

Ambiguous and Amiss: Li Shangyin's Poetry and Its Interpretations

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One striking feature of Li Shangyin's 李商隱 (ca. 812–58) poetry is its ambiguity, which has fascinated and frustrated generations of critics and scholars, giving rise to widely divergent interpretations. Through an analysis of Li Shangyin's famous poem "Jin se" 錦瑟 (The ornamented zither) and a survey of representative interpretations of his poetry by different schools in history, this article describes some of Li Shangyin's ambiguous characteristics and points out the inappropriateness and harmfulness of the interpretations that have resulted from misuse of certain criteria derived from the Chinese tradition of canonical exegesis. Believing that Li Shangyin's creation of highly ambiguous semantic structures in his poems was more for aesthetic than for political considerations, the author suggests that, in reading Li Shangyin's ambiguous poems, one should allow flexibility in terms of their topical references so as properly to grasp and appreciate the ambiguous significance.

The Poetry of Li Shangyin: Allusive & Enigmatic

In *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin: Ninth-Century Baroque Chinese Poet*, the only monographic translation and study of Li Shangyin 李商隱 (ca. 812–58) in English so far, James J. Y. Liu writes: "Li Shang-yin has been both admired and condemned for the highly allusive character of much of his poetry" (1969, 246). Few scholars of Chinese poetry would question this statement. In fact, not only does allusion figure prominently in Li Shangyin's poetry, but also it is recognized that allusion is abundantly common in premodern Chinese poetry in general. As Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 465–522) said: "Writers before the time of Ch'ing (Qing) [or Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju (Sima Xiangru)] and Yuan [or Wang Pao (Bao)] mostly wrote out of their natural inclinations, and seldom took advantage of the experience of others; but after the time of [Yang] Hsiung (Xiong) and [Liu] Hsiang (Xiang), many writers began to quote the works of past authors to help them in their own writing" (Shih 1983, 493). Being a later poet, Li Shangyin naturally inherited this tradition of allusion. Writing in the shadows of many great poets,

however, Li Shangyin distinguished his practice of borrowing from that of others. He presented in his poetry a continuum of forms that started with the use of overt allusions and then moved on with a tendency to reduce the more visible marks of borrowing through subtly internalizing his allusions or drawing on their atmospheric qualities. Moreover, in his search for images and voices throughout the literary tradition for his own poetry, he “explores strange and fascinating worlds of passion and fantasy that none of the other poets has explored” (Liu 1969, 250). In the wide range of his allusive sources, apart from canonical works to which most of his predecessors and contemporary poets alluded, Li Shangyin called upon out-of-the-way tales, anecdotes, and mythological and legendary stories.

If allusiveness is a striking feature in the Li Shangyin corpus, his frequent, creative, and assimilative employment of allusions contributed to another conspicuous characteristic of his poetry: enigma. In Li Shangyin’s poetry, these two attributes seem inseparable: Enigma is by definition interwoven with allusiveness, especially his cryptic allusiveness; and allusiveness, in turn, is integral to the epithet of enigma. To a large extent, these two constitutive elements of Li Shangyin’s poetry play a fundamental role in Li Shangyin’s poetic ambiguity, which, nevertheless, has been mainly appreciated intuitively.

To study Li Shangyin’s poetic ambiguity systematically in order to see how it contributes to the process of his poetic signification is an ambitious and complex project that deserves full-length presentation elsewhere. It is my interest in this article, however, to discuss, first, some of Li’s ambiguous poetic characteristics and traditional treatments of them. Instead of understanding these characteristics as highly crafted artistic effects, traditional critics and commentators have often regarded them as mere results of the poet’s sociopolitical circumstances and considerations. Second, I critically survey divergent interpretations of Li Shangyin’s poetry that have arisen over the centuries due to his ambiguity. Demonstrating and problematizing these interpretations of Li’s poetry are meaningful and useful activities, because a thorough knowledge of these interpretations—with all their problems—is necessary for our future exploration of Li Shangyin’s poetic ambiguity.

Ambiguity of Li Shangyin’s Poetry: “The Ornamented Zither” as an Example

Historically, the ambiguous characteristics of Li Shangyin’s poetry have received much attention, both positive and negative, by both traditional critics and modern scholars. In traditional critical writings on poetry, referred to as *shihua* 詩話 (remarks on poetry), Li Shangyin’s poetry is often associated in Chinese with the descriptors *yinpi* 隱僻 (hermetic), *shenpi* 深僻

(enigmatic), or *huise* 晦澀 (recondite), all of which could be in one way or another associated with ambiguity. Although many critics, for various reasons, denounced the ambiguous character of Li's poetry, positive attitudes toward it have been seen in quite a few critical writings since the Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279). Ye Xie 葉燮 (1627–1703), for example, viewed Li Shangyin's quatrains as follows: "Li Shangyin's seven-character quatrains are invested with profound meanings and worded in indirect expressions. They are unsurpassed and can truly exist incomparably for centuries" (Guo 1979, 74).

The following famous remark on Li Shangyin's poems by Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) provides an example of one modern reader's positive reaction to the characteristic of ambiguity: What such poems as "The Ornamented Zither," "The Walls of Emerald," and "The Holy Lady's Temple," and so forth, "are about I cannot determine. I cannot even explain the literal meaning line by line. Yet I feel they are beautiful, and when I read them, they give me a new kind of pleasure in my mind. We must realize that Beauty is many-sided, that Beauty is mysterious by nature. If we still acknowledge the value of Beauty, we cannot lightly brush aside this kind of writing" (Liang 1937, 50).¹

Although their understanding of the significance of ambiguity as a mode of Li Shangyin's poetry remained intuitive, these critics have shown the pervasiveness of this characteristic in the Li Shangyin corpus, especially regarding poems composed in the form of "regulated verse" (*lüshi* 律詩). Regulated verse, which became mature in the High Tang 唐 period (ca. 713–66) thanks to great achievements in it by poets like Du Fu 杜甫 (712–70), has very restricting rules yet at the same time affords opportunities for highly compact and complex verbal structures as well as subtle and cryptic poetic effects. For his allusive and multifaceted poetic utterance, Li Shangyin seems to have found a perfect outlet in the form of regulated verse. Many of his poems that reveal his esoteric worlds and complicated feelings are composed in such verse. To exemplify how the poet employs this poetic form to communicate things that are unintelligible and give rise to different readings of them, let us turn to his seven-character regulated-verse poem titled "Jin se" 錦瑟 (The ornamented zither), perhaps the most famous (and most controversial) poem by Li Shangyin:

錦瑟無端五十弦，一弦一柱思華年。
 莊生曉夢迷蝴蝶，望帝春心托杜鵑。
 滄海月明珠有淚，藍田日暖玉生煙。
 此情可待成追憶，只是當時已惘然。

The ornamented zither, for no reason, has fifty strings;
Each string, each bridge, recalls a youthful year.

Master Chuang [Zhuang] was confused by his morning dream of the
butterfly;
Emperor Wang's amorous heart in spring is entrusted to the cuckoo.

In the vast sea, under a bright moon, pearls have tears;
On Indigo Mountain, in the warm sun, jade engenders smoke.

This feeling might have become a thing to be remembered,
Only, at the time you were already bewildered and lost.

(Liu 1969, 51)²

Starting with the ornamented zither, a musical instrument which is both real and legendary, this poem conveys the poet's complicated feelings with great passion as well as in a very ambiguous way. Largely, the unintelligibility of the poem comes from its composition of complex allusions and juxtaposition of images which are highly metaphoric, metonymic, and contrasting. The allusion to the zither, for example, functions, first, as a concrete image and therefore immediately produces certain senses and images for the reader. Once the allusion—to the legend in which the god Taidi 太帝 ordered the fifty-stringed zither played by a goddess broken in half to subdue the extremely sorrowful tone it produced—is realized, however, the allusive quality of the image thickens the sadness evoked by these senses and allows us to experience a more profound human feeling through the remainder of the poem.³ Intrinsically, the poem's ambiguity begins with the poet's incorporation of a plaintive mood by drawing on the atmospheric quality of this allusion. Also, as the fifty-stringed zither is played "each string, each bridge," so are the past years recalled one by one; the zither can thus be taken metaphorically to represent man's life.

The second couplet can further exemplify the poem's ambiguous attributes. The first line of the couplet refers to a famous anecdote in the *Book of Zhuang Zi* (*Zhuang Zi* 莊子, also known as the *Nanhua jing* 南華經). In that story, the legendary Daoist master Zhuang Zi (fourth century B.C.E.) says that he once dreamed he was a butterfly and could not know if he was a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zi or Zhuang Zi dreaming he was a butterfly (Zhuang Zi 1977, 2.22b). Alluding to this well-known story, the phrase immediately presents both a question—What is real and what is unreal?—and an image invested with the poet's lost or perplexed feeling, or that of frustration or even despair. The second line of the couplet alludes to the myth of Emperor Wang 望帝 named Du Yu 杜宇, an ancient ruler of Shu 蜀. About him, there are several different stories of which we have this version: "Emperor Wang sent Bie Ling to be in charge of the floods and, after Bie Ling left, seduced his wife. He felt ashamed of his own action af-

terwards and was convinced that Bie Ling was a morally better man; he then turned his kingdom over to Bie Ling. When Emperor Wang left, a cuckoo was just then calling" (Liu and Yu 2004, 1580). The key element of the alluded story—that Emperor Wang disappeared or died of shame and spiritually transformed himself into a cuckoo—reminds one of a guilty, lonely ghost yet also evokes associations with tragic love. Thus, in this couplet, the poet seems to be recalling his past experiences and feelings; and, as Zhuang Zi was at a loss when waking up from a dream and Emperor Wang entrusted his unhappy soul to a sobbing cuckoo, he is bewildered and lamenting what has really happened (or what might have happened).

More imagistic but as cryptic as the preceding couplets, the third couplet of the poem presents a poetic world that is exquisite and gentle, yet vast and majestic. Although this couplet is highly allusive, functioning as an organic part of the total poetic pattern, allusions here—as good examples of Li's assimilative use of allusion—possess some amplified vitality, which is to a certain extent independent of the allusiveness. The first line of the couplet, for instance, cannot be fully understood without knowledge of its allusions. But, even one who is unaware of these allusions "could pertinently grasp the metonymic bonds that unite the images," as Francois Cheng notes; the bonds are those "between the sea and the moon (interaction), between the moon and the pearls (shine and roundness), the pearls and tears; . . . and finally, the image of the tears, being that of liquid element (and because the expression 'sea of tears' exists in the language), re-joins itself to that of the sea" (1982, 88). Needless to say, the images evoke a solitary and melancholy feeling.

Certainly, though, the poetic effect of this line will be increased by actualization of the allusions that bear the images. One of the several possible alluded texts that are assimilated in this line goes like this: "Beyond the South Sea there are mermaids ('shark people') who live in the water like fish, but spin like women on land; their weeping eyes can exude pearls" (Graham 1965, 169). If the color and shape of pearls seen in the distance look like the shedding of tears, the tear shedding—like pearls were originally exuded from mermaids' weeping eyes, according to this allusive source. Thus, tears become pearls and pearls seem like tears, the two melancholy images being mingled together against the vast moonlit sea. Such personified, disconsolate pearls, precious and beautiful, can be further associated with the image of an undetected pearl left in the vast sea, since the line may also allude to the expression *canghaiyizhu* 滄海遺珠 (a pearl left in the vast sea), referring to someone whose talent is not appreciated (Liu 1969, 51). The poet's artful manipulation of the ambiguous sources of allusions has therefore made the already melancholy image in the line even more mournful and despairing.

Indigo Mountain, in the second line of the third couplet, refers to Mount Lantian (*Lantianshan* 藍田山, also called *Yüshan* 玉山). The mountain was said to be located to the south of Chang'an 長安 and was famous for its fine jade. A few texts have been considered by commentators as possible allusive sources, two of which contain relevant implications for this reading. The first is the "Ziyu zhuan" 紫玉傳 (The story of purple jade) cited by Cheng Mengxing 程夢星. According to this story, Purple Jade, the daughter of the King of Wu 吳, died of a broken heart when she lost the young man she loved; and her ghost disappeared like smoke when her mother tried to embrace it (see Gan 1937, 16.108). As suggested by the alluded story, the precious jade is seen existing only from a distance: once one wants to reach it, it vanishes.

Cited by Feng Hao 馮浩 (1719–1801) as the source for the allusion, the next text seems closer to Li Shangyin's line. It is a remark which Sikong Tu 司空圖 (837–908) attributed to the Tang poet Dai Shulun 戴叔倫 (732–89): "The scene presented by a poet is like the smoke which issues from fine jade when the sun is warm on Blue Mountain (Lan-t'ien [Lantian], 'Indigo Field'); it can be seen from a distance but not from close to" (Graham 1965, 170). Obviously, Dai is here speaking about the effects of poetic language. Yet the feature of jade given in Dai's description echoes that in the first alluded story and thus reinforces the suggestion engendered by the allusion: the shimmery jade can be seen only from a distance and cannot be reached. Moreover, the similar words used in Li Shangyin's and Dai's texts indicate that there might have been an unknown or lost source from which both Dai's and Li Shangyin's allusions derived. Symbolically, the inaccessible jade at the sun-warmed Indigo Mountain may stand for life, which appears beautiful and inviting in certain ways but is, in the end, mysterious and unapproachable. The poet seems in a daze when he meditates on his past. Or, more particularly, he is bewildered when he meditates on his experience of unattainable love or his poetic achievement.⁴ Apart from their allusive characteristics, images in this line also function as representations of immediacy and establish a few contrasts with images of the previous line.

The simultaneous activation of the terse and fragmented imagery and the cryptic and contradictory allusion in the third couplet is not only harmonized with the plaintive mood and complicated feelings in the preceding couplets but also adds emotional and intellectual dimensions to the significance of the poet's comprehension of life in the final couplet. The final couplet, taken from the linguistic parallelism and the compressed imagistic structure of the central couplets, brilliantly tells that all the past experiences and feelings "might have become memories to be cherished; only, even at the time they occurred, one was already bewildered and could not be sure they were real" (Liu 1969, 56–57). Here, the "feeling" of love in particular and for life in general becomes a "bewildered feeling" (*wangqing* 惘

情). This, to a great extent, indicates Li Shangyin's lucid comprehension of life: life takes place, so does love; and even at the time when it happens, it is obscure and confusing. Thus, that life is unreal and dreamlike is emotionally and intellectually foregrounded here. Structurally, this couplet "reinforces the linear chant inaugurated in the first couplet," since the zither "seems to have been transformed into a song, a song that is none other than the poem itself" (Cheng 1982, 90).

The difficulty of this poem lies largely in its intrinsic ambiguity, which, when approached inappropriately, has provided possibilities of so many seemingly viable interpretations of the poem. Different, often mutually exclusive, interpretations of the poem have existed since the Song dynasty. Some regard the poem as Li Shangyin's memory of his deceased wife; some think the poem to be a lament over his misfortunes in life; others hold a view that the poem is an introduction to the poet's collected poems; still others say this is a love poem written for a maid or concubine named Jinse in the household of the poet's political patron, Linghu Chu 令狐楚 (Liu and Yu 2004, 1581–97). Although the exclusiveness of the different interpretations of the poem shows that critics and scholars have attempted to eliminate the semantic ambiguity of the poem, the divergence exemplifies the enigmatic features and the very existence of compound signification in the poem.

Poems like "The Ornamented Zither" do not appear randomly in the Li Shangyin corpus; rather, they comprise a certain portion of it. Traditional critics usually linked ambiguity and associated phenomena in Li Shangyin's poetic compositions with the sociopolitical situation of the poet's time and his personal experiences. After all, throughout his life, Li Shangyin was stuck with factional disputes between his patrons and never achieved high official rank. Shen Deqian 沈德潛 (1693–1769), for instance, held this opinion when remarking on Li Shangyin's metaphorical features: "Li Shangyin's recent-style poems are oblique and many-layered and excel in criticism and parable. In them metaphor is often used to express his feelings, because, since he had encountered difficult times, he had to be enigmatic" (Guo 1979, 217). Criticism like this gives attention only to sociopolitical factors while ignoring the poet's artistic consciousness, which had a lot to do with his dialectical understanding of his poetic heritage and his unique sensibility toward poetic effect.

Various Schools of Interpretation of Li Shangyin's Poetry

Li Shangyin's ambiguous characteristics—and traditional misunderstanding and treatments of them, as exemplified above—have given rise to widely divergent interpretations of his poetry, which can be traced to the late period of the Ming 明 dynasty (1368–1644) when the Buddhist Dao Yuan 釋道源 began to annotate Li's works. Although brief critical comments

are seen in some *shihua* during the Song and Yuan 元 (1271–1368) dynasties, extensive commentaries and annotations did not appear until the early Qing 清 dynasty (1644–1912). The year 1659 saw the first complete annotated edition of Li Shangyin's work, Zhu Heling's 朱鶴齡 (1606–83) *Li Yishan shiji* 李義山詩集 (Collected poems of Li Shangyin). In the preface, Zhu argued that Li's works revealed sociopolitical events and disclosed the poet's political situation and his ambitions in the language of romantic passion between a man and woman.

Following Zhu, quite a few distinguished scholars carried out comprehensive studies on Li Shangyin's poetry. As some scholars of Li Shangyin have concluded, however, there are mainly three schools, each of which has contributed to a particular interpretation of Li Shangyin's poetry (Liu 1969, 27–31). The first school, in line with Zhu's view, is led by Feng Hao and Zhang Ertian 張爾田 (1874–1945). In his well-known work *Yuxisheng shiji jianzhu* 玉溪生詩集箋注 (A complete annotation of Li Shangyin's poetry), Feng painstakingly collected and absorbed the studies by previous and contemporary critics and scholars. However, in this fruitful annotation, which surpasses all previous similar works and remains the standard edition of Li Shangyin's poems, Feng basically sees in many of Li Shangyin's poems veiled references to the Linghus, the poet's patrons. Zhang, in his *Yuxisheng nianpu huijian* 玉溪生年譜會箋 (A comprehensive commentary on the biographical chronology of Li Shangyin), still the most authoritative work on Li's life, developed Feng's views. Both Feng and Zhang saw Li Shangyin's ambiguous poems as personal allegories involving the poet's relation with his political patron Linghu Tao 令狐綯. Some love poems that express powerful passion and feeling, for example, are taken either as revelation of the poet's ardent desire for Linghu Tao's patronage or as reflection of his own frustrations in his official career. Scholars in this school thus believe that Li Shangyin, throughout his life and as reflected in his ambiguous poems, "was dominated by his desire for official advancement and his remorse over having lost the patronage of the Ling-hu [Linghu] family by his marriage with Wang Mao-yuan's [Maoyuan's] daughter, and his most celebrated poems are reiterations of such feelings" (Liu 1969, 27).

Represented by some scholars in the first several decades of the twentieth century, the second school interprets Li Shangyin's ambiguous poems, especially the poems without titles, as personal accounts of various clandestine love affairs that the poet had with certain Daoist nuns and court ladies. The best-known advocate of this view is Su Xuelin 蘇雪林 (1897–1999). Su's book *Yuxi shimi* 玉溪詩迷 (The poetic riddle of Li Shangyin), which focuses on unveiling the love affairs of Li Shangyin rather than on interpreting texts, has had considerable influence on modern literary historians and critics.⁵ In Su Xuelin's opinion, "every poem of his is an extremely amo-

rous and extremely passionate love poem; and his poetry, except for a small portion, exclusively describes his adventures and love affairs" (1988, 2). Holding this kind of theory, scholars of this group try hard to search for evidence for the "real" love affairs between Li Shangyin and those nuns or court ladies. In interpreting Li Shangyin's poems, especially love poems, they take general words and images as specific "secret codes." According to Su, many of Li Shangyin's poems contain obscure references to a secret love affair between Li Shangyin and two court entertainers, the sisters called "Flying Phoenix" and "Agile Phoenix." For instance, in her interpretation of the poem "Qiyue ershiba ri ye yu Wang Zheng er xiucai tingyu hou zuo" 七月二十八日夜與王鄭二秀才聽雨後作 (Written after a dream, while listening to the rain together with candidates Wang and Zheng, on the twenty-eighth night of the seventh month), Su says that the poem is about a dream and was written when the poet, after he left the court, recalled in front of his friends what had happened there between him and the two sisters (43–51). Additionally, Su thinks that allusions to Daoist goddesses in many of Li's poems refer to one, named Song, of the sisters who were Daoist nuns (36).

The third school includes twentieth-century scholars like Gu Yiqun 顧翊群 and Sun Zhentao 孫甄陶. Most scholars in this group, as pointed out by James Liu, share the views that "Li's poems that involve Taoist nuns are not autobiographical love poems but satirical poems about imperial princesses who had taken Taoist vows" and that "many of his other ambiguous poems are also political in nature, alluding to imperial concubines, courtiers, and eunuchs" (1969, 28). Both Gu and Sun are inclined to interpret Li Shangyin's ambiguous poems either on the basis of historical and political background or in light of the poet's personality and character. To them, many of Li's poems are satires of the court and political factions (Gu 1958, 1–5; 156–59).

In addition to the three schools, some other less influential groups exist, one of which deserves mentioning here. This group is represented by two Qing scholars, Lu Kunceng 陸昆曾 and Qu Fu 屈復 (both fl. eighteenth century), who share a view that is different from all others. Both Lu and Qu think that readers of Li's poems should interpret Li's poems according to their subjective feelings (*zhuguan qingzhi* 主觀情志), although they, too, think the poems have fixed meanings intended by the poet. Their interpretation, to a certain extent, is therefore a decoding of the intended meaning of the poet through the poem itself rather than from outside sources.⁶

Problems with the Existing Interpretations of Li Shangyin's Poems

The interpretations surveyed above are all amiss. They mainly show different concerns about the person of Li Shangyin; and in each case, they are

biased toward certain characteristics of the man known to history. They ignore intrinsic, artistic mechanisms of Li Shangyin's textual composition, which usually play a very important role in signifying poetic meaning. Taken together, these seemingly divergent interpretations are actually founded upon two reigning criteria in the tradition of exegesis: *zhi ren lun shi* 知人論世 and *yi yi ni zhi* 以意逆志. The former refers to knowing the ancient people by considering the ages in which they lived, whereas the latter means that one uses his or her understanding to trace the meaning of a work to what was originally in the writer's mind. Starting with Zhu Heling, interpretations of Li Shangyin have followed these conventional criteria. By applying them, many critics and scholars in Li Shangyin studies have tried to explain the so-called anomalies in Li Shangyin's poetry. To see clearly the essential problematics of interpretations of his poetry, we need to probe this exegetical tradition in some detail.

Both of the exegetical criteria are derived from the teaching of Mencius 孟子 (ca. 372–289 B.C.E.), whose use of them, however, was for different purposes. In the *Book of Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子), Mencius says:

The good knight in the village befriends the other good knights in the village. The good knight in the state befriends other good knights in the state. The good knight in society befriends other good knights in society. But, if the good knight in society finds that there are not enough good knights to befriend, he can still have converse with the men of antiquity, chanting their songs, and reading their works. . . . Can he befriend them without knowing them? He can, for he can have converse with their world. Thus he still has friends. (Dobson 1966, 72)

Here, we can see that the *zhi ren lun shi* idea basically refers to the matter of morality; that is, through reading literary texts, one can experience and imitate the spiritual integrity of the ancient man. It is obvious that the final purpose of reading is to improve the moral spirit, the text itself being no more than a medium by which the reader achieves that purpose. Further, Mencius here points out that to imitate the ancient man's spirit, one should not only read his works but also learn about his life, time, and other facts that are outside his own literary works but can be obtained from other texts. Although *zhi ren lun shi* is concerned with one's moral and spiritual cultivation, *yi yi ni zhi* apparently provides a method for reading the *Book of Poetry* (*Shi jing* 詩經): "Therefore, one who explains the [*Book of*] *Poetry* must not rely on its embellishment so as to do violence to the language, nor on the language so as to do violence to the intention [of the poet]. If he uses his mind to trace the meaning to the intention [of the poet], he will be successful" (Chow 1968, 156).

My understanding of Mencius' idea here is that when one tries with his or her mind to meet "what the author intended to say," he or she should not be limited or misled by the rhetorical elements, ignoring meanings con-

veyed in words. To be able to know what the author really meant, however, one should not just depend on what the words might seem to say, for those meanings might not reveal the author's intention. To truly understand the author's intention, one should exercise his or her own thinking apart from taking care of the reading. The *yi* 意, in Zhao Qi's 趙歧 (d. 201) commentary, refers to one's *xinyi* 心意 (mind). In my understanding, the *xinyi*, besides its comprehensive capacities, should have some ratiocinative ones. The *yi* is thus seen as referring to one's subjective relation to what is putatively on the author's mind.

Historically, the establishment of the two criteria for literary interpretation began with the Han 漢 (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) annotation of the *Book of Poetry*. By interpreting the meaning of a poem through fixing its background, the "Great Preface" (*Da xu* 大序) to the *Book of Poetry* by Mao 毛 showed the tendency of literary interpretation in accordance with Mao's understanding of *zhi ren lun shi*. This interpretive frame was subsequently established by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200) when he interpreted the *Mao shi* 毛詩 (Mao's annotated *Book of Poetry*). In terms of *yi yi ni zhi*, both Mao and Zheng used the criterion to interpret those poems or parts of poems in the *Book of Poetry* that communicate with the reader through "comparison and affective image" (*bi xing* 比興); while using this criterion, they often went beyond the limit expressed in Mencius' original idea. If there were any problems with the interpretation of the *Book of Poetry* by the reputed author of the "Great Preface" and Zheng Xuan, as Yan Kunyang 顏昆陽 argues (1991, 107–18), it should be understandable, since what these scholars tried to do with the *Book of Poetry* does not fundamentally belong to literary activity, rather, it belongs to the activity of the studies of Classics which aim at establishing moral as well as political values through interpretations and explanations of the Confucian Classics.

After the Six Dynasties 六朝 period (222–589), literary activity became self-conscious, and it departed from the realm of the Classics. In the situation where literary features were taken as they were, literary criticism or interpretation should have also adjusted itself in accordance with the new concepts. That is to say, when scholars use such criteria as *zhi ren lun shi* and *yi yi ni zhi* to inform their critical methods, they should realize their limits while practicing literary interpretation. However, as Yan further points out (1991, 3–31), the way the Han scholars interpreted the *Book of Poetry* by means of these two criteria above had not developed throughout the dynasties and was used almost unchanged by scholars during the Qing dynasty when they annotated the works of Du Fu, Li He 李賀 (790–816), and Li Shangyin.

Framed in such an exegetical mold, critics and scholars in Li Shangyin studies, on one hand, have tried to dig up the hidden references in Li

Shangyin's ambiguous poems by depending on histories, biographies, and other external materials, neglecting the functions of poetic language. On the other hand, they have attempted to twist or justify any discrepancies between a word, a line, or a whole poem and the "reality" they have tried to see by hypothesizing upon the poet's intentions. Thus, the first and the third kinds of interpretations demonstrated earlier dismiss the love topic in Li Shangyin's poetry and explain it as political allegory, seeing in Li Shangyin only Qu Yuan's 屈原 (ca. 340–278 B.C.E.) "Lisao" 離騷 (Encountering sorrow), which, by means of love expressions—such as the image of the "fairest" (*meiren* 美人)—reveals Qu's political wishes. The second school, trying not to read Li Shangyin allegorically, rebuilds, however, the poet's biographical love life simply by reading Li Shangyin's poetry as autobiography. Because of their affiliation to the exegesis of the *Book of Poetry* and their unawareness of the fact that "obscure and ambiguous passages are as much a part of the text's semantic structure as its clearest passages" (Riffaterre 1983, 10), these problematic interpretations largely reduce or even destroy the complex and rich meaning inherent in Li Shangyin's poetry.

The Puzzling Strength of Li Shangyin's Poetry

To maintain what is actually in Li Shangyin's obscure and allusive poems so as to properly grasp and appreciate the ambiguous signification of his poetry, we need to allow flexibility in terms of topical references in our readings of them. Indeed, "ambiguity is intrinsic, inalienable character of any self-focused message, briefly, a corollary feature of poetry. . . . Not only the message itself but also the addresser and addressee become ambiguous" (Jakobson 1987, 85). In my opinion, Li Shangyin's unique poetic presence lies in the puzzling strength of his poetry. In other words, correlating multiple readings or interpretations of a poem by him generates a distinctive poetic effect. It was through this effect that Li Shangyin differentiates himself from other great poets, such as Du Fu, a master of precision in the use of allusions. This understanding of Li's ambiguity and associated phenomena deserves lengthy discussion elsewhere. To conclude this article, however, I must point out that we must come to appreciate the highly poetized world of Li Shangyin's poems, including "The Ornamented Zither," in order to understand Li Shangyin as I have suggested. In such a subtle and oblique poetic world, the integration of allusion and imagery into a complex rhetorical and imagistic structure makes it possible, on one level, for the poet to juxtapose contrasting images—the clear moonlit night and the vague warm daytime; the wetness in "sea" and "tears" and the dryness in "mountain" and "smoke"; and "things that cannot coexist. . . : moonlight and sunshine, sea and land, present sensations and emotions and past experiences, what actually happened and what is imagined" (Liu 1969, 208).

On another level, though, the poet is simultaneously able to write about his hopes and bewilderments, to have remembered his wife and a lover, or to have thought of his poetry and meditated on his political life. The symbolism and implications in "The Ornamented Zither," as in many other poems in the Li Shangyin corpus, are so rich and indefinite that we, the modern readers, while recognizing that the poem is a composite of particular events and emotions, feel it "is essentially typological rather than particular and can be 'reused' in other circumstances" (Owen 1990, 117).⁷

Notes

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¹I have slightly modified the translation offered by Liu (1969, 31–32).

²The original Chinese text is from Feng (1780, 493).

³For the alluded story, see *Han shu* (1970, *juan 25 shang*).

⁴As suggested by scholars, the jade in this line can be taken as a symbol of an unattainable woman (Cheng 1982, 89) or as a reference to Li Shangyin's poetic excellence (Qian Zhongshu's 錢鐘書 opinion, quoted in Zhou 1986, 2–3).

⁵Even in recently published works on Li Shangyin, we see Su's influence (see, e.g., Bai 1991).

⁶As Lu explains (1985, *xu 2*), his annotations and interpretations of Li Shangyin's *jin ti* 近體 (recent-style) poems are based upon the poetic texts themselves.

⁷In Owen's (1990, 117–18) view, poetry has a normative aspect which allows it "to be flexible in reference to a variety of particular situations" and to be reused by another person—e.g., a reader of it—for his or her personal circumstances. Viewed in this light, a poem's "mode of meaning is given as essentially typological" and cannot be entirely reduced "to the poet's own particular circumstances." Moreover, "by not seeking to determine the particular historical ground (though assuming in a general way that some poems may have referred to *some* historical ground)," our understanding or interpretation of poetry can become active and remain open.

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