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Li Shangyin and the Art of Poetic Ambiguity

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1

Li Shangyin (813–858), one of the most respected, mysterious, ambiguous and provocative Chinese poets, lived during the late Tang period, when the glorious Tang dynasty (618–907) is beginning to decline. It was a time of social riots, political division and painful general insecurity. In order to survive, he allied himself with various political patrons and accepted every job offered to him. He was a victim of continuous conflicts between the Niu and Li factions that for forty years had been fragmenting the central bureaucracy. He had far-sighted political views and fostered great ambitions. Thus, when he no longer found favour with the ruling elite, he often travelled around the country, though he was already in poor health. He was a prisoner of factional politics and his official career in fact suffered throughout his life.

Born into an aristocratic family of lower-class provincial officials in Zhengzhou in the present-day province of Henan, after his father's death Li initially lived with his uncle. It was his uncle who introduced to him the Confucian classics. After three years of mourning, he and his family moved to Luoyang. Already early in his life he displayed a great talent for literature, and this talent earned him the favour of the most influential members of the Niu faction, i.e. of Linghu Chu (the military commander in the present-day province of Shandong) and his son Linghu Tao. After several unsuccessful attempts, in 837 he finally passed the highest official exam in Chang'an (the then capital of the empire). However, he was not yet able to find a job. Because of this lack of desired employment, a year later he joined the staff of Wang Maoyuan, the military commander in the present-day province of Gansu and a member of the opposite Li faction, marrying Maoyuan's daughter. This was an insult to Linghu Tao, who so resented the marriage that he ceased to support Li's political interests, therewith bringing about the destruction of Li's political career. In 839, Li got a job in the Imperial library, but soon afterwards he was moved to another post in what is now Henan. Along with the lower position came disappointment. For most of his years



of service he was occupied with administration, crime and tax collection. In 842, he finally became a lector in the Imperial library. However, he couldn't keep this position for long, due to his mother's death. The following three years he spent in mourning in the county of Yongle (in the present-day province of Shanxi). In 848, he first returned to the Imperial library, and then travelled a lot and moved from one post to another, sometimes as an administrator, sometimes as an inspector. In addition to these tasks, he was also a member of the Hanlin Academy,¹ of Chang'an, a tax appraiser for salt and iron and a secretary general at the Ministry of Labour (his highest official position ever). His diverse employments might seem unusual for such an exceptional poet as Li Shangyin, but the majority of Chinese poets traditionally occupied uncommon and inappropriate posts.

After his official career became imbued with too many obstacles and disappointments, Li returned to his native town of Zhengzhou, where shortly afterwards he died of an illness at the age of forty-five. His wife died before him, in 851, and he was left to raise a son and a daughter. After the factional conflicts towards the end of the Tang dynasty had hurt him so much, he derived comfort from Buddhism in the last years of his life, and on his deathbed he wrote a farewell ode dedicated to his spiritual master, the famous monk Zhixuan.

2

Li Shangyin is appreciated as a highly original and committed poet who developed a unique style that is full of vague allusions and unusual images he mined from the literary past (the traditional canon, myths and legends) as well as from nature and personal experience. The second important feature of his poetry is his mysteriousness which finally leads to ambiguity. This ambiguity plays an essential role in most of his renowned poems, poems in which he connects the present with the past, reality with fantasy and history with mythology. Therefore, these poems based on imagination, hypotheses and contradictions usually give rise to different interpretations by Chinese scholars. The interpretations can be classified into three groups (Liu, 1969, 27).

The first group of interpreters of Li's poetry believes that these ambiguous poems are actually a disguised reference to his political patrons, first of all to Linghu Tao, as well as to Li's unrealized political ambitions, his wish for a high social standing and wealth. This may be true for some poems but not all of them, since most of these ambiguous poems are poems on friendship.

1 The Hanlin Academy (also called the National or Imperial Academy) was an elite scholarly institution founded in the 8th century by the Tang emperor Xuanzong and lasted till 1911. It was actually the highest academic institution in the Empire whose members performed besides secretarial and archival also literary tasks for the court.

From the standpoint of the second group of interpretations, the poet depicts his love affairs with various court ladies and Daoist nuns as well as his mourning for his late wife. This type of interpreters sees in him first and foremost a decadent womanizer who wasted his life through extramarital relations. But these interpretations are again hypotheses only. We are not sure whether these poems are entirely autobiographical or whether they are even based on personal experience. It is true that Li flirted with women, but during his life he was interested in other matters, too. For example, in his youth he was engaged in the study of Daoism, finding in Daoism refuge from the cruelty of reality and also imaginative inspiration. As mentioned, towards the end of his life, he finally found solace in Buddhism.

Belonging to the third group are those interpreters who think that Li's ambiguous poems are above all satires on court and political factions, i.e. political satires. The truth is Li wrote also political poems in which he, being concerned with the social and political abuses of that time, expressed his criticism of the holders of political power. However, not all of his ambiguous poems are always an expression of his moral Confucian attitude (Liu, 1969, 27–33).

In all three types of interpretations there is doubtless a bit of truth. Since each one emphasizes only one aspect of the poet's character, it is more adequate to understand his ambiguous poems in symbolic terms, where the meaning of the poem is not limited to one interpretation but to many.

Li Shangyin is actually most popular for his melancholic love poetry that reveals his ambiguous attitude to love, shrouded in a secret message. Here we can sense his moral disapproval of a secret but hopeless love, but we can also feel his passion, and the tension between the two leads to a paradox, i.e. the temptations of an illicit romance also exacts a high price. These are poems where Li investigates various aspects of the worlds of passion which arouse in him feelings of rapture, satisfaction, joy and hope as well as feelings of doubt, frustration, despair and even thoughts of death. All this is interwoven with the elements of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism which embody two conflicts. The first one is a matter of contrast between rigorous Confucian moral principles together with Buddhist renouncement of pleasure on the one hand and pleasure alluding to the famous Daoist quest for a magic elixir of longevity on the other. The second conflict arises from the contrast between the Confucian ideal of serving the emperor or the empire and the Daoist and Buddhist ideals of withdrawing from a worldly life of noise and dust into seclusion. Unfortunately, Li did not succeed in solving either of these two conflicts in his poetry (Minford, Lau, 2002, 920).

This is not to suggest, however, that all of his love poems are imbued with suffering and pain. Some are perfectly unburdened, some are more relaxed, and some are

ironical. At times they depict the world of love from an impersonal point of view, but above all they depict the ill fortune of lovers in general. Nevertheless, Li Shangyin is one of the few Chinese poets who can recognize, in female beauty and in the sorrows of love, themes to be taken up in all seriousness, and it is for these reasons that many phrases and lines from his poems had such a great impact on the classical Chinese love poetry in subsequent centuries.

3

The Exquisite Zither

I wonder why this splendid zither has
fifty strings
Every string, every peg evokes those
glorious springs
Perplexed as the sage, waking from his
butterfly dream
Like the king, entrust to the cuckoo my
heart evergreen

The moon bathes the teardrop pearl in
the blue sea
The sun lights the radiant jade in
indigo mountain
These feelings remain a cherished memory
But I was already lost at that moment
(Translated by Lien W. S. and Foo C. W.)

锦瑟

锦瑟无端五十弦，一弦一柱思华年。
庄生晓梦迷蝴蝶，望帝春心托杜鹃。
沧海月明珠有泪，蓝田日暖玉生烟。
此情可待成追忆，只是当时已惘然。

“The Exquisite Zither” is Li Shangyin’s most famous poem, and yet it is also one of the most mysterious poems in the Chinese poetic tradition. Permeated with beautiful sensual images and complex allusions, it transmits numerous secretive messages, and its various levels of meaning give rise to different interpretations. From the Song dynasty (960–1279) on, many Chinese have critics tried to unravel its mysterious meanings, achieving varying levels of success. Their interpretations

are as different as chalk and cheese. Some are convinced that Li wrote the poem in memory of his deceased wife. Others believe that this is a love poem dedicated to his maid Jinse (“Jinse” being the Chinese word for an exquisite zither), who died in the prime of life, or to a concubine of a distinguished government official, i.e. a veiled comment on an illicit romance. The third group of interpreters sees it as the poet’s lamenting of unfortunate circumstances in his career in politics and poetry, while the last group understands it as an introduction to his collected poems. We do not know who placed the poem in this initial position and why. We can only assume this was due to the poem’s contemporary reputation. (That said, the second interpretation is most probable and most frequent; we will therefore try to interpret the poem in this direction.) Each interpretation is merely hypothetical, and it reminds us that a poem can have as many interpretations as it has readers. All its various understandings confirm beyond all question its mysteriousness, ambiguity and complexity. This is a poetic world where the present intertwines with the past (the poet’s as well as the historical and the mythological past), where the boundary between the poet’s inner world and external reality is blurred.

The poem’s unique structure – it is based on juxtaposition of images and complexity of allusions which emphasize even more its obscurity and ambiguity – can help us to follow the poet’s intricate thoughts and feelings (Li, 2008, 140). The exquisite zither (decorated with brocade) is not only a concrete image; it is also a key symbol of the poem. It symbolizes human life; in the poem, the poet’s youth, and it restores distant memories which are again awoken towards the end of the poem (Owen, 2006, 396). The poet is perplexed when thinking about his youthful years. Already at the very beginning, he asks himself about the meaning of the zither. At the same time, the image alludes to the legend of the mythological ruler Fu Xi, who couldn’t endure the touching melody played on it by one of his favourite concubines. He broke it in half, which is why even today the zither has only twenty-five strings. It is through these poetic means that the poet remembers his gloomy, complicated years of youth. Consequently, the zither recalls a painful remembrance of the poet’s youth and helps provide the melancholic atmosphere that permeates the whole poem, intensifying from line to line.

The subsequent lines – together with their rich network of associations, elusive allusions to the poet’s personal experience – embody the essence of the poem. First, we are confronted with the famous anecdote of the legendary Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (369–286 BC) and his metamorphosis. He once dreamt that he had become a butterfly. His dreams were so vivid that after he woke up he was no longer sure whether he was the one who dreamt that he was a butterfly, or whether he was the butterfly that in its dreams had become Zhuangzi. Thus, he raised the question of what

is true and what is untrue. In a similar way, Li Shangyin emphasizes his own feelings of bewilderment since dreams provoke just this kind of feeling. The anecdote conveys the fundamental Daoist idea of life being an illusion – relative and consequently uncertain. This is illustrated by the image of the butterfly, which symbolizes life's brief duration. Moreover, not even Zhuangzi himself could comprehend the meaning of his dreams when he suddenly woke up.

The myth of King Wang refers to the legend of the ancient ruler of the state of Shu (present Sichuan) who once seduced the wife of his minister Bie Ling while the minister was engaged in taming floods. Wang was so ashamed of himself that he abdicated and handed over the throne to the deceived husband. After Wang's death, his soul was transformed into a cuckoo. He returned every spring and mourned the loss of his kingdom. Here, a cuckoo symbolizes sadness and regret. Since its image is often connected with eroticism and alludes to a sexual sin, it is also a symbol of unfortunate, illicit romance. The memory of adultery can thus allude to a tragic love in the remote past, to the poet's painful experiences and to feelings of remorse.

Neither can the subsequent lines be fully understood without knowing the sources of their allusions. The images of the sea and the moon, the moon and the pearl, and the pearl and the teardrop are connected with each other and evoke feelings of solitude, sadness, a tragic view of life. The zither and its melody evoke and recall the image of the sea in the moonlight. The pearl shell(s) are very mysterious indeed. According to the legend, beyond the South Sea, crying mermaids appear when there is a full moon. Their teardrops transform into pearls imbued with moonlight (Graham, 1965, 168), and that is why the form and colour of pearls remind us of tears. The moon is a pearl in the sky and a pearl is the moon in the sea. These two images, alongside tears, symbolize a feminine beauty. Pearls and tears as a symbol of melancholic atmosphere can also allude to separated lovers. Alternatively, the interpretation can be associated with the image of an undiscovered pearl in the vast sea. In other words, the poet may be alluding to the phrase "a pearl, forgotten in the vast sea", which refers to someone whose talent has been ignored (Liu, 1969, 51).

The Lantian Mountain (Blue Fields), also called Yushan (the Jade Mountain), is situated in the present county of Lantian in Shaanxi province and is famous for its fine jade; it is exposed to sweltering heat. Though jade lies hidden deeply in the rocks, its sun-ray-imbued spirit is so strong that it can be seen as smoke rising above the mountain. When watched from afar, it makes for a beautiful view. Here, we have to emphasize various sources of allusions. One of them is the story of an old man who planted the seeds he was given by a stranger in thanks for his generosity. Fine jade grew from the seeds, and with the help of the jade he could marry a young girl for whom

he so greatly longed. The sun and jade symbolize a strong, brave man. Another source is the story of the hero Chang Hong who was killed in an act of injustice and whose blood became jade after he died. Yet another source is the story of a girl called Purple Jade who, after death, returned as a spirit in order to redeem the reputation of her lover Han Zhong who had been accused of tomb robbery. When her mother wanted to embrace her spirit, it vanished like smoke. Jade, therefore, can also symbolize something unattainable. In Li Shangyin's poem is it perhaps an unattainable woman? One of the possible references is also a remark made by the poet Dai Shulun (732–789), namely, that a poetic scene is like smoke rising from the jade in the sweltering heat on the Lantian Mountain, i.e. it can be seen only from afar and not from close up (Ashmore, in: Zong-Qi Cai, 2008, 196–197). Hence it follows that jade can symbolize life – beautiful and attractive on the one hand and mysterious and inaccessible on the other. The poet is thus confused as he meditates on the past.

Furthermore, these images can, as combinations, as pairs, provoke yet other meanings. The sea and the mountain can allude to the eternal metamorphosis of human life, the moon and the sun to cosmic movement, pearls and jade to harmony in marriage or love, while tears and smoke can symbolize an unfulfilled, tragic love. In addition, it is good to know that the second half of the poem is also marked by the feminine principle of yin (sea, moon) and by the masculine principle of yang (sun, smoke); their natural embodiment (through the feminine image of the sea and moon, and the masculine image of the sun and smoke) embodies sexual love. The sum effect is that interpretation cannot be limited to a single meaning. Beyond all these images, there can be latent a “me” and “you”, even if the poet merely alludes to a “me” and a “you” rather than mentioning them directly (Cheng, 1982, 84–91). In this way, these lines can also hint at a relationship between a man and a woman, i.e. between lovers.

At the end of the poem, Li Shangyin remembers his feelings from his youth. When he tries to understand them now, he is as lost and perplexed as he was then. He is not quite sure whether they are real or not. The concluding lines contain three characters defined by the radical “heart”. In English translation, these are “love”, “memory” and “lost or perplexed”. This “love” was already then hopeless, a fantasy only. Now that the past is deeply buried, like jade, his feelings of disappointment and sorrow are just as vague as they were then. In this manner, the poet points out a prevalent feeling of regret (Owen, 2006, 396).

All these allusions – whether they refer to historical events and persons or to legends and myths, and whether or not the poet intentionally selected them – enrich the poem with additional layers of meaning. While reading the poem, we are faced with a special world, a world permeated with sensual appeal, rich feelings and profound

intellectual implications, a world as a masterful exploration of life and language (Liu, 1969, 207–210). The poem's great popularity since the Song dynasty forth is not surprising since it unites two key elements in the traditional Chinese comprehension of poetry, a meaning beyond words, and a poet's personal commitment. As such, the poem offers a unique and unforgettable investigation into the relationship between experience and poetry (Owen, 2006, 397).

4

Without Title (1)

Hard is for us to meet and hard to go away;
 Powerless lingers the eastern wind as all the flowers decay.
 The spring silkworm will only end his thread when death befalls;
 The candle will drip with tears until it turns to ashes grey.
 Facing the morning mirror, she fears her cloudy hair will fade;
 Reading poems by night, she should be chilled by the moon's ray.
 The fairy mountain P'eng lies at no great distance;
 May a Blue Bird fly to her and my tender cares convey!
 (Translated by J. J. Y. Liu)

无题 (-)

相见时难别亦难，东风无力百花残。
 春蚕到死丝方尽，蜡炬成灰泪始干。
 晓镜但愁云鬓改，夜吟应觉月光寒。
 蓬山此去无多路，青鸟殷勤为探看。

Li Shangyin wrote a remarkable cycle of love poems called *Without Title* and the above poem is one of them. A fitting dedication would have been to his passionate but concealed love of women (court ladies or Daoist nuns), encompassing all the joy and suffering embodied by such a love affair. Therefore, his confession also this time rests on most ambiguous, subtly selected images and allusions which veil his feelings and his intimate romance. He is more cautious than garrulous. The reader is confronted with an enigma with no evident answer.

In this poem, too, the arrangement of images and allusions provokes a feeling of mysteriousness. The statement at the very beginning reveals its theme: a secret love affair and the drama of separation. It depicts two kinds of suffering, one which is caused by the lovers waiting to meet again and one which is born of their fear of inevitable parting. Whether they meet or part, each time they are both deeply grieved.

The images of powerless wind and withering flowers further intensify the feeling of sorrow and despair. On the first level, this association of images acts as a description of landscape in spring, yet on a symbolic level it discloses other layers of meaning. The powerless wind can be compared with the poet and the withering flowers with his sweetheart. The wind cannot prevent the flowers from withering, and neither can the weak poet revive her youthful beauty, since with the passing of time her attractiveness fades (Lavrač, 2000, 23).

Towards the end of spring, the silkworm spins its thread till it dies. It plays its fated role till the end, which represents an everlasting yearning for unfulfilled love. The parallel is evident: the silkworm wraps itself in a cocoon, and the poet, similarly, shuts himself away in grief. This scene actually hints at the lost, frustrated poet who is, due to parting, even more aware of the cruelty of the passing of time and of the old age which will, ultimately, destroy not only both lovers but also their love.

The image of the candle is quite ambiguous. It can refer to the two of them together, to the poet, or to his sweetheart. The radiant candlelight can symbolize his passionate love for her. Its melting wax evokes tears, which suggests a desperate poet who is most likely weeping. His longing remains unfulfilled. Just as the candle finally turns to ashes and goes out, so, too, does the poet burn with passion till his heart changes into ashes. And just as the candle is extinguished by its own flame, so, too, is the poet destroyed by his own passion (Liu, in: Minford, Lau, 2002, 926). Another possibility is that tears are shed by his sweetheart because she is separated from the man she faithfully loves. The gloomy atmosphere is intensified by ashes, which here point to a despair that is born of illicit love (a motif picked up again in the changing colour of her hair).

The next message is that youth and beauty pass away too quickly. The poet imagines how his sweetheart sits of the morning in front of her mirror and anxiously regards her hair, which has obviously changed hue. Due to her never-ending longing, her hair is now “cloudy”. She grieves over her fleeting beauty. Here, the image of the mirror symbolizes a woman, her appearance as well as her frame of mind, i.e. sadness and grief. On the other hand, night and the chill moonlight further intensify her feelings of solitude and hopelessness (Lavrač, 2000, 23–24). Properly speaking, the whole central part of the poem points out the transiency and fragility of life and love.

The passion does not cease even in the conclusion of the poem, where the meaning is also not quite clear, since it simultaneously alludes to two instances from Daoist mythology. The fairy mountain Peng is the legendary Penglai Mountain on the Penglai Islands in the East China Sea. Thus, Peng alludes to the land of immortals beyond the reach of an ordinary human being. The Blue Bird was a messenger of the Queen Mother of the West, a mythological ruler of the regions where the sun goes down, i.e.

of the Kunlun Mountain which expands from Tibet to Xinjiang in the West. The poet wishes that the bird would fly to his sweetheart who dwells on the Penglai Mountain and convey his tender cares. The magic bird symbolizes a bridge between the separated lovers, and thus only she can provide communication between the two of them. In this manner, the poet expresses his hope that there still is a possibility of their reunion. He in fact tries to find comfort in the bird. And so the poem ends with a good wish born of despair.

5

Untitled (2)

Sa, sa, the East wind,
 a fine rain comes;
 Beyond the hibiscus pool
 a faint growl of thunder.
 A gold toad bites on the lock –
 incense drifts through;
 A jade tiger hauls on the rope
 when you draw well-water.

Chia's daughter peeped through a screen
 at young secretary Han,
 Lady Mi left her cushion
 for the gifted Prince of Wei.
 Our spring desire can never vie with the opening blossom –
 For a pinch of heart's longing, a pinch of ashes!
 (Translated by I. Herdan)

无题 (二)

飒飒东风细雨来，芙蓉塘外有轻雷。
 金蟾啮锁烧香入，玉虎牵丝汲井回。
 贾氏窥帘韩掾少，宓妃留枕魏王才。
 春心莫共花争发，一寸相思一寸灰。

Already the introductory lines hint at the lovers' secret rendezvous, with the image of rain illustrating their restrained feelings. The image of a light thunder (which intensifies the melancholy atmosphere) in classical Chinese love poetry refers to the lover's carriage and the rolling of its wheels. From this we can infer that the scene takes place in the palace and that the woman involved is most probably a court lady who is

waiting for her beloved. The rain, wind and thunder are images harbouring various layers of meaning. Aside from being typical images for depicting the natural world, they are at the same time marked by a strong erotic touch. Indeed, the images are replete with erotic allusions.

The next lines are mysterious and ambiguous. The animal images of the toad and the jade tiger are most likely ornaments, the first one a part of the decorated lock on the door of the room and the second one a decoration on the pulley above the well. The first image alludes to the woman's inner quarters in the palace, in this case to the room where his sweetheart is waiting for him. The second image can refer to their messenger, who bears their secret messages. Further, the words *incense* (in Chinese *xiang*) and the *silk* which the rope is made of (in Chinese *si*) are, in Chinese, homonyms that hint at lovesickness (in Chinese *xiangsi*).

The second half of the poem begins with the allusions to legends about illicit love. Han or Han Shou was a handsome young man who was a secretary of Jia Chong, the prime minister of the Jin dynasty (265–420). When his daughter Lady Jia watched this handsome young man through a curtained window, she fell in love with him and presented him with a rare, imported incense from a private family collection. When, later on, Jia Chong met Han, he smelled the scent on Han's clothes, recognized it and thus unmasked the lovers – but also finally allowed them to get married (Ashmore, in: Zong-Qi Cai, 2008, 194).

Lady Mi (also called Princess Fu) and her cushion allude to the famous poem *The Goddess of the River Luo* written by Cao Zhi, a prince from the Wei dynasty (220–265) who had been unhappily in love with her ever since she was married to his older brother Cao Pi, the first emperor of the Wei dynasty. After her death, the emperor, aware of his brother's love for her, presented the shocked Cao Zhi with her cushion in remembrance of her. According to the legend, after Cao Zhi left the capital and got to the Luo River, her spirit appeared to him and confirmed that Lady Mi had bequeathed her cushion to him as a token of her eternal love. This indicated that their love was finally fulfilled (Ashmore, in: Zong-Qi Cai, 2008, 194–195).

When Li Shangyin alludes to Jia's daughter and her love for Han Shou and to Lady Mi and her love for Cao Zhi, he may be saying: "You have shown your favour to me, as Jia's daughter did to Han Shou and the Princess Fu did to Cao Zhi" – or, "I am not as handsome as Han, not am I as gifted as Cao: how can I hope to win your love?" (Liu, in: Minford, Lau, 2002, 925)

The poem concludes with a lucid recognition. The lovers obviously warn themselves not to allow their hearts to blossom from love. They are only too well aware

of the suffering that would follow if they did so. Nevertheless, we can sense that they are indeed helpless. Their yearning is so strong that they cannot stop it. All they can do is silently watch their hearts being swallowed by unfulfilled love till it destroys them and turns them to ashes (Liu, in: Minford, Lau, 2002, 925).

The three Li Shangyin poems discussed in this article, to quote Liu, “represent Chinese poetry of the ‘oblique’ kind at its extreme. They illustrate how rich, complex, subtle, and condensed Chinese poetry can be, in revealing different worlds of experience through an integration of imagery, symbolism, and allusions” (Liu, 1966, 141).

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Li Shangyin in umetnost poetične dvoumnosti

Ključne besede: Li Shangyin, klasična kitajska poezija, podobe, simboli, aluzije, dvoumnost

Li Shangyin (813–858), eden najbolj občudovanih, skrivnostnih, dvoumnih in provokativnih kitajskih pesnikov, je živel v poznem Tangu (9. stoletje), v obdobju zatona nekdanje veličastne dinastije Tang, ki so ga zaznamovali družbeni nemiri, politična razklanost in mučna vsesplošna negotovost. Slovi kot nadvse izviren in angažiran pesnik, ki je razvil svojski slog, nabit z nejasnimi, težko razumljivimi aluzijami in nenavadnimi podobami, ki jih je črpal iz literarne preteklosti, tj. iz tradicionalnega kanona, mitov in legend, ter iz narave in lastnih izkušenj. Druga značilnost njegove poezije je skrivnostnost, ki nazadnje vodi v dvoumnost. Ta igra osrednjo vlogo v večini njegovih pesmi. V njih mojstrsko povezuje sedanost s preteklostjo, resnično z namišljenim in zgodovinsko z mitološkim. In prav ta dvoumnost oz. nejasnost pogosto poraja njihove različne, na domišljiji, domnevah in protislovjih temelječe interpretacije posameznih razlagalcev. Ker vsaka poudarja zgolj eno plat pesnikovega značaja, je bolj primerno tisto razumevanje Lijevih dvoumnih pesmi, ki temelji na simbolni ravni, ko pesem sočasno pomeni več kot le eno stvar oz. ko razširi in odpre svojo pomensko pokrajino različnim razlagam.

Li Shangyin je pravzaprav najbolj znan po svoji melanholični ljubezenski poeziji, ki razkriva njegov dvoumen odnos do ljubezni, zaviti in skrivno sporočilo. Na eni strani je mogoče čutiti njegovo moralno neodobravanje skrivne, vroče, a brezupne ljubezni, na drugi pa njegovo strastno poželenje, kar vodi v medsebojno napetost obeh nasprotnih vidikov, v paradoks. To pomeni, da privlačnost prepovedane ljubezni zahteva visoko ceno. To so pesmi, v katerih Li proučuje različne plati svetov strasti, ki sprožajo v njem tako občutke ljubezenske vzhičenosti, zadovoljstva, radosti in upanja kot tudi občutke dvoma, razočaranja, obupa in celo misli na smrt.

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Li Shangyin and the Art of Poetic Ambiguity

Keywords: Li Shangyin, classical Chinese poetry, images, symbols, allusions, ambiguity

Li Shangyin (813–858), one of the most respected, mysterious, ambiguous and provocative of Chinese poets, lived during the late Tang period, when the glorious Tang dynasty was beginning to decline. It was a time of social riots, political division and painful general insecurity. Li Shangyin is famous as a highly original and committed poet who developed a unique style full of vague allusions and unusual images derived from the literary past (the traditional canon, myths and legends) as well as from nature and personal experience. The second important feature of his poetry is a mysteriousness which finally leads to ambiguity. Ambiguity plays an essential role in most of his renowned poems, and he uses it to superbly connect present and past, reality and fantasy, and history and mythology. Thus, ambiguity and obscurity, respectively, often engender different interpretations among Chinese critics. These interpretations reflect the poems' imaginative qualities, hypotheses and contradictions. Since each interpretive direction emphasizes but a single aspect of the poet's character, it is more fitting to understand his ambiguous poems in symbolic terms. Such understanding entails that the meaning of the poem is not limited to one interpretation; rather, the poem's poetic landscape opens itself up to various interpretations.

Li Shangyin is actually most popular for his melancholic love poetry that reveals his ambiguous attitude to love. In this poetry, love is shrouded in a secret message. On the one hand, we can sense his moral disapproval of a secret but hopeless love; on the other, we can sense his passion. This leads to a paradox: the pleasing temptations of an illicit romance also exact a high price. In these love poems Li investigates various aspects of the worlds of passion which stoke in him feelings of rapture, satisfaction, joy and hope as well as feelings of doubt, frustration, despair and even thoughts of death.