The Art of Allusion in Chinese Poetry

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Analysing the Works of Li Shangyin

By

Li Zeng

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In memory of my parents Zeng Sheng and Wang Xiaoya

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PREFACE

This book, developed with updated sources and noticeable differences from my doctoral dissertation, deals with allusion that plays a significant role in pre-modern Chinese poetry, including the works of Li Shangyin (ca. 812-858).

Traditional commentators had to come to grips with allusion when annotating and interpreting poetry. They offered valuable insights into the origins of allusions, mainly treating them as sources or influences. In contrast to contemporary studies of Chinese poetry, where allusions are generally appreciated for their poetic impact, this book places a special emphasis on exploring the rhetorical function of allusion as drawn from Li Shangyin's poems. The aim is to demonstrate that allusions serve as integral elements in both Li Shangyin's poems and the broader Chinese poetic tradition.

In handling the formal and semantic facets of an allusion that enrich a given poem, I frame my discussion within traditional concerns about the Chinese notion of allusion. In discussing about how this enrichment is produced—that is, in explicating the allusive process between two or more literary texts, I sometimes apply terms or notions, such as the "allusion marker," from Western literary theories. Treating allusion as a poetic device in Li Shangyin's poems, the book attempts to formulate an English language taxonomy regarding the practice of allusion in Chinese lyricism. Hopefully, the book's finding that some of Li Shangyin's allusions verge on the unintelligible will broaden our perspectives on and enhance our appreciation of Chinese poetic ambiguity.

The book roughly consists of two sections according to different material and focus. The initial section, encompassing the Introduction and Chapter 1, primarily delves into historical and theoretical aspects. It places my viewpoints firmly within the realm of traditional allusion poetics and lays down a foundational context for understanding Li Shangyin's fascination with allusiveness. By critiquing interpretations of Li Shangyin, spanning both traditional and contemporary perspectives, this section establishes a historical and theoretical groundwork for the upcoming discussions about specific poems from Li Shangyin's body of work in the subsequent chapters.

The second section, encompassing Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5—functioning also as conclusion, is analytical and interpretative. Chapter 2 examines Li's allusive modes—e.g., the "overt" and "assimilative" modes, and shows how Li Shangyin reappropriates these modes in his poetic composition and what effects they produce in his poems. These modes are relatively essential to and characteristic of his allusiveness which, in the remaining chapters of this section, are examined with a broad yet subtle range of allusions in his employment and in a kind of progression of discussion, moving from analyses and interpretations of Li's allusive poems to that of his most highly allusive ones.

The analyses and interpretations in the chapters of the second section are meant to be exemplary rather than exhaustive—some analytical interpretations, for instance, can be done in more detail and can take different directions as well. Approaching the end of the book, through a detailed discussion of Li's "Ornamented Zither"— one of the most puzzling poems in the Li Shangyin corpus, I reiterate that the study sees the art of allusion in Li Shangyin as a highly crafted and conscious one. This art, often producing poetic ambiguity, is developed from the poetic tradition to which all great poets have recourse.

Any translators of Li Shangyin's poetry would have encountered such problems as formidable gaps and choice of diction for his highly allusive references while maintaining lyricism of his poetry. Similar problems could happen to the translation of other relevant Chinese materials about allusion in classical poetry or Li Shangyin's poetry. To provide a sound presentation with consistent analyses and level transitions between quotations and texts, I have translated most of Li Shangyin's poems and the Chinese theoretical and critical writings used in the study. For the same purpose, I have borrowed translations of some of Li's poems and relevant Chinese materials from James J. Y. Liu, A. C. Graham, Stephen Owen, Arthur Waley, Paul Rouzer and other scholars of classical Chinese studies, as well as from Chloe Garcia Roberts' most recent translation of Li Shangyin. For an accurate and coherent presentation of Li's poems in the original throughout, I use Feng Hao's (1719-1801) editions in the *Yuxisheng shiji jianzhu* (*A Completed Annotation of Li Shangyin's Poetry*). All translations rendered by me will appear unnoted throughout, whereas the translations by others will be specifically noted with the translator's name and work from which the translation is borrowed.

In the stretched course of this research project, I have received support and help from a great number of people, to whom I am deeply grateful. Above all, I owe special thanks to Professor Wayne Schlepp, Professor Charles Hartman, and Professor Graham Sanders for their expert guidance

and pertinent critique of the fundamental parts of the research conducted at the University of Toronto, mainly from which the book derives. I am solely responsible for any errors or inaccuracies that exist.

Finally, I am indebted to my wife Angela Ren for her lasting faith in me and longtime support and help.

ABBREVIATIONS

For complete publication information on the books cited in the following list, see the Bibliography, pp. 131-138.

LDSH	He Wenhuan, ed. *Lidai shihua*
LSYSG	Liu Xuekai, Yu Shucheng, eds. *Li Shangyin shige jijie*
QTS	*Quan Tang shi*
SBBY	Sibu beiyao ed.
SBCK	Sibu congkan ed.
YXSZ	Li Shangyin, *Yuxisheng shiji jianzhu*
SRYX	Wei Qingzhi, comp. *Shiren yuxie*
FNWZ	Li Shangyin, *Fannan wenji xiangzhu*
WX	*Wen xuan*
WXDL	Liu Xie, *Wenxin diaolong*
WXLPX	Guo Shaoyu, ed. *Zhongguo gudian wenxue lilun piping zhuanzhu xuanji*
XLDSH	Ding Fubao, ed. *Xu lidai shihua*
YFSJ	Guo Maoqian, comp. *Yuefu shiji*

INTRODUCTION

THE POETICS OF ALLUSION IN CHINESE TRADITION

In *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin: Ninth-Century Baroque Chinese Poet*, an important translation and study of Li Shangyin (ca. 812-858) in English, James J. Y. Liu writes: "Li Shang-yin (Shangyin) has been both admired and condemned for the highly allusive character of much of his poetry."[1] 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. Traditionally, the work of coming to grips with allusions was fundamental for literary commentators in the annotation and interpretation of poetry. While providing valuable information about origins of allusions in allusive texts, traditional commentators treated allusive phenomena mainly as source or influence. This situation has gradually changed in modern and contemporary studies of classical poetry where scholars recognize the importance of allusion to poetic forms and meanings.[2] While being illuminating, most of these studies, when referring to allusion, have mainly intuitively appreciated allusion for its poetic effect and not said enough about its function in text and the structuring of texts— the latter refers to the relationship between the preexisting written material including literary, historical, and other type writings and the poems which draw allusions, including those to actual historical persons, from the antecedent.

Thus, it is the function of allusion that we pay special attention to in this study. And to approach the subject, I propose to explain the poetic

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[1] James J. Y. Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin: Ninth-Century Baroque Chinese Poet* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 246.

[2] See, e.g., Lattimore, David. "Allusion and T'ang Poetry". In *Perspectives on the T'ang*, eds. Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 405-439; Hightower, James R. "Allusion in Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien". In *Studies in Chinese Literary Genres*, ed. Cyril Birch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 108-132.

significance of allusion using models drawn from Li Shangyin's poetry, trying to bring allusion into a rhetorical function which works as a constitutive element of poetic system and thus contributes to the process of poetic signification. While carrying out this task, I also render a presentation of the poetic world of Li Shangyin which represents the poetic style and vision of the last phase of what is acknowledged as the "golden age" of Chinese poetry, the Tang dynasty (618-907). As a poet writing in the shadows of many great poets of the tradition, Li Shangyin's poetry seems to transform the misfortune of belatedness into a mastery to create something different based on a particular understanding of past literary writing, especially its characteristics of allusiveness.

With few exceptions, studies of Chinese allusion in English have excluded traditional critical notions on allusion, and a primary definition of Chinese allusion seems inconsequential to them. I believe it is not only necessary to examine these notions because in fact they are a part of the traditional poetics, but also important to frame the perspective of this study within that poetics, some of which can be illuminating in understanding the poetic significance of allusion in Chinese poetry in general and Li Shangyin's allusive works in particular. By the same token, it is insightful to employ the key terms used in the traditional poetics of allusion for analyses and discussions in this study. At times, though, for clearer analyses and communications, I apply terms or notions, such as the "allusion marker," from Western literary theories, including that of allusion developed in light of intertextuality which, to borrow Jonathan Culler's words, "leads us to consider prior texts as contributions to a code which makes possible the various effects of signification."[3]

Allusion in Tradition

In the *Wenxin diaolong* (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*), the earliest theoretical work that discusses the Chinese notion of allusion at length, the term *shilei* is used by Liu Xie (ca. 465-522) to refer to allusion:

> Factual reference, which intrinsically shares certain properties with a present situation, exists outside the formal structure of the text. By making such references, one draws comparisons between previous events and his own principles and adduces the past to prove the present. Formerly, when King Wen explained the nine-in-the-third-place line of the hexagram *Jiji* in his

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[3] Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 103.

annotation of the lines of the hexagrams, he referred to the ancient expedition of Gaozong; and when explaining the six-in-the-fifth-place line of the hexagram *Mingyi*, he alluded to the staunchness of Prince Qi of recent times. Here, human events were adduced to affirm propositions. Lord Yin, when launching a punitive campaign against Xi and He, cited the teachings from canonical and legal institutions; and King Pangeng, in his admonishing speech to his people, used Chiren's dicta. Here, established texts were quoted to elucidate principles. Therefore, it is the great stratagem of the Sages and the general axiom of the Classics to quote established texts to elucidate principles and to adduce human events to affirm propositions.

事類者，蓋文章之外，據事以類義，援古以證今者也。昔文王繇易，
剖判爻位，既濟九三，遠引高宗之伐，明夷六五，近書箕子之貞；斯
略舉人事，以徵義者也。至若胤征羲和，陳政典之訓；盤庚誥民，敘
遲任之言；此全引成辭，以明理者也。然則明理引乎成辭，徵義舉乎
人事，迺聖賢之鴻謨，經籍之通矩也。[4]

Here, the term *shilei* is understood to designate one thing, not two. The *lei* in this phrase means "to classify" and, by extension, "to discern the similarities between things." Liu Xie defined *shilei* as a rhetorical device characterized by referring to something in the past that lies beyond the formal structure of the text; by this device, the author can produce effects of comparing or testifying the present with the past.[5] His theory became the foundation on which later theoretical discussions of the Chinese notion of allusion were developed. In Liu Xie's examples of *shilei* given in the quotation above, a distinction is made between reference to historical (human) events and citation of prior texts, denoted respectively by *renshi* and *chengci*; alternately, in later sections of the chapter on allusion, Liu Xie used *gushi* to refer to *renshi* or historical (human) events. Following Liu, the term *gushi* is often used in many *shihua* (remarks on poetry) to mean references to historical events.[6]

The difference between textual allusion (*chengci*) and historical allusion (*renshi or gushi*) is seen mainly in the fact that in many cases textual allusion evokes a strong sense of the immediate present and therefore can be understood in the context of a poem without knowing the source meaning which, however, if known, adds rich implications to the understanding;

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[4] *WXDL*, 8.2b.

[5] For a detailed discussion of this phrase *shilei*, see Li Yuegang, *Wenxin diaolong jiaoquan*, Vol. 2 (Taipei: Guoli bianyi guan Zhonghua congshu bianshen weiyuanhui, 1982), 1693. I am indebted to Professor Charles Hartman for calling my attention to Li Yuegang's interpretation of this phrase.

[6] Such as the *Xiqing shihua*, *Xizhai huaji*, etc. See *SRYX*, Vol. 1, 157-159.

whereas historical allusion in most cases cannot contribute to the significance of a poem unless the original meaning of the alluded source is acquired. In effect, nevertheless, since a historical allusion is a reference to an event or story appearing in a preexisting text, it actually bears certain features attributed to textual allusion. For instance, on the one hand, some historical allusions are so commonly used that they become less effective as referring to historical events and therefore function as textual allusions. On the other hand, historical allusions are sometimes used by poets in unconventional forms and can produce effects in the immediate present which while not dependent on, are amplified by, the source meaning.

This distinction between two kinds of allusions, being essential to the Chinese notion of allusion, was used by poets and commented on by critics in the history of Chinese classical poetry. For instance, in the *Shiren yuxie* (*Jade Splinters of the Poets*), speaking of the first line of the second poem of Li Shangyin's "Mawei Slope: Two Poems" 馬嵬二首, the Song (960-1279) critic Wei Qingzhi points out Li's citation from the writing of the philosopher Zou Yan (third century B.C.) as a kind of using *chengci*:

> In Li Yishan's [Shangyin] "Uselessly I learnt that beyond the seas lie nine other continents," he referred to the motif of Consort Yang's being in the Penglai Mountain by using the language from Zou Zi's "Beyond the nine continents lie nine other continents."
>
> 李義山"海外徒聞更九州"，其意則用楊妃在蓬萊山；其語則用鄒子云"九州之外，更有九州"。[7]

In the same chapter on *shilei*, Liu Xie used the term *yong shi* (to use event) and its variant *yin shi* (to cite event) for references to previous events.[8] After Liu Xie, *yong dian* was sometimes used to refer to references to the fundamental works of Chinese culture, such as the *Classics*, whereas *yong shi*, especially after Zhong Rong's (496-518) employment of this term in his *Shipin* (*The Poets Systematically Graded*), came to refer to all kinds of allusions in traditional criticism, whether they were citations from prior texts or references to previous events.[9] Ever since the sixth century, *yong shi* has been most frequently employed by Chinese critics and scholars to denote the Chinese notion of allusion. In the following distinction of *yong*

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[7] *SRYX*, Vol. 1, 150.
[8] See *WXDL*, 8.3a.
[9] See Shen Qiuxiong. "Shilun Li Yishan shi de yongdian". In *Li shangyin shi yanjiu lunwen ji*, ed. Guoli Zhongshan daxue Zhongwen xuehui (Taipei: Tiangong, 1984), 617.

shi made by Kao Yu-kung and Mei Tsu-lin, we see that the term comes closest to the English word "allusion:"

> We would like to alert the reader to the fact that the word "allusion" is used here as the equivalent for the Chinese term 用事 *yung-shih* (yong shi), literally "use event." "Event" is understood here as past event, something mentioned in a preexisting text. "Use event" should be distinguished from "mention event." If an event contemporary to the poet is referred to directly, then we will say that he "mentions the event"; but only if he uses a past event to refer to a present event would we say that he "uses an event." "Historical allusion" is probably a more precise translation of *yung shih* (yong shi). But since "allusion" is shorter, we will often use it to stand for "historical allusion," which in turn stands for *yung shih* (yong shi).[10]

Allusion, thus defined, came into play noticeably in Chinese classical literary composition at an early time. This is observed by Liu Xie:

> 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.
>
> 自卿淵已前，多俊才而不課學；雄向以後，頗引書以助文。[11]

In terms of popularity in poetic practice, allusions were used not only by ordinary poets, but by many outstanding ones as well. As the Song critic Zhang Jie says: "The use of allusions in poetry for showing erudition started with Yan Guanglu [Yanzhi] and reached the ultimate with Du Zimei [Fu] 詩以用事為博，始於顏光祿，而極於杜子美."[12] During the Six Dynasties (222-589), allusion was so abundant in poetic composition that poets like Tao Yuanming (365-427) who is well known for his poetic naturalness and immediacy, when they wished, could be "as mannered, erudite, and allusion-laden as that of any Six Dynasties poet."[13] Since the Tang dynasty, use of allusion had become a convention in Chinese poetic

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[10] Kao Yu-kung and Mei Tsu-lin, "Meaning, Metaphor, and Allusion in T'ang Poetry," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, No. 38 (1978): 326.

[11] *WXDL*, 10.2b; trans. Vincent Yu-chung Shih, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press), 493.

[12] Zhang Jie, *Suihantang shihua*. In *XLDSH*, Vol. 1, 544.

[13] Hightower, "Allusion in Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien", 109.

writing. During and after Li Shangyin's time, allusion was especially popular.

Although allusion was commonplace in classical poetry, it was found by some critics to be superfluous or inappropriate in lyric writing. This was especially true in times when the current fashions of plagiarism of old texts became very popular and poets abused allusions by using them in their poems mainly for display. In the "Preface" to *The Poets Systematically Graded*, for example, Zhong Rong expressly objects to the use of allusion in poetic writing:

> Rich erudition is expected to bear on official documents, and the shining examples of our forebears are required to be used exhaustively in the writing of glorifications, counter-proposals and ordinary memorial addressed to the throne, but the melodic expression of what one feels does not become more valuable for its bookish references.

> 夫屬詞比事，乃為通談；若乃經國文符，應資博古，撰德駁奏，宜窮往烈。至乎吟詠情性，亦何貴於用事？ [14]

Here, what Zhong Rong is really concerned with is the anti-lyrical effect of allusion used by poets like Ren Fang (460-508) and Wang Rong (468-494) who favor the display of erudition over the direct expression of feeling. [15] Similarly, in scattered discussions of allusion in later critical writings, the use of allusion, especially the excessive use of it, is regarded by some critics as a sign of poetic failing and poor imagination. Yan Yu (1180-1235) and Tu Long (1542-1605), for instance, are against writing a poem with abundant allusion. [16] In Wang Guowei's (1877-1927) opinion, allusions are substitutions, and they are obstructive in poetry. [17]

Despite such criticism of the excessive use of allusion in poetry, allusive texts in poetic practice seemed to have increased undeterred. This phenomenon drew certain critical attention to the ability to use allusion

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[14] Zhong Rong, *Shipin*. In *LDSH*, 8; trans. Siu-kit Wong, *Early Chinese Literary Criticism* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1983), 96-97.

[15] See Zhong, *Shipin*, 9.

[16] See Yan Yu, *Canglang shihua*. In *LDSH*, 443; Tu Long, *You quan ji*, Vol. 3 (Taipei: Weiwen, 1977), 1173.

[17] See Wang Guowei, *Renjian cihua* (Hong Kong: Zhonghua, 1975), 16-22. In some other traditional and modern critical writings, we see a sort of ambivalence toward allusion. The theoretical ambivalence, in my my opinion, stemmed at least in part from a somewhat paradoxical theory which ever since Confucius' time had advocated both "naturalness" (*ziran*), and "suggestiveness" or "reserve" (*hanxu*) in poetic writing.

judiciously and skillfully in poetic composition. Wang Shimao's (1536-1588) comment exemplifies this recognition: "The shortcoming is not caused by allusion. However, one should know how and when to use it 病不在故事，顧所以用之何如耳."[18] To some critics, the ability to use allusion well became an important criterion for determining what constituted good or bad poems. As Hu Yinglin (1551-1602) remarks: "Besides being imitative and expressive, poetry is also allusive…. By reading his allusive poems, one would know the poet's writing skills and talent 詩自模景述情外，則有用事而已…. 欲觀人筆力材旨，全在阿堵中."[19]

Thus, while preserving the view that direct expression of emotion was the essential nature of poetry, traditional critics also argued for the appropriate employment of allusion. First of all, they emphasized the fidelity to the source in the use of allusion because for these critics the original meaning of the allusion should remain immutable. If one's understanding of the original text was perfect, his use of allusion to it would not obstruct his expression. Poets who disregarded or defied the original meaning of the allusion risked distorting the very text their work was supposed to preserve. The emphasis on the source of allusion can be illustrated with an example given by Liu Xie:

> In the "Yuankui," a poem on sunflower by Lu Ji, he writes:
>> "Things sheltering feet share the same wisdom,
>> Giving rise to diverse forms, each in a unique way."
> The sunflower can shield the feet, a role cited by Confucius to ridicule Zhuang Zi. That the kudzu vine guards the roots was stated by Yue Yu. If one were to liken kudzu to a sunflower, he would distort the allusion; if one were to claim sheltering superior to guarding, he would deviate from the truth.
>
> 陸機園葵詩云：庇足同一智，生理合異端。夫葵能衛足，事譏鮑莊，葛藟庇根，辭自樂豫；若譬葛為葵，則引事為謬；若謂庇勝衛，則改事失真。[20]

Secondly, traditional critics stressed the integration of the borrowings into the alluding text. The poet was supposed to understand the alluded material very well and be able to grasp the essence of it. As long as the poet was faithful to the original meaning of the alluded context, he was free to use allusion in expressiveness—he could use it by making a statement of

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[18] Wang Shimao, *Yipu xieyu*. In *LDSH*, 497.
[19] Hu Yinglin, *Shi sou* (Shanghai: Zhonghua, 1962), 64.
[20] *WXDL*, 8.3b.

analogy or contrast. In either way, the allusion should be used aptly so that it became an organic part of the poem. This concern is again indicated in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* which is echoed by later critics:

> When one alludes to past events with adapting to the current situation, it's as if he is speaking from his own mouth. But if the facts alluded to are incongruous of the alluding context, they are of flaws even after a thousand years….
>
>   The praising goes: "…. To treat others as oneself, this has been a timeless principle."

凡用舊合機，不啻自其口出，引事乖謬，雖千載而為瑕….
    贊曰：…. 用人若己，古來無懵。 [21]

To achieve the integration, however, different individuals in traditional criticism made different suggestions and different poets adopted different ways. In his *Shifa jiashu* (*Poetic Rules of the Masters*), Yang Zai (1271-1323), for instance, recommends *huo yong*, meaning lively or creative use of allusion: "Set forth antiquity to criticize the present; use one thing to prove another: don't show your tracks—it's all right if you give a shadow; though it be a fixed reference, it can be used in a lively way 陳古諷今，因彼證此。不可著跡；只使影子可也. 雖死事亦當活用." [22] Using allusion in such a way, a poet not only often varies the allusive forms, but sometimes changes or borrows only parts of the original meaning given in the alluded texts. Employed so, the allusiveness can be more profound and subtle, and the alluding poem richer in significance and more distinctive in style.

    If integrating borrowed words and phrases into one's new poetic pattern in certain frames was one of the strategies in using allusion in poetry, then, digging out allusions hidden in poems became an important as well as a fashionable part for poetic commentators in actual critical practice. In Tang poetry in general, for instance, commentators had to "illustrate nearly every line with quotations from older sources--standard references for mythological, historical, and geographical information, earlier examples of idioms, earlier uses of images which have accumulated special associations." [23] Being over-zealous in search for the so-called sources, such commentators quite

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[21] *WXDL*, 8.3a, 8.3b.

[22] Yang Zai, *Shifa jiashu*. In *LDSH*, 471; trans. Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 440.

[23] Graham, *Poems of the Late T'ang*, 27.

often were simply showing off their own wide learning by displaying their subjects' erudition. Within certain limits, such an approach is obviously useful as it identifies most allusions and, for that matter, this is the great achievement of the traditional approach. One of its limitations, however, is the compulsion to hunt for the source--searching for the sake of searching. Further, when annotating their subjects, these commentators often tried to offer a historical, biographical, or political interpretation of allusions, neglecting the process of artistic transformation and the rhetorical function of the allusion as an integral part of the systematic character of poetic composition. It is these neglected aspects and other associated formal and semantic facets of allusion that interest us in the present study.

By its very nature, the study of allusion raises the issue of imitation and to a certain extent treads on the same ground. In a sophisticated and self-conscious literature, such as Chinese classical poetry, imitating the literary past is predominant. Ever since Confucius' (551-479 B.C.) time, literati poets, at social and state functions, expressed their hopes and fears, stated their compliment and complaint by means of exchanging passages from the canonical works, such as the *Shijing* (*Classic of Poetry*), which they had learned by heart. This sort of imitation of ancient texts, sometimes mixed with imitation of each other's works, is apparently reflected in many lyric poems collected in anthologies of model works such as the *Wen xuan* (*Selection of Refined Literature*) and *Yutai xinyong* (*New Songs from a Jade Terrace*). It is interesting to point out, however, that tradition and imitation always stand in a dialectical relation to one another. The ancient Chinese literati poet's referring to and using the literary past inevitably preserve and at the same time modify the tradition.

If in the relationship between imitation and tradition allusion plays an important part, in actualizing the allusiveness in a given text, a high degree of cultural literacy is presupposed in the reader. This requirement was usually fulfilled to an appreciable extent by the Chinese literati poet who was both a writer and a reader. He was first a reader who read widely and was able to appreciate the literary language in different literary genres. At the time when he was ready for writing, he was himself a plurality of texts and of different codes. As Liao Ping Hui points out:

> Before trying his hand at literature, a poet had to acquire considerable awareness of the tradition through the study of earlier texts. Not just in the yueh-fu (*yuefu*) poetry alone, which like the western pastoral lyrics is often sung or put to music and which invites replies, many Chinese poems absorb and transform by taking up the same theme or by employing similar (sometimes just the opposite) words or syntax to refresh an artistic experience of the earlier poets or texts. Frequently Chinese poets would

approach an aesthetic experience through the reshaping of words to test their creative potentiality, bringing their own works into an intertextual (dialogic) relationship to those of others.[24]

Thus, the modes of reading a text were implicitly brought into the modes of writing. Moreover, the literati poet, on the one hand, assimilates present experiences to his cultural tradition by means of allusion or *yong shi*, thus obtaining the authoritative seal of conventional norms and paving a larger ground for validating the poem as a representation of the "real." On the other, through allusion or *yong shi*, he manipulates the autonomic characteristics of literary language to produce an imagined world differentiated from the "real."

Key Terms Used in the Study

Among various uses of allusion in Chinese classical poetry, traditional critics found four modes that were most often used by poets: orthodox allusion, inverted allusion, overt allusion, and assimilative allusion; they are termed in Chinese respectively as *zheng yong*, *fan yong, ming yong*, and *an yong*.[25] Since these are key terms used in the analyses of Li Shangyin's allusive poems in the study, discussions of them are in order in the following.

Zheng yong (orthodox allusion): when an allusion is used to make a comparison between the present situation in the alluding poem and a past event from another text, and the original meaning of the allusion is fully applied in the alluding poem, the way to do so is called *zheng yong*. In such a comparison, a poet can draw an analogy or a contrast between the present and the past. However, the analogy or contrast is not realized in the allusion itself, but in the context of the alluding text. For the convenience of discussion, I sometimes use "orthodox allusion" as an equivalent for *zheng yong* in the study.

Fan yong (inverted allusion): in traditional critics' words, this is to "use an allusion by reversing its original meaning 反其意而用之."[26] It actually refers to the way where a poet either inverts the meaning of an allusion or changes an allusion's implication that is conventionally accepted. In either

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[24] Liao Ping Hui, "Intersection and Juxtaposition of Wor(l)ds," *Tamkang Review*, 14 (1983-84): 407.

[25] The Yuan critic Chen Yiceng divides allusive modes into nine types among which these four are included. See Chen Yiceng, *Wen shuo* (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu, 1972), 6-7.

[26] *SRYX*, Vol. 1, 147.

case, the purpose is to produce a special poetic effect. Traditionally, to use allusion this way is also called *fan an* (turning the table). This kind of use did not become a popular practice until the Tang dynasty and was encouraged by later traditional critics, such as Yuan Mei (1716-1797) who has a well-known remark that "poetry is valued for its turning the tables 詩 貴翻案."[27] When Zhang Gaoping examines the characteristics of inverted allusion in Song poetry, he points out that Song poets inherited this use from previous poets. However, almost all the pre-Song examples of "turning the tables" poems given by Zhang are from Tang poets' works.[28] Perhaps because it could not be easily mastered, this use of allusion was not often adopted by poets. When applied successfully, however, it still shows the respect for the allusive source: to render a new implication based on a perfect understanding of the original meaning. Li Shangyin is especially skillful with this kind of allusion and for one particular use of it in his "Master Jia" 賈生, he was highly praised by the Song critic Yan Youyi like this:

> Employed in poetry or prose, some allusions follow the original meanings, while others reverse them…. Li Yishan's [Shangyin] "Alas, in vain did the emperor drew near Jia at midnight, / He asked him about the gods instead of the people" uses the allusion to Jia Yi but negates the original meaning of it. One cannot do this unless he is widely learned and liberal, and he does not imitate his predecessors by simply following convention.

> 詩文用故事，有直用其事者，有反其意而用之者…. 李義山 "可憐夜 半虛前席，不問蒼生問鬼神！" 雖說賈誼，然反其意而用之矣…. 非 學業高人，超越尋常拘攣之見，不規規然蹈襲前人陳跡者，何以臻 此！ [29]

In my discussion of Li Shangyin's historical poems in Chapter 3, I give some examples of his "inverted allusion" by which I mean *fan yong*.

Ming yong (overt allusion): when a poet employs an allusion by its conventional form, the way he does this is called *ming yong*. In this kind of use, the allusion is easily identified because the poet does not change its form with which a reader is familiar. We may call this kind of use "overt allusion." In practical application, an "overt allusion" can be used to achieve either the effect of *zheng yong* or that of *fan yong*. Since *ming yong* or "overt

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[27] Yuan Mei, *Suiyuan shihua*, Vol. 1 (Taipei: Guangwen, 1971), 6.

[28] See Zhang Gaoping, *Song shi zhi chuanchen yu kaituo* (Taipei: Wenshizhe, 1990), 20-32.

[29] Quoted in *SRYX*, Vol. 1, 148.

allusion" is comparatively easy to be applied and recognized, it is commonly used by most poets and sometimes recommended by critics whose interest lies in simple and direct poetic expressions. In giving explanation to his model examples from the Mid- and late Tang poems, for instance, the Southern Song critic Zhou Bi says:

> In any poem, the use of references can cause obstructions.... If one does not blend the reference into the poem, and if one makes the references the main point, and further if the references are light and direct, then you will have something close to village ballads and street songs, sung to the tapped rhythm of bamboo sticks. Cases like this represent the most perfect use of references.

> 詩中用事，既易窒塞…. 若不融化，以事為意，更加以輕率，則鄰於里謠巷歌。可擊竹而謠矣。凡此皆用事之妙者也。[30]

An yong (assimilative allusion): literally, this means to use an allusion or allusions in a hidden way. It actually refers to a poet's assimilation of the borrowings into an alluding poem. In this kind of use, the poet either selects scattered words and phrases from one alluded text and synthesizes them in the alluding poem, or distorts and blends several allusions from different sources to create one or a series of new allusive images in the alluding poem. In either case, the allusive elements in the alluding text are distinctive and may not be sufficiently familiar. Like "overt allusion," allusion in this *an yong* mode can produce different effects. Although the *ming yong* of allusion is the common way in practice, *an yong* or the assimilative use of allusion is regarded as the highest level in allusiveness and strongly encouraged in traditional theory. An oft-quoted example of this encouragement comes from the *Xiqing shihua* (*Poetic Discourses from Xiqing*):

> Du Shaoling [Fu] says: "The way of using allusions in poems should be assimilative as what is said in the Chan talk: 'Put salt in water; one can taste the saltiness by drinking the water.'" This is where a poet's secret lies.... As if tying the wind or grasping a shadow, the poet who is skillful with allusion won't leave a track of allusion in his poems.

> 杜少陵云：作詩用事，要如禪家語，"水中著鹽，飲水乃知鹽味"。此說，詩家秘密藏也…. 則善用事者，如系風捕影，豈有跡耶？[31]

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[30] This passage is from Murakami Tetsumi's *Santaishi,* cited and trans, Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, 426-427.
[31] *SRYX,* Vol. 1, 147.

Gushi (historical allusion) and *chengci* (textual allusion): as we discussed before, the Chinese notion of allusion contains a distinction between reference to historical (human) events and citation of prior texts, denoted respectively by *gushi* and *chengci*. In effect, however, since a *gushi* is an event or story "mentioned in a preexisting text," as explained by Kao Yu-kung and Mei Tsu-lin in an earlier quoted passage, it actually bears similar features attributed to *chengci*. Generally in this study, therefore, "allusion" or *yongshi* is employed in the broad sense to include both *gushi* and *chengci*, or "historical allusion" and "textual allusion," except in Chapter 3 where we focus on historical allusion in discussing Li's poems on history, and in one session of Chapter 4 where Li's use of textual allusion is particularly examined.

Allusion marker: at times, for clearer analyses and communications, I apply this Western term borrowed from Ziva Ben-Porat's theory on allusion developed in light of intertextuality. In her discussion, Ben-Porat emphasizes the differentiation between allusion as a textual element called "marker" within the linear sequence of the alluding text and allusion as a process of activating the other text:

> The literary allusion is a device for the simultaneous activation of two texts. The activation is achieved through the manipulation of a special sign: a sign (simple or complex) in a given text characterized by an additional larger "referent." This referent is always an independent text. The simultaneous activation of the two texts thus connected results in the formation of intertextual patterns whose nature cannot be predetermined…. This additional aspect, the built-in directional signal, is often called the allusion; but in order not to confuse it with the device which it triggers, I propose to use the term "marker," for the latter. The marker is always identifiable as an element or pattern belonging to another independent text. This is true even when the pattern is a comprehensive one, such as the title of a work or the name of a protagonist.[32]

Clearly, an "allusion marker" in an alluding text is always identifiable as such no matter whether it assumes a conventional form or a new one, as Ben-Porat adds: "A distorted quotation or a unique noun in a new declension are examples of markers that are recognizable as belonging to a certain system in spite of a new form."[33] The marker may contain a clear meaning of its own or it may not. In any case, the context in the alluding text—often through syntactic or semantic disjunctions—will direct the marker to refer

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[32] Ziva Ben-Porat, "The Poetics of Literary Allusion," *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and theory of Literature*, 1 (1976): 107-108.
[33] Ben-Porat, "The Poetics of Literary Allusion," 110.

to the alluded text. In my analysis of the dynamics of allusion in Li Shangyin's poems, the term is applied in the above definition.

1

AMBIGUOUS AND AMISS: LI SHANGYIN'S POETRY AND ITS INTERPRETATIONS

"Emperor Wang's springtide heart, entrusted to a night jar,"
The beauty's patterned lute laments the youthful years.
Poets generally love the fine quality of Li Shang-yin's (Shangyin) verse;
One only regrets there is no Cheng Hsuan (Zheng Xuan) to explicate it.

望帝春心托杜鵑，佳人錦瑟怨華年；
詩家總愛西昆好，獨恨無人作鄭箋。 [34]

This seven-character quatrain is the twelfth poem of the *Lun shi sanshi shou* (*Thirty Poems on Poetry*) written by the poet-critic Yuan Haowen (1190-1257). The word *Xikun* in the original text refers to the Xikun School poetry (Xikun pai). At the beginning of the Song dynasty, a group of poets made Li Shangyin's poetry the special model to imitate. These poets, including Yang Yi (974-1020), Liu Yun (971-1031), and others, are known as the Xikun School because of the title of a collection of their poems, *Xikun chouchang ji* (*Collection of Poems and Replies on Mount Kunlun in the West*). Although the Xikun poets achieved only an arguably superficial resemblance to Li Shangyin's stylistic idiosyncrasies, according to traditional views, the name *Xikun* has often been anachronistically applied to Li Shangyin's poetry. The Song critic Yan Yu, for instance, writes in his *Canglang shihua*: "The His-K'un (Xikun) style—this means the style of Li Shang-yin (Shangyin), but under this designation is also to be found that of Wen T'ing-yun (Tingyun) and such poets of our own era as Yang I (Yi) and

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[34] Wang Liqing, *Yishan lunshi quanzheng* (Taipei: Zhonghua congshu, 1976), 85; trans. John Timothy Wixted, *Poems on Poetry: Literary Criticism by Yuan Hao-wen (1190-1257)*, diss., Oxford University. 1976 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1978), 173.

Liu Yun 西崑體，即李商隱體，然兼溫庭筠及本朝楊，劉諸公而名之也."[35] Hence "Li Shang-yin's (Shangyin) verse" in the English translation.

By mentioning the elaborate Xikun style inspired by Li Shangyin, the quatrain serves as a commentary on Li Shangyin's famous poem "The Ornamented Zither" 錦瑟 and by extension on Li's poetry in general. The focal point in this quatrain indicates two attributes of Li Shangyin's poetry: allusiveness and ambiguity. By quoting and alluding to Li's poem, Yuan's poetic comment is allusive itself and immediately brings out an allusive reading of Li Shangyin's poetry; after stating that Li's poetic writing as a whole is beautiful, the last couplet of this quatrain points out the ambiguous quality of Li Shangyin's poetry by referring to Zheng Xuan (127-200), the famous Late Han (25-220) commentator of the *Classic of Poetry*. In Yuan's view, these two attributes of Li Shangyin's poetry seem inseparable. [36] Ambiguity is interwoven with allusiveness, especially his cryptic allusiveness; and allusiveness, in turn, is integral to the epithet of ambiguity. To a large extent, these two constitutive elements of Li Shangyin's poetry play a fundamental role in Li Shangyin's poetic ambiguity. And because of them, Li Shangyin has fascinated and frustrated generations of critics and scholars over the centuries.

Ambiguity of Li Shangyin's Poetry

Chinese concepts of ambiguity have occasionally been discussed or hinted at by quite a few literary critical writings in history. In the chapter, "The Recondite and the Conspicuous" (Yin xiu) of *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, for example, Liu Xie says:

> [I]n the bright flowering of literature, there are latent elements (*yin*) and elements that stand out (*hsiu* [*xiu*]). The latent is the layered significance that lies beyond the text (*wen*); the out-standing is that which rises up uniquely within the piece. The latent is fully accomplished in complex and multiple concepts. The out-standing shows its craft in preeminent superiority. These are the splendid achievements of old works, an excellent conjunction of talent and the affections.

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[35] Quoted in *LDSH*, 445; trans. Wixted, *Poems on Poetry*, 105. For a detailed discussion of this, see Wixted, *Poems on Poetry*, 103-107.

[36] As a matter of fact, this view has generally been shared by many scholars in Li Shangyin studies. See, e.g., Yan Kunyang, *Li Shangyin shi jianshi fangfa lun* (Taipei: Xuesheng, 1991), 154.

是以文之英蕤，有秀有隱。隱也者，文外之重旨者也；秀也者，篇中
之獨拔者也。隱以復意為工，秀以卓絕為巧，斯乃舊章之懿績，才情
之嘉會也。[37]

Here Liu Xie's *zhongzhi* (layered significance) and *fuyi* (complex and multiple concepts) certainly refer to ambiguity. The oft-heard Chinese aphorism, *shi wu da gu* 詩無達詁, may express the Chinese understanding of ambiguity in a better way; the aphorism does not mean that poetry cannot be understood or interpreted, rather, it means that the meaning of a poem cannot be exhausted by limited interpretations. In spite of this theoretical realization in traditional Chinese literary criticism, poetic ambiguity in classical text was either reduced or explained away by commentators throughout history. A. C. Graham keenly observes this phenomenon when he remarks:

> In China, as in England before Empson provided the tools of analysis, there is often a strong feeling that a line of poetry is impoverished by too precise a prose explanation, and a willingness to allow different readers to see different things in it, but only a vague and fitful awareness that apparently contradictory explanations may all be valid.[38]

Compared with the understanding of ambiguity in Chinese poetic tradition, modern studies of ambiguity in the West have brought out more obvious results with the development of semantics in the twentieth century. By William Empson's definition, ambiguity refers to "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language."[39] No matter how controversial restricting the scope of the term might be and how different the ways of classifying it, the twentieth century concepts of poetic ambiguity all point out the multi-signification of poetic language.[40] According to some modern scholars of Chinese poetry, on the other hand, intrinsic elements in the Chinese grammatical structure of a poem, such as fluidity regarding parts of speech, the absence of inflections, and polysemy, can be factors contributing to ambiguity, and the

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[37] *WXDL*, 8.5a; trans. Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, 263 (the parentheses are original).

[38] Graham, *Poems of the Late T'ang*, 37.

[39] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963), 1.

[40] For detailed discussions on ambiguity, see Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*; and Shlomith Rimmon, *The Concept of Ambiguity: The Example of James* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977).

flexibility with identifying the tenor of imagery and allusion in a poem can also cause ambiguity.[41]

Described as above, the poetic ambiguity is seen to have gradually developed to classical poems. In light of Empson's theory, Zhu Ziqing's pioneer study of equivocal characteristics of the Han poem "Traveling On, On and On Again" (Xing xing chong xing xing) collected in the "Nineteen Ancient Poems" (Gushi shijiu shou) is a good example of critical recognition of this gradual development.[42] It was during the Tang dynasty, however, that sensibility toward poetic ambiguity increased and its significance in terms of poetic effect was consciously explored and appreciated.[43] Among many obscure and equivocal works by Tang poets, ambiguity stands out strikingly in the Li Shangyin corpus in terms of degree and quantity. Whereas his "The Ornamented Zither" is taken as "one of the most allusive of all Chinese poems."[44] 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, such as *shihua*, Li Shangyin's poetry is often associated in Chinese with the descriptors *yinpi* (hermetic), *shenpi* (enigmatic), or *huise* (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 dynasty. Ye Xie (1627-1703) in his *Yuan shi* (*The Origins of Poetry*), for example, viewed Li Shangyin's quatrains as follows: "The metaphorical meanings of

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[41] See, e.g., Yeh Chia-ying, *Zhongguo gudian shige pinglun ji* (Hong Kong: Zhonghua, 1977), 139-149.

[42] Zhu devotes one article to the discussion of equivocal characteristics of classical poems. In that article, by analyzing several other classical poems, such as Tao Yuanming's "Yin jiu" and Du Fu's "Qiu xing," he traces the beginning of Chinese poetic ambiguity back to the Han poem "Xing xing chong xing xing." In Zhu's view, poetic ambiguity as a feature of poetry has its limitations. See Zhu Ziqing, *Zhu Ziqing gudian wenxue lunwen ji*, Vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1981), 59-77.

[43] Some scholars trace the beginnings of Tang poetic ambiguity to Du Fu's poems after the poet arrived in Kuizhou in the year of 766. See, e.g., Graham, *Poems of the Late T'ang,* 20; therein Graham also mentions that the Japanese scholar Kurokawa Yoichi—in his "An Introduction to Tu (Du) Fu's 'Eight Autumn Poems'" (in Japanese: *Journal of Chinese Literature,* Kyoto University, April 1956)—holds a similar view in discussing Du Fu's ambiguous characteristics. Although it is doubtful that the actual phenomenon of poetic ambiguity began with Du Fu as seen by these scholars, their views suggest the strong sensibility toward poetic ambiguity during the Tang dynasty.

[44] Graham, *Poems of the Late T'ang*, 27.