执棰拊以鞭笞天下，威振四海。

When it came to the First Emperor of Qin, he had developed the legacy of the Six Dynasties, ruled by force, wiped out the Eastern Zhou, Western Zhou and all the vassal states, ascended to the throne to rule the whole empire, and enslaved the people of the world by means of violent penalties, solidifying his unmatched reign. (Sima 1982, p. 280)

The allusion of the alchemist is from the record above. As recorded in a passage, in the twenty-eighth year of the first emperor (219 B.C.) we read:

南登琅邪，大乐之，留三月。乃徙黔首三万户琅邪台下，复十二岁。作琅邪台，立石刻……既已，齐人徐市等上书，言海中有三神山，名曰蓬莱、方丈、瀛洲，仙人居之。请得斋戒，与童男女求之。于是遣徐市发童男女数千人，入海求仙人。

The emperor then went south and ascended Mt. Langya, which delighted him so greatly that he remained there for three months. He ordered 30,000 households of the black-headed people to build Langya Terrace, exempting them from taxation and labor services for a period of twelve years. Having constructed the Langya Terrace, he set up a stele inscription...After the stele inscription had been done, a native of Qi named Xu Shi and others submitted a memorial saying that in the midst of the sea were three fairy mountains named Penglai, Fangzhang, and Yingzhou, with immortals living on them. They asked that they be allowed to fast and purify themselves and to go with a group of young boys and girls to search for them. (Sima 1982, pp. 244–47)

It is clear that the *yao* draws upon the allusion of the First Emperor of Qin sending emissaries to the mystical mountains in search of the elixir of immortality. Therefore, *yao* refers to the elixir that can make people live forever.

The implication of the *yao* of this poem can also be proved by Xiao Shiyun’s annotation to the poem:

白意若曰：仙者清静自然，无为而化。秦皇之所为，若此求仙者，岂如是非乎？宜其卒为方士之所欺，而不免于死也。后之为人君而好神仙者，亦可鉴矣。

Li Bai's intention may be like this: the immortals are pure and calm and let nature take its course. If what the Emperor Qin did was to pursue immortality, did he follow this rule? He was definitely cheated by the alchemists and failed to escape from death. Those future emperors in quest for immortality should take lessons from it. (B. Li 2013)

Similarly, the forty-eighth poem in the series of "Ancient Style" criticizes that, "the emperor only thought about the elixir on the Penglai Immortal Island without caring about the cultivation and life of the common people",² and the fourth one in "Six Poems of Traveling to Mount Tai" (*You Taishan liushou* 游泰山六首) says that "how can I get elixirs to help me to ascend and fly to Penglai Island."³

Secondly, it is the medicine that can elevate a man to an immortal. For example, Li Bai's "Inscribed at Yongqiu Magistrate Cui's Pill Furnace" (*Ti Yongqiu Cuimingfu danzao* 题雍丘崔明府丹灶) reads as follows:

美人为政本忘机，服药求仙事不违。
叶县已泥丹灶毕，瀛洲当伴赤松归.....
九转但能生羽翼，双凫忽去定何依。

Virtuous people govern without a utilitarian heart.

The taking of medicine and the seeking of immortality are not contrary to it.

The stove in Ye County has been made,

And it is time to return with Chisongzi to Yingzhou....

Taking the nine-crucible cinnabar can cause a man to grow feathers and wings.

Where will the two ducks suddenly go? (B. Li 1977b, vol. 2:24, p. 1134.)

It is evident that the *yao* in the poem refers to the elixir of immortality, as indicated by the line "he would not go against taking medicine and seeking immortality (服药求仙事不违)" and the phrase "self-ignition" in the sixth line. The implication of *yao* in this poem can also be found in the line "Taking the nine-crucible cinnabar can cause a man to grow feathers and wings (九转但能生羽翼)". Likewise, the "nine-crucible" (*jiuzhuan* 九转) means the nine-crucible cinnabar (*jiuzhuandan* 九转丹). In *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (*Baopuzi* 抱朴子), Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–363) discusses the types and functions of "golden elixir" (*jindan* 金丹) as follows:

一转之丹，服之三年得仙。二转之丹，服之二年得仙。三转之丹，服之一年得仙。四转之丹，服之半年得仙。五转之丹，服之百日得仙。六转之丹，服之四十日得仙。七转之丹，服之三十日得仙。八转之丹，服之十日得仙。九转之丹，服之三日得仙.....其一转至九转，迟速各有日数多少，以此知之耳。其转数少，其药力不足，故服之用日多，得仙迟也。其转数多，药力盛，故服之用日少，而得仙速也。

"An elixir of the first cyclical transformation culminates in immortality after being taken for three years; of the second, in two years; of the third, in one year; of the fourth, in half a year; of the fifth, in one hundred days; of the sixth, in forty days; of the seventh, in thirty days; of the eighth, in ten days; and of the ninth, in three days ... Cyclical mutations one through nine are thus differentiated by the varying speeds of their effectiveness. If these transformations are few, the medicine will be found weak, it will have to be taken for a longer time, and immortality will be attained slowly. However, if it is transformed through many cycles, the medicine will be strong, it will be taken for fewer days, and immortality will be attained more quickly." (Ge 1988b)

It can be inferred that the nine-crucible cinnabar is the top-quality pill for ascending to immortality.

In Li Bai's poems, there are some examples showing that the word *yao* means the elixir for immortality. The poem "Inscribed at the Mount Song Recluse Yuan Danqiu's Residence" (*Ti songshan yiren yuandan qiushan ju* 题嵩山逸人元丹丘山居) is one of them. In this poem, Li Bai writes "We are like-minded and could help each other. Let's represent alchemy and seek immortals together." (提携访神仙, 从此炼金药) Wang Qi 王琦 (1696–1774) makes comments that "*jinyao* 金药" refers to gold cinnabar, the best medicine (B. Li 1977b, vol. 2:25, pp. 1152–53). Yu Xianhao holds that his gold cinnabar means alchemy for immortality (Yu 2015).

Thirdly, it is the elixir stolen by Heng'e 嫦娥 from the Queen Mother of the West (*xiwangmu* 西王母) in the legend or the immortal herbs pounded by the Jade Rabbit (*yutu* 玉兔). For example, the third of "Four Poems on Encounters" (*Ganyu sishou* 感遇四首) goes as follows:

昔余闻姮娥，窃药驻云发。
不自娇玉颜，方希炼金骨。
飞去身莫返，含笑坐明月。
紫宫夸蛾眉，随手会凋歇。

Since the past, I have heard of Heng E,
Whose black hair remained unchanged after stealing the elixir.
She was not proud of her jade liked appearance,
But only hoped to refine her gold bones.
She flew to the sky and did not return,
Sitting in the Guanghan Palace on the moon smilingly.
The beauties in the palace please do not boast,
You may be withering at any time. (B. Li 1977b, vol. 2:24, p. 1111)

Heng'e 嫦娥 is also known as Heng'e 恒娥, Chang'e 常娥, Chang'e 嫦娥, or Su'e 素娥. The "Surveying Obscurities" (*Lan ming xun* 览冥训) chapter in the *Huainanzi* states: "Just like Hou Yi asked the Queen Mother of the West for the elixir, but Heng'e stole it and flew to the moon. Hou Yi was very frustrated because he lost the elixir and could not follow Heng'e to be an immortal."⁴ That is to say, the word *yao* in the poem is a literary quotation, implying that the elixir of the Queen Mother of the West was stolen by Chang'e.

There is a rabbit image in the moon, and legend has it that it pounds herbs. The chapter "The Book of Music" (*Yuezhi* 乐志) in the *History of Song of the Southern Dynasties* (*Song Shu* 宋书) records an ancient poem titled "Dongtao Xing" (Farewell to Dong Tao 董桃行) that is composed of the following lines:

教敕凡吏受言，采取神药若木端。
白兔长跪捣药虾蟆丸，奉上陛下一玉杵，
服此药可得即仙。

The immortal taught the mortal officials the words:
You can get the magic herbs on the top of the Ruomu.⁵
The Jade Rabbit sitting there and pounding the herbs,
And offering it to the emperor with a jade plate.
You can become an immortal after taking this medicine. (Shen 2011)

Since the Wei-Jin Dynasties, the story of Chang'e stealing the elixir and ascending to the moon has been cited in literature, often accompanied by the image of the Jade Rabbit and the moon. Fu Xuan's (239–294) "Imitating Questions to the Heaven" (*Ni Tianwen* 拟天问) says: "What is there in the moon? The Jade Rabbit pounding herbs and the prosperity comes."⁶ Li Bai also incorporated these motifs in his poems, such as in "Two Overtures of Flying Dragon" (*Fei Long Yin Er Shou* 飞龙引二首) which reads:

鼎湖流水清且闲，轩辕去时有弓箭，古人传道留其间……

载玉女，过紫皇，紫皇乃赐白兔所捣之药方。

后天而老凋三光，下视瑶池见王母，蛾眉萧飒如秋霜。

Clear and serene, Dinghu's waters gently flow,

When Xuanyuan departed, bows and swords did show.

Ancient wisdom passed on, within this realm it stays,

The Jade Maiden carries, through the Purple Emperor's gaze.

Purple Emperor grants the potion, by White Rabbit's hand,

Aged and withered after one's natural lifespan, the Three Lights die out.

Gazing down at Jade Pool, the Queen Mother appears,

Her brows like autumn frost, graceful and austere. (Wang, Qi, vol. 1:3, pp. 183–84)

The true essence of *yao* is unveiled in a captivating sentence that depicts the Purple Emperor's graciousness as he imparts the elixir recipe concocted by the Jade Rabbit.

To the fourth point, *yao* or medicine is made for disease. For example, the poem "Write This Poem to Sentimentalize Current Situation and to Bid Farewell to My Cousin the Prince of Xu Yannian and Cousin Yanling" (*Ganshi liubie congxiangwang yannian congdi yanling* 感时留别从兄徐王延年从弟延陵) reads:

天籁何参差，噫然大块吹。

玄元包囊籥，紫气何逶迤……

深心紫河车，与我特相宜。

金膏犹罔象，玉液尚磷缁。

伏枕寄宾馆，宛同清漳湄。

药物多见馈，珍羞亦兼之。

The sound of nature rises and falls, blowing the earth.

Xuanyuan is wrapped in a voluptuous and graceful atmosphere,
and auspicious air is meandering....

My heart is towards the *ziheche*, which is particularly suitable for me.

The golden elixir is still elusive,

And the jade liquid has not yet become solid and pure white.

I am lying on a pillow of a guesthouse,

Like Liu Zhen lying on the shore of the Qingzhang River.

I really appreciate the medicine and delicacies presented by you. (B. Li 1977b, vol. 2:15, pp. 720–23)

Although there are a few idea-images related to immortality in this poem, it is of great significance to note that *yao* should not be interpreted solely as a magical pill. This implication becomes evident in the opening lines where Li Bai describes himself lying on a pillow in a guesthouse, compared with Liu Zhen lying on the shore of the Qingzhang River. The act of lying on a pillow suggests that the poet is confined to his bed. An Qi further elaborates on his condition in his study:

诂料至杭后，始知延年早已今非昔比，且时局方有重大变故。李白报国之策，顿成泡影，其情之沮丧，可以想见。其卧病宾馆，或即因此故。

Li Bai did not realize that Wang Yannian was no longer what he used to be, and great changes had taken place in the social landscape until he arrived at Hangzhou. His ambition of serving the country was mercilessly shattered. It is not difficult to imagine how depressed he was. In all likelihood, he was confined to bed for this reason. (B. Li 2017)

Another important piece of information in these lines is the allusion to Qingzhang Mei清漳湄, the bank of River Qingzhang. This comes from Liu Zhen's (?–217) "Four Songs for Leader of Court Gentleman for Miscellaneous Uses" (Zeng wuguanzhonglangjiangsi shou赠五官中郎将四首), which says that "I am seized by a stubborn illness, so I have to withdraw from society and live in solitude on the bank of Qingzhang River. (余婴沉痾疾，窳身清漳滨)". Li Zhouhan explains that this poem was written when Liu Zhen was detained by illness on his way to Ye Du邺都 (Xiao 2016). By referring to this source, Li Bai is making the same implication that he was ill in a distant land.

In addition to various medicines denoted by the term "*yao*", Li Bai's poems also feature a plethora of other medicinal names that deserve further investigation and analysis. Examples include cinnabar (dansha 丹砂), lead (qian 铅), Zizhi 紫芝, calamus (changpu 菖蒲), potable gold (jinye 金液), fluid aurora (liuxia 流霞), and many more. Furthermore, his poems also allude to elixir liquid (danye 丹液), potable gold (jinye 金液), and other "*yao*." Some names of *yao* such as "cinnabar" have specific connotations, and others serve as general terms only.

3. Emotional Implications of *yao* in Li Bai's Poems

The *yao* or medicines, their drug names, and their general names seen in Li Bai's poems have different emotional implications. They can be divided into four types:

Firstly, *yao* suggests Li Bai's admiration of immortality. For instance, Li Bai writes in the poem "The Tiantai Mount Viewed from Afar at Dawn" (*Tiantai xiaowang* 天台晓望):

观奇迹无倪，好道心不歇。
攀条摘朱实，服药炼金骨。
安得生羽毛？千春卧蓬阙。

Seeing this unusual scenery, but not finding any trace of the immortals,

It was hard to calm the mind of learning Dao.

Climbing the strip to pick the vermilion fruit,

Take medicine to refine the gold bones.

How can I have feathers?

To rest on its laurels in the Penglai Island for hundreds of years. (B. Li 1977b, vol. 2:21, p. 971)

The first four lines of this poem describe the geographical location and overall characteristics of Tiantai Mount. The following six lines depict the poet's emotions when he climbs up to enjoy the beautiful scenery. Immersed in the ethereal enchantment of the surroundings, the poet, inspired by his innermost feelings, adeptly transforms the sensations encountered along the way into artistic expressions, presenting a vivid and captivating picture of the journey. His heart for Taoism burns with unyielding passion as he yearns to grasp the fruit of immortality, partake in the elixir of the immortal realm, and soar high, unfettered, exploring the mystical wonders of Penglai Island. In Ge Hong's *Bao Pu Zi*, the phrase "taking medicine" is explicitly associated with the attainment of immortality (Ge 1988a). The theme of this poem, as Yu Xianhao points out, is that Li Bai "still wants to pick the immortal fruit, take the golden elixir, fantasize about the feathered ascension, and to spend a thousand years in the Fairy Mountain and immortal palace."⁷ It can be found that "taking medicine" indicates his admiration for Taoism and his desire for immortality.

The theme of taking the immortality pill repeatedly appears in Li Bai's poems such as the "Two Overtures of Flying Dragon (B. Li 1977a, vol. 1:3, pp. 183–84)", the "The Hardships of The Past (B. Li 1977a, vol. 1:5, p. 289)", and the "Ying Yang, Farewell With Yuan Danqiu to Huaiyang." (*Yingyang bie yuandanqiu zhi huaiyang* 颍阳别元丹丘之淮阳) (B. Li 1977b, vol. 2:15, p. 717). The *yao* or the names of the medicines in these poems all contain emotional connotations related to the longing for immortality and the desire to ascend and live forever.

Secondly, there is the use of historical allusions to criticize current events. For instance, Li Bai describes the First Emperor of Qin in his "Ancient Style" as "seeking the medicine of the Penglai island and do not think about the agriculture. Finally, he was unable to succeed in spite of his efforts, only to end in a tragic ending. (但求蓬岛药, 岂思农廡春。力尽功不贍, 千载为悲辛) (B. Li 1977a, vol. 1:2, p. 263)".

The term *yao* in this poem specifically alludes to the elixirs of immortality discovered on the mythical island. However, unlike the aforementioned poems, the primary focus of these verses is not on the veneration of immortals. The events mentioned in this poem regarding the First Emperor of Qin are documented in Sima Qian's *Shiji*, where it is accounted that the emperor dispatched Xu Shi to the sea to search for a magical pill on his behalf. This episode is referenced in several other biographies within *Shiji*, wherein the emperor is criticized for disregarding the suffering of his subjects while pursuing his own longevity.

The theme of this poem becomes evident through various interpretations. Xiao Shiyun, in "Classified Supplementary Notes on Li Taibai's Poems", suggests that the poem contains a satirical undertone towards the contemporary era, utilizing the idea-image of the Qin dynasty. Zhu Jian (1455–1541), in "Selection and Annotation of Li Poetry", remarks that "during the Qin Emperor's eastern patrol, he solely pursued the elixir of Penglai for his own longevity, in no consideration of the well-being of his people (Zhu 1572)." These observations indicate that Li Bai employs the anecdote of the First Emperor of Qin's pursuit of the "medicine of Penglai Island" to criticize foolish rulers who prioritize personal immortality over the welfare of their subjects, resulting in the corruption and collapse of the empire.

Among Li Bai's poems, there are also some of them with a similar theme, such as "Ancient Style" (third of fifty-nine), which goes as follows:

秦王扫六合，虎视何雄哉……
 刑徒七十万，起土骊山隈。
 尚采不死药，茫然使心哀……
 但见三泉下，金棺葬寒灰。

The Qin Emperor had swept the world of his foes,
 Looking around like a tiger he rose...
 He worked seven hundred slaves,
 To build in deep mountain recess his graves.
 He sought elixir of immortality,
 These contradictory deeds puzzle me...
 We but see buried in the three springs,
 The ashes cold, of Emperor of Qin in coffin made of gold. (B. Li 1977a, p. 92)

As Zhan Ying points out, “This poem is written for Emperor Xuanzong’s (685–762) worship of immortals, using Emperor Qin as an example to satirize him. (此诗即为玄宗慕仙事而发，借秦皇以刺玄宗)” (B. Li 1996) In addition to this, Li Bai also satirizes the ruler’s pursuit of immortality in “The Ancient Ballads of Bright Moon” (*Gu langyuexing* 古朗月行):

白兔捣药成，问言与谁餐……
 阴精此沦惑，去去不足观。
 忧来其如何，凄怆摧心肝。

The white rabbit pounds herbs and asks who to dine with...
 The moon is lost in confusion, and there is no way to observe it.
 Worry about how it comes, and sorrow destroys the heart and liver. (B. Li 1977a, vol. 1:4, p. 259)

In the above poem, we can find that it clearly conveys Li Bai’s discontent with rulers who prioritize their pursuit of longevity and immortality while neglecting their responsibilities in governance.

Thirdly, Li Bai employs the term *yao* to symbolize his aspirations and express his melancholy about the passage of time. An example is the poem “Reply to Xiucai Su at the Golden Gate” (*Jin Men Da Su Xiu Cai* 金门答苏秀才), which reads:

巨海纳百川，麟阁多才贤……
 我留在金门，君去卧丹壑……
 愿狎东海鸥，共营西山药……
 月出石镜间，松鸣风琴里。
 得心自虚妙，外物空颓靡。
 身世如两忘，从君老烟水。

The vast sea embraces all rivers,
 The Lin Pavilion has many talents...
 I will stay at the Golden Gate,
 You can lie down in the Dan Gully...
 I hope to ramble around with the gulls in the East China Sea,
 And I wish to jointly operate the yao in the Western Mount. with you.
 The moon appeared between stones like mirrors,
 The pine sang in the sound of the wind like an organ playing.
 My heart is empty and wonderful,

The external things are empty and decadent.

Forget myself and the outside world,

Spend this life in a dreamlike water landscape. (Wang, Qi, vol. 2:19, pp. 882–83)

The theme is made unmistakably clear by the lines quoted above, as they skillfully illuminate and convey the central message being portrayed. The opening couplet compares the grandeur of the poet's friend's locations, the "unicorn pavilion" and the "golden gate" within the palace and capital, to the poet's humble abode in a secluded valley. This poem can also be interpreted as a reflection of the poet's discontent with worldly affairs and his contemplation of retreat as a means of solace. However, it is through his pursuit of immortality that the poet ultimately rediscovers inner peace and fulfillment.

This point is further demonstrated in the poem "Twelve Poems Imitating Ancient Style" (*Nigu shier shou* 拟古十二首) (ninth of twelve):

生者为过客，死者为归人。

天地一逆旅，同悲万古尘。

月兔空捣药，扶桑已成薪。

白骨寂无言，青松岂知春。

前后更叹息，浮荣何足珍。

The living are passersby,

While the dead are returnees.

Surviving between heaven and earth is a difficult journey,

Lamenting throughout history.

The jade rabbit on the moon pounded herbs in vain,

The Fusang tree has become firewood.⁸

White bones are silent without any speech,

How can the pine know that spring is arriving.

After thinking about it, I sigh even more.

How can flashy vanity be precious? (B. Li 1977b, vol. 2:24, p. 1099)

In this poem, the poet incorporates the literary allusion of the Jade Rabbit pounding herbs on the moon. While the first two lines convey a sense of lamentation towards short life and fleeting time, the last two lines of the poem also reveal the poet's inner sorrow, sadness, and anguish.

Furthermore, the concept of *yao* is mentioned in Li Bai's poem as a means to extol the virtues of friendship. One typical example can be found in the poem "In Ying Yang, I Bid Farewell to Yuan Danqiu to Huaiyang." (*Ying Yang Bie Yuan Danqiu Zhi Huaiyang* 颍阳别元丹丘之淮阳):

吾将元夫子，异姓为天伦……

我有锦囊诀，可以持君身。

当餐黄金药，去为紫阳宾……

别尔东南去，悠悠多悲辛。

前志庶不易，远途期所遵。

已矣归去来，白云飞天津。

Master Yuan, I regard you as a brother with a different surname.

I have a brocade trick that can help you stay young.

That is alchemy monasticism.

Take the Golden Medicine and become a guest of the Ziyang Immortal.

I farewell to you and then headed southeast.

My life has many sorrows and hardships.
 My previous aspirations have not changed,
 but I still adhere to them during the long journey.

I have returned, as white clouds fly above Tianjin Bridge in Luoyang. (B. Li 1977b, vol. 2:15, p. 717)

The first two lines, taken from the *Guliang Commentary (Guliang Zhuan)*, serve to substantiate the close bond between Li Bai and Yuan Danqiu, highlighting their brotherhood. The following lines of the poem delve into Li Bai's personal reflections on feeling trapped in the mortal world and his lamentation over this predicament. Yu Xianhao's "Emendation and Annotation of *Li Taibai's Complete Works*" (Vol. 12) further explains that the following section expresses the poet's lament about the fleeting time in the world and his yearning for immortality. The poem also urges friends to take pills and follow the Taoist practices of Hu Ziyang. Through these verses, Li Bai skillfully conveys his genuine emotions towards his friends with references to the "golden elixir" and other phrases.

Indeed, Li Bai has written many poems with similar themes. Some examples include "Write This Poem to Sentimentalize Current Situation and to Bid Farewell to My Cousin the Prince of Xu Yannian and Cousin Yanling" and "The Poem Given to Pei Shiqi Zhongkan in Early Autumn" which praises the bravery and rising talents of Pei Sheng and his associations with influential families. Another poem, "Exiled to Yelang Halfway, Thanks to The Grace of The Emperor, I am Released, and with The Joy of Regaining The Lost Territory, Writing the Letter to Xiucai Xi", expresses Li Bai's gratitude towards the emperor for his pardon and the joy he felt at reclaiming lost territory, as he wrote a letter to Xiucai Xi (*Liu Yelang bandao chengen fanghuan jian xin kefu zhi mei shuhuai shi Xi xiucai*). Li Bai's poems, such as "I Shall Shortly Summit the Fangzhang and Penglai Immortal Mountains after Sending Mr. Xi This Poetry" and "I Will Head to Shanzhong to Avoid the Chaos and Leave This Poem for Xuancheng County Magistrate Cui", not only reveal his yearning for immortality but also showcase his genuine friendships and deep appreciation for his companions. In the first one, Li Bai expresses his longing to share his poetic aspirations with Xi, highlighting the deep bond between them. Likewise, in another poem, he extols the hospitality of Cui and the joyful experiences they have shared. These verses not only embody Li Bai's quest for immortality but also underscore the significance he attaches to genuine friendships.

4. Conclusions

In the history of Chinese culture, the term *yao* first appeared in the early Qin Dynasty, as seen in works like *The Book of Changes*, which provides cautions against excessive reliance on *yao* with the sentence "Do not be overjoyed by medicine." From the Wei and Jin dynasties onwards, references to *yao* became abundant in poetry. And the trend continued into the Tang Dynasty. However, Li Bai's poems diverge significantly in their approach to this theme. These distinctions can be summarized by the recurrent allusions to the elixir of immortality found on the mythical Penglai Island—a potent remedy capable of surpassing the bounds of mortal existence. This elixir was believed to have been stolen by Heng'e, the moon goddess, from the Queen Mother of the West, or alternatively, it was made from the immortal herbs pounded by the Jade Rabbit. Although a small part of Li Bai's poems involving "yao" touch upon the concept of diseases and medicine, a closer examination reveals a multitude of phrases that refer to the idea-imageical meaning of *yao*. For instance, *yao* suggests Li Bai's admiration of immortality. Some historical allusions are used to expose deficiencies and address issues of his time. Li Bai utilizes *yao* to symbolize his ambitions and express his sorrow over the passage of time. Last but not least, *yao* is employed in his poems to celebrate the true essence of friendship as well. All in all, Li Bai's poetry sets itself apart from that of other poets through its distinctive range of verbal expressions and profound emotional impact.

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Notes

- 1 The the three springs means the netherworld.
- 2 The line reads: 但求蓬岛药, 岂思农廡春. See (B. Li 1977a, vol. 1:2, p. 145).
- 3 The line reads: 安得不死药, 高飞向蓬瀛. See (B. Li 1977b, vol. 2:20, p. 924).
- 4 “譬若羿请不死之药于西王母, 姮娥窃以奔月, 怅然有丧, 无以续之”, See (Liu 2020).
- 5 Ruomu was a red sacred tree recorded in *the Classic of Mountains and Seas (Shanhai jing 山海经)*, which lives among the most remote places, having green leaves and red flowers.
- 6 “月中何有, 白兔捣药, 兴福降祉”, in (Ouyang 1999).
- 7 “仍欲摘仙果, 服金丹, 幻想羽化飞升, 千载游卧神山仙宫”, See (B. Li 2015).
- 8 Fusang is a sacred tree in ancient legends, consisting of two large mulberry trees that support each other.

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