

# Analysis of the Function of the Lotus Imagery in Song Ci Poetry

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**Abstract**—As a flower frequently appearing in ancient literary works, the lotus presents diverse facets and serves various subtle functions under the brushes of Song Dynasty ci poets. It can convey emotions, hint at seasonal changes, and embody noble qualities.

**Keywords**— Song Ci Poetry, Lotus, Imagery, Analysis.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The lotus, an aquatic plant also known as lianhua, furong, fuqu, ouhua, handan, xike, jingke, chanke, Lingbo Xianzi (Goddess Treading the Waves), etc., blooms in summer. It has been widely cherished in China for its beauty and purity. Throughout various dynasties, countless literati have praised the sacred and elegant lotus through different forms such as poetry, ci, prose, and fu, leaving behind numerous masterpieces. Some describe its appearance: "Green lotus leaves cover the green water, the lotus flowers don red freshness," using green and red to depict the colors of leaves and flowers. Others praise its noble character: "Emerging from silt yet unstained, cleansed by clear ripples yet not seductive." The descriptions are varied and manifold.

## II. THE FUNCTIONS OF LOTUS IMAGERY IN SONG CI POETRY

During the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties, the people's fondness for the lotus became even more pronounced. In the Wu region, the 24th day of the sixth lunar month was customarily observed as the Lotus Appreciation Festival, and viewing lotuses became a widespread practice in the Jiangnan region. The emergence of the ci genre further propelled lotus-themed literature to its peak. Among the approximately 19,900 ci poems in the Complete Ci Poetry of the Song Dynasty, nearly 1,600 directly describe the lotus. Including works that refer to it by other names, the number is even greater. Descriptions of the lotus in Song ci are detailed and varied: some focus on leaves, some on flowers, some on both. Concurrently, the functions of depicting the lotus in Song ci also differ: borrowing scenery to express emotion, using objects to convey ideals, hinting at seasons, or embodying qualities, among others.

### A. Hinting at Seasonal Changes

The lotus in ci can hint at two seasons: summer and autumn.

Summer: For example, in "Ruan Lang Gui: Early Summer": "Green locusts, tall willows mute new cicadas; Warm breezes begin to enter the strings. Behind the green gauze window, sinking incense smoke; The sound of Go stones startles daytime slumber. A light rain passes, small

lotuses turn; Pomegranate flowers blaze as if burning. With slender hands in a jade basin stirring clear springs, Jade pearls shatter then round again." Here, the described lotus hints at summer. The ci depicts boudoir life in early summer: the first stanza portrays static beauty through auditory means; the second depicts dynamic beauty through visual imagery, using silent pictures to display nature's vitality, simultaneously expressing the female protagonist's innocence and liveliness.

Another example is "Die Lian Hua· First Twisting Frosty Silk, Sorrow Grows": "Rain ceases, duckweed breeze stirs the swelling green. Tender lotuses, tear-stained faces gazing at each other. Slantingly pasted, green clouds, the new moon rises; Its curved arc is precisely the shape of sorrowful brows." This describes an elegant outdoor scene after a summer rain: a gentle breeze caresses the newly risen green water; the lotuses therein, adorned with sparkling raindrops, stand gracefully, swaying charmingly, hinting at summer.

Autumn: For example, Li Qingzhao writes: "Red lotus fragrance fades, jade mat feels autumn; Lightly loosening my silk robe, Alone I board the orchid boat. Who in the clouds sends a brocade letter? When the wild geese return, The moon fills the western tower. Flowers drift, water flows of their own accord; One kind of longing, two places of idle sorrow. This feeling cannot be dispelled; No sooner does it leave the brows, Than it climbs into the heart." The first three lines establish the season as autumn, with lotuses fading and flowers gone, conveying a sense of desolation amidst fallen blooms and absence.

Another example is "Yong Yu Le· Bright Moon Like Frost": "Bright moon like frost, fine breeze like water, Scenes of pure beauty boundless. In winding inlets fish leap, On round lotus leaves dew spills, Unseen in solitude." The first three lines indicate autumn, followed by descriptions of fish leaping and dew spilling.

Also, "Gan Cao Zi· Late Autumn states" wirted by of Liu Yong: "Late autumn, Randomly sprinkling on fading lotuses, Bead-like genuine pearl rain." The metaphor is apt; the character "random" is used excellently, depicting both the chaotic, startling sound of rain on fading lotuses and the scene of jumping pearls scattering, also hinting at the autumn season.

### B. Setting the Atmosphere, Enhancing Scenic Beauty

In Song Ci Poetry, the lotus imagery is generally referred to as "he," "lian," or "furong." For example, in "Lin Jiang Xian": "Beyond the willows, light thunder, rain upon the pond, The sound of rain drips shatters the lotus sound." The crisp sound of raindrops on lotus leaves seems to shatter the

originally whole lotus sound into finer ripples of sound, using the small to see the large, reflecting the entire cool, rainy world through subtle sounds.

Another example: "After the lotus blooms, West Lake is fine, Before and behind, red canopies and green covers follow." Here, the poet compares lotus flowers and leaves to "red canopies and green covers," vividly and dynamically, using color contrast to highlight the strong visual impact of lotus leaves and flowers.

### C. Borrowing Scenery to Express Emotion, Using Objects to Convey Ideals

Ancient literati often used objects to convey emotions and express aspirations.

For example, Jiang Kui's "Nian Nu Jiao·A Boat Amidst the Bustling Red" is a work that uses objects to convey ideals, borrowing the lotus to express personal circumstances. This ci captures the most genuine emotional experience of appreciating lotuses. "A boat amidst the bustling red, I recall upon arrival often pairing with mandarin ducks. Thirty-six ponds where people haven't reached, Countless water pendants and wind garments. Green leaves blow cool, Jade faces sober from wine, Further sprinkled with rush and cattail rain. With charming smile they sway, Cold fragrance flies up into poetic lines." The poet boats among lotuses, seeing emerald leaves and beautiful flowers like water pendants, wind garments, a beauty's jade face. "I only fear their dance garments, cold, easily fall; Sorrow enters the west wind, southern shore. Tall willows cast shade, Old fish blow waves, Urging me to stay among the flowers. So many spreading leaves, How many times on the sandy path my way back?" This also expresses Jiang Kui's (tender care and protective love for the lotuses and his reluctance to leave. Here, the poet, by describing the lotus pond, delineates an icy-pure, unstained world, which is also the poet's ideal. His affection for the lotus embodies his pursuit of a transcendent life ideal.

Another example is Li Jing's "Huan Xi Sha·Lotus Fragrance Fades, Jade Leaves Wither", also a work borrowing scenery for emotion. The opening two lines, "Lotus fragrance fades, jade leaves wither, West wind's sorrow rises between green waves," describe lotuses losing fragrance and color, their jade leaves fading. Such a desolate scene evokes infinite melancholy. The following, "Still sharing languor with passing time, Unbearable to behold," transitions from scenery to emotion.

### D. Symbolizing the Virtue of a Gentleman, Embodying the Poet's Noble Quality

The lotus has always been a symbol of nobility and purity. In literature, it was Zhou Dunyi's "Ai Lian Shuo" that truly established the lotus's status as a gentleman. The author states: "I alone love the lotus for emerging from silt yet unstained, cleansed by clear ripples yet not seductive; Hollow inside, straight outside, not creeping nor branching; Fragrance wafts far, increasingly pure; Erect and cleanly planted, it can be admired from afar but not profaned." Firstly, "emerging from silt yet unstained, cleansed by clear ripples yet not seductive" describes the lotus's quality of remaining untainted despite

growing in mud, not following vulgar customs, maintaining purity and self-respect. Secondly, "hollow inside, straight outside, not creeping nor branching" depicts its upright, unclinging noble quality. Thirdly, "can be admired from afar but not profaned" portrays the lotus as an aloof gentleman, dignified and inviolable. Furthermore, in the latter part, the author states, "The lotus is the gentleman among flowers," directly bestowing the title of gentleman upon the lotus, depicting its noble, unstained gentlemanly image. The essay also uses objects to convey ideals, comparing the lotus to a person. Through description and praise of the lotus, it extols its steadfast, noble quality of emerging unstained from silt, expressing the author's life attitude of not craving fame or fortune and maintaining purity.

Additionally, Zhou Bangyan's "Su Mu Zhe·Burning Chenxiang Incense", although expressing homesickness, has always been renowned for its depiction of the lotus's divine charm. The ci says: "Burn chenxiang incense, dispel the humid heat. Birds herald clear skies, at dawn peeping eaves, chirping. On leaves the morning sun dries last night's rain, Water surface clear and round, One by one wind-lifted lotuses." It describes what is felt, heard, and seen. The first four lines skillfully establish time and season through olfactory, auditory, tactile, and visual descriptions. The next three lines depict what the poet sees outdoors. From different angles and perspectives, using varied lenses, it captures the lotus's rich, vivid, lifelike image. The author gathers the lotus's image and related sentiments, highlighting them from different sides and angles, accurately and vividly expressing the lotus's divine charm and expressing his own nostalgia.

### III. CONCLUSION

As an imagery, the lotus in ci serves functions such as hinting at seasons, enhancing scenery, borrowing scenery for emotion, and embodying qualities. Among these, the primary function is lyrical, expressing the author's various subjective emotions. For example, Li Qingzhao in "Yi Jian Mei" expresses desolation and longing amidst changed circumstances; Li Yu (Note: likely refers to Li Jing) in "Huan Xi Sha" Lotus Fragrance Fades, Jade Leaves Wither expresses pain and lament; Su Shi in "Ruan Lang Gui·Early Summer" expresses maidenly boudoir sentiments, embodying a healthy beauty. When we savor these uniquely beautiful ci lines today, it is as if we encounter souls from a thousand years ago, re-experiencing the eternal charm of the "lotus's distinctive sentiment" within the ci poetry.

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