

Life and Homeland in the Colors of Jiangnan Spring by Du Mu

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Abstract: The color art in Du Mu's "Spring South of the Yangtze" lies essentially in the profound blend of the poet's life vicissitudes and his patriotic devotion. Vivid chromes embody his longing for ideals, while misty shades echo his reflection on reality. Their interplay weaves a poignant emotional tension, evoking the elegance of classical poetry. This paper focuses on Du Mu's "Spring in the South of the Yangtze" and analyzes the aesthetic qualities of classical poetry from three dimensions—emotional cultivation, artistic characteristics, and artistic expression techniques—using its use of color as a starting point. By comparing it with the use of color in other poems, it reveals the important role of color in classical poetry, which is not only a visual presentation but also an emotional carrier and cultural symbol. "Spring in the South" employs contrasting light and dark hues, warm and cool tones, and the interplay of motion and stillness to create a profound artistic realm. It embodies reflections on historical rise and fall alongside praise for natural beauty, exemplifying the classical poetic aesthetic ideal of "poetry within painting, emotion within imagery."

Keywords: Du Mu; Color; Emotional Cultivation; Patriotic Sentiment

1. Introduction

As a treasure of Chinese culture, classical Chinese poetry possesses unique aesthetic qualities—such as sincerity of emotion, artistic refinement, and rich expressive techniques. Among its many aesthetic elements, color stands out as a crucial component. In poetic creation, color serves not only as a visual element but also carries profound emotional and cultural connotations. Du Mu's "Spring in the South"—a mere twenty-eight characters—paints a vivid tableau of southern spring through its distinctive use of color, while simultaneously

evoking readers' profound reflections on historical rise and fall. The color art in Du Mu's "Spring South of the Yangtze" lies essentially in the profound blend of the poet's life vicissitudes and his patriotic devotion. Vivid chromes embody his longing for ideals, while misty shades echo his reflection on reality. Their interplay weaves a poignant emotional tension, evoking the elegance of classical poetry. [1] This paper examines the aesthetic qualities of "Spring in the South" through the lens of its color usage. This approach not only deepens our appreciation of the poem's charm but also offers a unique perspective on understanding the aesthetic characteristics of classical poetry, enabling a more comprehensive and profound appreciation of its artistic appeal.

2. The Emotional Resonance of Color Usage in Du Mu's "Spring in the South"

2.1 Color as a Hymn to Natural Beauty

"A thousand miles of oriole song, green reflecting red" opens with vivid hues, sketching a vibrant spring landscape of the south. 'Green' embodies spring's vitality and vigor, symbolizing nature's exuberant life force; 'red' signifies warmth and beauty, the most dazzling color of spring. These two hues complement each other, creating a powerful visual impact that immerses the reader in a kaleidoscope of colors, evoking spring's exuberant vitality and boundless energy. Through this masterful use of color, the poet expresses heartfelt admiration for the natural beauty of spring in the south. This praise transcends mere appreciation of the scenery; it embodies awe for nature's miraculous creativity [2]. For Du Mu, whose official career was fraught with frustrations and repeated exiles to distant posts, such radiant vividness served as the very portrait of his ideal life. Born into a distinguished clan yet vexed by the cutthroat strife of the officialdom, he was trapped in thwarted ambitions. Amid such trials, the "green" and "red" of Jiangnan became his

spiritual refuge, embodying his yearning for a tranquil, leisurely life unshackled by trivial worldly cares [3]. The line "Water villages, mountain towns, wine flags fluttering in the wind" sustains this luminous keynote. In villages embraced by emerald waters and towns nestled against green hills, wine flags of crimson and cyan dance gently with the breeze. The earthly warmth woven by these interlaced hues is not merely a true reflection of Jiangnan's thriving commerce and people's peaceful livelihoods, but also a vessel for Du Mu's ideal of a flourishing era [4]. As a scholar harboring aspirations of governing the nation for the common good, the vision of a peaceful realm and prosperous people he cherished lies precisely within these vivid, bright colors.

2.2 Reflections on Historical Rise and Fall through Color

Four hundred and eighty temples of the Southern Dynasties, how many pavilions and towers shrouded in misty rain? The poet's gaze shifts from the present beauty to historical contemplation. The element of "misty rain" adds an aura of haze and mystery to the scene. Once-grand temples of the Southern Dynasties now fade into history, Leaving only pavilions and towers faintly visible through the misty rain. This chromatic rendering not only captures the unique charm of spring in the Jiangnan region but also embodies the poet's reflections on the rise and fall of history. Those once-glorious temples now stand as relics of the past, prompting contemplation of time's relentless passage and the impermanence of worldly affairs. Here, color becomes a witness to history, bearing the poet's profound musings on historical transformation.

Mist and rain drape the world like a somber veil, enshrouding the once vivid temples and terraces. Their vermilion pillars and slate-gray tiles soften into a hazy blur, their former radiance fading into the quiet patina of time. This muted palette is the seamless outward reflection of Du Mu's inner melancholy [5]. Blessed with profound statesmanship, he found no way to fulfill his aspirations amid the murky politics of late Tang. The frustration of an unfulfilled official career and the chasm between ideal and reality clouded his heart like the unyielding mist—heavy with the confusion of unrecognized talent and the sorrow of thwarted ambitions.

From a national perspective, the hazy hues hold profound historical warnings and anxieties for the present. The rulers of the Southern Dynasties, fanatically devout to Buddhism, squandered people's toil and resources on temple construction—ultimately sealing their dynasties' fate. Those pavilions and terraces looming amid mist and rain are not just relics of the Southern Dynasties' rise and fall, but a microcosm of late Tang society. Du Mu's late Tang faced parallel crises: rampant Buddhism, warlord separatism, and corrupt governance, with the dynasty already teetering toward decline. Mist and rain bleed into the boundary between history and reality. Within this blurred palette, the poet invokes the Southern Dynasties' past to warn his era's rulers, urging them not to repeat the tragedy of falling to extravagance and dereliction. Furthermore, the cold, ethereal aura woven by the drizzle deepens his profound anxiety for the nation's destiny. The fading pavilions in the mist mirror the late Tang's waning glory, and the dimness in the colors echoes his pessimistic foresight for the dynasty—fully embodying his patriotic devotion to the realm [6].

2.3 Resonance between Color and Life Circumstances.

When composing this poem, Du Mu was at a low point in his political career. This personal predicament is reflected in the color palette of "Spring in the South." The poem features both vibrant hues like 'green' and "red," alongside the hazy, indistinct "mist and rain." This contrast in colors mirrors the poet's life circumstances. On one hand, he harbored hope for life and aspired to achieve something in politics, much like the vibrant spring brimming with boundless possibilities and vitality. On the other hand, the setbacks of reality left him feeling bewildered and helpless, akin to the pavilions shrouded in misty rain—vague and elusive [7].

Du Mu did not merely paint the spring scenery—through the shift of hues, he bound his personal aspirations tightly to the nation's fate. The radiance of individual ideals and the sting of reality's frustrations, the yearning for a flourishing realm and the shadow of dynastic decline—all unfurl vividly in the interplay of colors within these twenty-eight characters [8]. This color-borne expression endows the poem with both the liveliness of scenery and the

weight of emotion: it harbors a scholar's personal reflections, and more profoundly, embodies a profound sense of national duty, securing its place as a timeless masterpiece cherished across ages.

3. Artistic Characteristics of Color Usage in Du Mu's "Spring in the South"

3.1 Striking Color Contrast

One artistic hallmark of "Spring in the South" is its vivid color contrast. 'Green' and 'red' represent a warm-cool hue juxtaposition: green evokes freshness and tranquility, like a spring breeze caressing the face; red conveys passion and exuberance, akin to a blazing flame. These two hues complement each other, making the scene more vivid and layered. Simultaneously, the static colors of the "pavilions" contrast with the dynamic hues of the "mist and rain." The pavilions are still, their colors relatively fixed, conveying a sense of steadiness and solidity; the mist and rain, however, are dynamic, constantly drifting and spreading, adding an air of liveliness and transformation to the scene. This interplay of motion and stillness creates an ethereal atmosphere, enhancing the poem's artistic resonance. This contrast in colors enriches the visual depth of the poem.

3.2 Building Ambience through Color

In "Spring in the South," color serves not merely as visual presentation but as a builder of ambience. "Green reflecting red" constructs a vibrant spring scene, evoking images of birdsong, blossoms, and the awakening of all things; while "mist and rain" evokes a hazy, enigmatic Jiangnan ambience, prompting reflections on history and reality [9]. Together, they forge a profoundly serene and beautiful artistic realm, highlighting the unique charm of Jiangnan spring and its weighty historical resonance, thereby elevating the poem's artistic value.

3.3 Spatial-Temporal Structure of Color

The poem's color scheme follows a clear spatial progression from distant to near. First, the distant landscape unfolds: "A thousand miles of green and red, with orioles singing" uses "a thousand miles" as its scale, spreading "green" and 'red' as the background hues of a vast landscape. Next, the focus shifts to the foreground: "By water villages and mountain

towns, wine flags flutter in the breeze" zooms into detail—the bluish-gray "mountains," the emerald "water," and the fluttering wine flags (red or blue) form small-scale color contrasts lend the scene authenticity and a sense of everyday life. Chronologically, the "present-memory" shifts interweave reality and illusion, shifting through tonal variations. "A thousand miles of oriole song, green reflecting red; Water villages and mountain towns, wine flags in the breeze" vividly depicts the spring scenery of Jiangnan before one's eyes, with bright and fresh colors; "Four hundred and eighty temples of the Southern Dynasties, how many pavilions and towers stand in mist and rain" recalls temples shrouded in the rain of the Southern Dynasties, with colors becoming dim and deep. The contrast between light and shadow distinguishes reality from memory, akin to a cinematic transition, creating a captivating effect.

4. Artistic Techniques in Du Mu's "Spring in the South"

4.1 Symbolization of Color: Using "Color" to Represent "Objects"

Many color terms in the poem function as metonymies: "green" and "red" do not denote specific hues but represent "green leaves" and "red flowers," respectively. For instance, Yan Jidao's "green marshes" uses 'green' to symbolize vegetation, while Wen Tingyun's "peach blossoms and human faces" employs "red" to signify peach blossoms. This exemplifies classical poetry's symbolic wisdom of using color to represent wholes. This technique of "color symbolization" endows limited words with infinite expressive potential—readers encountering "green reflecting red" may envision specific blossoms and foliage, yet simultaneously extend the imagery to abstract concepts like "vitality and prosperity," achieving a leap from the concrete to the abstract [10].

4.2 Synesthetic Color: an Aesthetic Experience of Sensory Fusion

"Thousand miles of oriole song amidst green and red" implies synesthetic fusion of auditory and visual senses: the oriole's song, inherently an auditory image, forms a synesthetic connection with the visual hues of "green" and "red" "across the" thousand miles "of space—the

crisp chirping seems to imbue the ‘green’ and ‘red’ with a vibrant, luminous quality, while the vivid colors lend the oriole’s song a visible form. This transcends sensory boundaries, immersing readers in a harmonious fusion of sound and color for an immersive aesthetic experience.

4.3 Historicizing Color: Conveying Thought through Hue

The historical imagery of “four hundred and eighty temples of the Southern Dynasties” combines with the color of “mist and rain” to form an expression of “historicized color”: the “gold” and ‘vermillion’ of Buddhist architecture, originally symbols of solemnity and dignity, are now shrouded in the bluish-gray of “mist and rain,” creating a “glory-to-dullness” color contrast. This metaphorically represents the historical shift from the flourishing of Buddhism in the Southern Dynasties to its decline in the Tang Dynasty [11]. Here, color transcends mere depiction of natural scenery to become a vessel for historical transformation, bearing the poet’s profound reflections on the impermanence of worldly affairs and the rise and fall of all things.

5. Comparative Analysis of Color Usage in Classical Poetry

5.1 Comparison with Bai Juyi’s Poetic Color Palette

Bai Juyi’s poetic color descriptions are direct and accessible, emphasizing the beauty of hues through concise, vivid language to evoke immediate sensory responses in readers. For instance, in “Recalling the South,” lines like “The sun rises, and the river flowers blaze redder than fire; Spring comes, and the river water turns green as indigo” employ direct expressions like “redder than fire” and “green as indigo.” Using hyperbole, these lines vividly portray the intense, striking colors of spring’s river water and flowers in the South. The language is accessible, and the emotional expression is direct, allowing readers to quickly visualize the scene.

Du Mu’s “Spring in the South” employs vivid color vocabulary yet adopts a more subtle and nuanced approach. Through the combination of imagery and color coordination, readers gradually perceive the artistic conception created by color while savoring the poem. For instance, “Water villages, mountain towns, wine

flags in the breeze” uses imagery like “water villages,” “mountain towns,” and “wine flags” to subtly suggest blue waters, green mountains, and the hues of wine flags—red or blue—are not explicitly stated, yet they invite readers to draw their own associations and interpretations. This subtlety imbues the verse with rich resonance, contrasting sharply with Bai Juyi’s direct approach to color expression.

5.2 Comparison with Li He’s Use of Color

Li He’s poetry often employs fantastical, intense hues. He skillfully uses unusual colors to create oppressive atmospheres and ethereal, dreamlike realms. For instance, in “The Governor of Yanmen Pass”: “Black clouds press down on the city, threatening to crush it; The bugle call fills the autumn sky, The frontier night turns crimson like lipstick.”

Although Du Mu’s “Spring in the South” also employs vivid colors, its overall style is bright and fresh, depicting the natural beauty and cultural landscapes of spring in the southern regions. The colors employed in the poem serve to showcase the vitality of the south and the weight of history. For instance, in “Four hundred and eighty temples of the Southern Dynasties, how many pavilions and towers stand in mist and rain,” the grayish-white mist and rain add a sense of historical vicissitudes. Yet, the atmosphere created by these colors remains grounded in a realistic historical perception, starkly contrasting with Li He’s fantastical imagination.

6. Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of Du Mu’s use of color in “Spring in the South,” we see that color holds significant aesthetic value in classical poetry. Color is not merely a visual presentation but also a vehicle for emotion and a cultural symbol. In “Spring in the South,” the use of color is closely intertwined with emotional cultivation, artistic characteristics, and artistic expression techniques, collectively creating a unique aesthetic realm. Comparisons with color usage in other classical poems further highlight the distinctiveness of “Spring in the South of the Yangtze.” This demonstrates how poets often shape and employ color to complement their creative style, serving the expression of emotion.

The use of color in classical poetry offers a vital pathway to understanding its aesthetic qualities.

It allows us, while appreciating the verses, to delve deeper into the poet's emotional world and grasp the unique charm of classical poetry. By focusing on the use of color in classical poetry and exploring its underlying cultural significance and aesthetic value, we ensure that classical poetry continues to shine brightly in the modern era.

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