Why Is There a Poem in This Story?
Li Shangyin’s Poetry, Contemporary Chinese Literature, and the Futures of the Past†

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In Ge Fei’s novella *Jinshu* (Brocade Zither, 1993), a literary text by the name of Feng Ziran completely trustee the classics. To his mind, all the knowledge of his ancient country was excellent, perfect. This was a kind of knowledge that not only made you grasp the logic of things, gave you a thorough understanding of life and death, and made you aware of your role in society, but also allowed you to escape dangers and disasters. (Ge Fei 1994: 259)

The irony of this passage becomes evident as the story unfolds. As Feng Ziran enters the examination hall, he suddenly feels that those long, lonely years of study have been “an absurd mistake.” To his dismay, the theme of the exam is “Brocade Zither.” “Such a title is really out of place,” Feng thinks. “Apart from the mediocre octave by Li Shangyin, which he knew

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The title of the story refers to Li Shangyin’s famous poem “Jinshu,” which, in the famous poem. "Jinshu," which A. C. Graham (1971, 171) translates as "The Forsaken Lady." "Men chance to the patterned leaf has fifty strings. / String and feel, one by one, recall the blossoming years. / Chen gong kuo dreams at mantle that a butterfly lost its way. / Wang Ping CI bequested his song to the nightingale. / The moon is full on the cold sea, a tear in the snow. / On blue Mountain the wind, a single issue from the south. / Did it visit, this road, to autumn with foxfire? / In a trace from
very well, he could not recall any historical figure or event that could be connected with that theme... What kind of joke was that?” (263). His tutor had instructed him in the Confucian teachings, expecting that the examination would revolve around such topics as the human relations and the celestial principles, the three cardinal virtues and the five constant virtues. The rare times that candidates were required to write about poetry, they would be asked to comment on verses from the Shi Jing (Book of Songs), or by the famous Du Fu and Li Bai. “What the hell does Li Shangshin amount to?” Feng Zicun wonders, concluding that his teacher was right when he said, “In today’s academic circles there is no learning (zhenjiu) left to speak of,” as we the prostitute who had told him, “The age of scholars (zhishengren) is gone long ago” (263). In a bizarre, Feng Zicun rewrites the two final verses of Li Shangshin’s poem, goes back to the temple where he lodges, and before dawn hangs himself.

As purging as this novel is, it is not the only text of modern Chinese literature to allude to the late Tang poet Li Shangshin (813–858). He is, indeed, a favorite of several 20th-century Chinese writers: Fei Ming (1901–1967) admired his poems and sought to imitate them in his writings, many essays and one novel by Wang Meng (1944–) are inspired by them, several of Ge Fei’s (1964–) fictional works are interspersed with references to his poetry; and the young writer Guo Xuewen (1975) wrote about Li Shangshin in a pamphlet in which he contrasted Li’s feelings of feeling to the slavishness of the writers of his own generation. In addition, since the early 1980s, a remarkably large number of scholarly studies on Li Shangshin have been published in China, many of which deal with his controversial "untitled poems" (wu shi) and with a greatness of the most famous poem, “Braided Zither.”

Described in the Ju Tang shu (Old history of the Tang: Liu Xie et al. 1975: 507–78) as a precocious literary talent well versed in ancient-style prose (guwen) and as an eccentric personality, Li Shangshin came from a family of petty officials, and although temporarily appointed to low-rank positions, he spent much of his life moving from place to place and eventually died in poverty—a destiny not uncommon among Chinese authors of all times. Li Shangshin prized formal refinement over moral and intellectual content and opacity over clarity, inspiring imitators in the long period. His poems were first collected by the editor Yang Yi (974–1020), but extensively annotated only during the Qing. He wrote about sexual love in a melancholic tone, and the evocative language of his verses, famously rich in images and allusions, led scholars to endless speculations on their meanings.

For several contemporary writers, Li Shangshin’s poetry has come to represent a crystallization of those aspects of the Chinese literary past that they deem relevant to the present, but the features and purposes of their appropriations vary. The portraits of Li Shangshin that emerge from contemporary critical writings range from that of a decadent artist to that of an enlightened intellectual. His poetry has been invoked as a synecdoche for the quality of “literariness” itself and has often been framed in a discourse of regret and loss, but the relations between Li Shangshin’s poetry, literariness, and loss have been traced in widely divergent ways. Wang Meng, for instance, finds in Li Shangshin’s poetry a quality that he attributes to Chinese classical language in general, namely a capacity to convey the “ineffable” meanings that are lost in conventional communication. Wang suggests that the aesthetic experience that one derives from this poetry can help heal the fractures induced by history, and even contribute to the strengthening of the national self. Gu Fei, on the other hand, identifies Li Shangshin’s literariness with the blurring of borders between the real and the imagined and in the collapsing together of different dimensions of time. In reading Li Shangshin’s poetry as the expression of an inability to apprehend and control the real, Gu Fei identifies it with a loss that appears to be a transhistorical trait of the human condition, in contrast, for such young authors as Gu Xuewen, Li Shangshin’s poetry reflects the authentic experiences that, he contends, are no longer available in the present due

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1 See Li Xiang’s essay “Liaoyang de guominshu miyi” (The officials update our all blindly, 2002). On Fei Ming’s affiliation with Li Shangshin, see Sun Shangling 2001 and Fei Ming 2006. Gan Zhangyi’s 2008 izheng (In the art of poetry, 1948) also includes several discussions of Li Shangshin’s poems. In Tanhu, some of Li Shangshin’s poems have been adapted into songs for karaoke.

2 For an overview of the recent scholarly work on Li Shangshin, see Liu Xie et al. 1998 and Zheng Xingjie 1998. “Braided Zither,” which a commentator (Bai Yiyong, 1964) describes as “an eternal noble” (yiyou en mei), is often ground and decentered together with the “untitled poems.”
to cultural globalization and the proliferation of visual media.

It is the multiplicity of interpretations that I hope to convey in this essay, that is, how Li Shangyin has been appropriated in a variety of projects aimed at redefining what constitutes "literature" in the period of deep transformations of the 1980s and 1990s. I first discuss the reception of Li Shangyin's poetry in the context of the debates on Meilong poetry in the 1980s, then look at the intertextual allusions to Li Shangyin's poetry in the writings of Wang Meng and Ge Fei. The materials I examine are varied—including fictional narratives, scholarly essays, speeches, and introductions to poetry collections—and reveal unexplored links between contemporary fiction, poetry, literary criticism, and Tang studies. This partly reflects the fact that writing in multiple genres is an integral part of the "literary life" of several contemporary Chinese authors. In the Chinese context this is nothing new; in imperial China and in the early twentieth century, fiction writers often wrote essays, speeches, as well as annotations on their favorite readings. One of the issues at stake in the contemporary revival of Li Shangyin is precisely an interrogation of the experience of reading, specifically a reflection on the functions that reading classical literature might have in shaping future subjectivities and communities—or the functions that such reading might have had, since in some of these texts one can perceive nostalgia for reading as well as the fear of an impending post-writing age.

Several years ago, Janos Dekert observed a fundamental continuity between classical poetry and early-twentieth-century fiction. In his view, the short stories of Lu Xun, Yu Dafu, Guo Moruo, and other canonical May Fourth writers showed more affinities with the "critical" tradition of classical poetry than with the "predominantly epistemic" genre of folk literature (Prosek 1980: 3). These writers were burdened with the task of founding a new national literature, and therefore they "unconsciously identified themselves with what they considered good literature and not with those genres which they felt were to a large degree folkloristic." The revival of Li Shangyin and the intertextual practices examined in this essay can hardly be described in terms of historical continuity. However, they do reveal that classical poetry continues to appeal to contemporary fiction writers, for reasons that involve personal affinity and, at least in some cases, a conscious effort to redefine the role of literature in opposition to the literature of the previous decades, which they perceive, to borrow Prosek's term, as predominantly "epic" and hence lacking some of the alleged qualities of a "modern" national literature, namely psychological analysis and depth. The recent revival of Li Shangyin can thus be connected with the process of legitimizing ways of writing focused on the interiority of the writer since the early 1980s. This process is well documented. What is much less known is how Chinese classical literature (as referent of intertextual allusions as object of scholarly studies, and as a literary mode) has contributed to the shaping of new visions of literary authority.

In his discussion of the critical reception of Li Shangyin since the Song, Stephen Owen (2014: 5) has noted that Li Shangyin's "rise to fame was a complex history of changing values." This statement refers to what is probably the central controversy in the studies on Li Shangyin, namely whether those poems apparently alluding to love and sexual passion ought to be read as political allegories and whether they refer to specific historical figures. The Taiwanese writer and scholar Su Xuxin (1957-1999) was perhaps the first to grant full legitimacy to the theme of love in Li Shangyin's poems. She contested all previous allegorical readings, claiming that Li Shangyin's sentiment was their central referent and painstakingly reconstructing the identity of the lovers who had, in her view, inspired them (Su 1969). In Su Xuxin's writings, Li Shangyin is portrayed as a romantic hero involved in passionate (and often tragic) love affairs with numerous courtesans and nuns. Her appreciation for erotic themes is clearly shaped by the emphasis on individual feelings in the May Fourth intellectual discourse. Her efforts to link poetry to precise biographical events, however, do not significantly differ from the work of...
those commentators who strove to identify the historical personalities to which the poems supposedly referred (Dong 1992: 56).

The question of the historical or biographical referents of Li Shangyin’s figurative language has continued to divide scholars in the more recent decades. Although contemporary interpretations generally avoid overtly political readings, very few of them emphasize the theme of love and loss. Rather, most of them make an effort to valorize his very ambivalent and indecisive, which Stephen Owen has variously defined as “poetics of the clandestine” (Owen 2006: 353) and “poetics of blankness” (359–360). In other words, the recent scholarly reception of Li Shangyin has largely sought to eschew modes of interpretation that insist on direct links between poetry and life events—whether political or sentimental—inviting readers to expose themselves to a more or less radical uncertainty. An overview of commentaries published in the 1980s will illustrate this point, and will show how the valorization of Li Shangyin’s hermeticism contributed to the legitimization of Menglong poetry, a genre of writing that was initially criticized for its alleged lack of clarity.

The Return of Li Shangyin: The New Reader and the Debates on Menglong

Not much was published on Li Shangyin in China between 1955 and 1977, years in which an overtly political and largely formalist mode of writing and reading predominated. The late 1970s and early 1980s editions generally emphasize the sociopolitical implications of his poetry and the contradiction between his “progressive” personality and the “feudal” times in which he lived. The publication of Li’s poetry was thus justified by emphasizing that he was a responsible and “politically engaged” poet. In a selection published in 1978 by a research group of Anhui University, for example, Li Shangyin is portrayed as “a poet who cared for reality, politics, and the destiny of the feudal state” (Li Shangyin shixuan 1978: 10), and the poem “Brocade Zither” is read as representative of “the tragedy of a progressive literatus in the feudal society” (174–175) who was limited by his times and by his class background and could not recognize the causes of his misfortune. The editors acknowledge the literary importance of the “untitled poems” and, following the Qing commentator Feng Hao, divide them into three groups: those expressing deep feelings of love and regret, clear allusions to the political misfortunes of the poet, those that are ambiguous and may or may not be allegorical, and those that clearly are not allegorical and only express sexual desire (16). The commentators specify that the “untitled poems” did not represent the height of Li Shangyin’s achievements, and that his merit lay in his denunciation of the “corruption and decadence” (zhanan fuxi) of the political life in his time, which he expressed in his political poems (17).

A similar view is presented in a book on Li Shangyin by scholars Liu Xuehai and Yu Shucheng, who praise the “poems on aspirations” (zhanghuashijie) because they convey the poet’s “democratic thoughts” and his eventual failure in the corrupt world of the late Tang. The “untitled poems” are appreciated from a formal viewpoint and, again, divided into three groups, the least worthy of which is represented by poems expressing “superficial, vulgar feelings, the sensual passion for prostitutes, which clearly do not imply any allusion at all.” The editors unfavourably compare Li Shangyin to Li Bai, criticizing him for being much weaker, more passive and pessimistic than the latter.

These early 1980s editions focused on debates that had divided Li Shangyin’s commentators since the Southern Song, namely the poet’s use of figurative language and, in particular, the relationship between love images and the poet’s social and political concerns. These commentators implied that a clear line could be drawn between poems expressing deep feelings and those referring to ephemeral love affairs; political allusions and aesthetic value were mostly associated with the first, whereas the latter were generally dismissed as frivolous pastimes.

Subsequent editions of Li Shangyin’s poetry reflects the growing 1
emphasis on literature at the expression of individual subjectivity that characterizes literary criticism in the mid-1980s. They focus less on political context and more on the psychology and feelings of the author. These commentators sought to disconnect the aesthetic from the sociopolitical by insisting on the indeterminacy of meaning in Li Shangyin's poetry, but at the same time they emphasized the necessity of a more "scientific" approach to the study of poetry. It might incidentally be noted that the theorization of the aesthetic subject by the literary critic Liu Zaihui, that was so influential in the mid-1980s, represented an attempt to divorce literature not only from the sociopolitical but also, more generally, from the domination of instrumental reason. It is therefore remarkable that in the contemporary scholarship on Li Shangyin a focus on the subjectivity of the writer, an emphasis on textual indeterminacy, and the claim to a "scientific" approach to literature often coexist in the work of the same critic, as is especially the case in the essays of the scholar Dong Nabin.

Before looking at the important work of Dong Nabin, however, I would like to discuss a 1985 reprint of a small Qing edition annotated by the Confucian Jiang Bingzhang that explicitly takes issue with the previous scholarship on Li Shangyin. The poems are preceded by a lengthy preface by Hao Shifeng, a contemporary scholar of Tang poetry at Nankai University, who points out that Jiang Bingzhang's edition did not enjoy much popularity when first printed in 1755, and that his commentary was biased as a Confucian scholar, he looked only at the content of the poems and failed to take into account their aesthetic features. Hao argues against the tendency to portray Li Shangyin as he was a second Du Fu—namely, a poet that was mostly concerned with the fate of the state—and criticizes the allegorical readings of the "untitled poems." Hao Shifeng defines their ambiguous mood as "spring sadness" (shangqun), namely "not mere sorrow but rather a complicated feeling of interpretation of hope and despair in which longing and loss are intertwined with each other" (Jiang 1985: 15).

Echoing Su Xuejin's interpretation, Hao Shifeng reprimands previous commentators who disregarded love as a worthy poetic theme, and insists that Li Shangyin's poems expressed "desire for free love... respect and sympathy toward his companions... mutual love between equals." The poet's unique respect toward women diverged very much from "feudal morality... somewhat resembling the modern meaning of love" (Jiang 1985: 20-21). Of course, Hao points out, this did not mean that the poet was completely "modern," because he was limited by his own times and hence his aspirations never found full realization. However, in his view, the very contradiction between Li Shangyin's desire and the limits of his epoch constitutes the point of departure of his aesthetic quest and is at the basis of the recurrent dream images in his poetry: for Li Shangyin, dreaming was not mere escapism, but symbolized his yearning for beauty, love, and a happy life. Dreams were an ideal spiritual realm, an imaginative plane that encompassed the vague memories of the past and the vain aspirations for the future (25-28).

In concluding his preface, Hao insists that Li Shangyin's poetry can be enjoyed even if it is "obscure" (mianqiang) and suggests that the appreciation of beauty does not depend on the understanding of meaning. In support of this view, he quotes Liang Qichao: "The poems of Li Shangyin... I cannot figure out what they are about. When I try to interpret them line by line, I do not even understand their literal meaning. And yet, I feel that they are beautiful, and in reading them my soul gains a fresh feeling of joy." (33). Hao Shifeng praises ambiguity, which he associates with depth of thought, complexity of feeling, and "modern" aesthetic value. He also claims that the political views that previous commentators attributed to Li Shangyin were reductive, oversimplified, and based on categories that were too clear-cut to be accurate. What he values instead is Li Shangyin's contradictory passions that escape categorization, especially as expressed in his "untitled poems."

A similar valorization of complexity and of aesthetic enjoyment
with the various attempts, over the 1980s, to configure the aesthetic as the space through which a renewed "subject" could flourish, whose agency would possibly make itself felt in realms that would once again transcend the borders of the merely aesthetic. 15

All three aspects of the critical discourse on Li Shangyin outlined above—the emphasis on the subjectivity of the author, an embrace of textual indeterminacy, and the need to adopt a more "scientific" approach to literature—emerge in a series of essays published by the scholar Dong Naibin (1992) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Dong Naibin presents his work on Li Shangyin as a contribution to the strengthening of literary history as an "autonomous discipline" centered on the "spiritual exchange between the writer and the reader," granting central importance to the contexts of transmission and reception (Dong 1992: 3-5). In this perspective, he dismisses not quite scientific interpretations aimed at a "one objective and uncontestable literal meaning," suggesting that the tendency to connect figurative language with specific referents was an obsolete methodology. The multiple layers of meaning in Li Shangyin's poetry, he claims, were bound to remain veiled and ambiguous (pinhu). 56-57.

Dong Naibin's approach is holistic in that it connects specific components of Li Shangyin's poetry to the poet's psychological world and to the whole of Chinese culture. Inspired by system theory, his analysis takes the "linguistic image" as the central unit of inquiry. 16 According to Dong, an analysis of the diachronic and synchronic relations between various "linguistic images" in Li Shangyin's poetry (such as, for example, the butterfly and the dream) would not only allow one to derive the "psychological laws" of literary creation, and thus serve as a basis to outline a model of the psychological mechanisms of literary creation (13), but would also be conducive to a broader examination of the sedimented meanings of a cultural system, revealing the deep psychological pattern of Chinese culture itself (20). In another essay, Dong (1998: 540) emphasizes...
Even though Dong Nabilin seems to prefer the word jiehua (intelligible, visual) to menglong, his emphasis on literary ambiguity is also at the heart of Xu Xingliang's 1998 work, "Menglong: A Poem and a Myth." The first anthology of menglong poetry was published in 1986 (yet 1985).

According to Xiaomeng Chen (2002: 45), "The very meaning, essence, and social impact of menglong poetry are in the process of re-creation, a re-creation that has led to the emergence of a new form of artistic expression." In their study of menglong poetry, the scholars explored the concept of "menglong" as a source of artistic innovation. They argued that menglong poetry is not only a creative process but also a source of cultural identity.

While proposing a "systemic" approach to poetry, Dong argues that one can only "relatively approximate" its original meaning. All interpretation is by necessity a reinscription of the subjectivity of the reader/interpreter onto the texts of past "menglong" poetry, and studying the texts is all creative activities. They are a re-creation of the basis of the texts of the past. While respecting the text and the interpretations, the scholars propose a new way of understanding menglong poetry. They argue that the poetry is not only a creative process but also a source of cultural identity.

Through their interpretations of Li Shangyin, the scholars examined these newly emerging practices of reading and writing. Specifically, their commentaries can be read as defenses of menglong poetry. They argued that menglong poetry is not only a creative process but also a source of cultural identity. They proposed a "systemic" approach to poetry, and while respecting the text and the interpretations, the scholars propose a new way of understanding menglong poetry. They argued that the poetry is not only a creative process but also a source of cultural identity.

But although Li Shangyin was often mentioned as an example of native modernism and the origin of menglong poetry, his name was used for conflicting arguments, reflecting the great variety of interpretations of modernism and of the word menglong itself. Zhang Ming (1989: 33), for instance, contends that most of Li Shangyin's "untitled poems" are not menglong at all; rather, they remain the reader with a "bright, beautiful, and deep feeling." The only reason they are considered "ambiguous" (jinhuo) is that it is unclear whether they are love or political poems. Li Shangyin can not be compared with or seen as a precursor of menglong poetry, which makes people feel thoroughly "vexed" (ziqin); his poetry, therefore, can not be used to promote the contemporary "menglong style," which Zhang obviously despises. In Zhang Ming's view, menglong not only means ambiguity and lack of clarity, but also denotes a pessimistic and passive mood, which leaves the reader with existential confusion and outright depression and is not to be found in Li Shangyin and in the Chinese tradition in general.

Tao Weipeng (2003: 17-18), on the other hand, criticizes Xu Jingya's (1983b; 1983e) notion that the Chinese poetic tradition was backward and inadequate to modern times, mentions Li Shangyin's poem "Ye yu jie li" (Night Rain: To my wife up north) as an example of "multilayered spatiotemporal structure" (duo cong de shijian, shijian jieguo), and thus, again, as a precursor of modernism. By pointing out that the elements of Western and new were in fact already present in Chinese classical literature, Tao urges writers to embrace literary experimentation.

In sum, the scholarly work on late Tang poetry examined above indirectly contributed to the legitimization of menglong poetry and of modernist writing in general. In the literary debates of the early 1980s Li Shangyin was often presented as a native precursor of menglong poetry and modernism, even though his name was sometimes also invoked to discredit menglong poets. This suggests links between the scholarship on
Tang poetry, literary criticism, and contemporary fiction and poetry. The writer Wang Meng, for one, played an important role in bridging these diverse writing genres.

**Connecting with the Past: Wang Meng's The Strain of Meeting**

In 1982, Wang Meng wrote the novella *Xiang jian shi ran* (The strain of meeting), titled after the first verse of one of Li Shangyin's "untitled poems." In later essays, commenting on the verse "Xiang jian shi ran, bie yi ran" (The strain of meeting equals parting), Wang emphasizes that it alludes not only to the difficulty of meeting due to external circumstances, but also to the difficulty of communicating even when a meeting actually takes place:

> Separation is painful, difficult... and yet, to meet is also difficult. For one thing, the opportunity to meet is rare, but even when one finally meets, what then? If one meets, one should then connect and speak to each other. What I mean is: how can one meet and really communicate? To meet and not communicate is even worse than not meeting at all... this is about love and yet goes beyond love. Think of all that is precious, all that one longs for and yet often risks losing or has already lost... isn't this often "the strain of meeting that equals parting"? (Wang 1995: 61-62)

What is it that the protagonists of this novella "long for and yet risk losing or have already lost"? In the early 1980s, Lan Peiyu, a woman who migrated to the United States in 1946, is invited by the Chinese government to return for a belated memorial service for her father, who committed suicide at the outset of the Cultural Revolution. Described as a tormented Chinese in exile, who feels left behind by the "tide of history" (Wang 1989: 179) and inexorably estranged from the people of her country, Lan returns determined to reestablish a connection with her past and be reacquainted with her national community. Above all, she looks forward to meeting her old friend Weng Shihan, who is a self-styled type of the author: a Communist Party member before he turned eighteen, he "regarded himself as a revolutionary by vocation, a political worker" (214) but was sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution and rehabilitated only in 1979. And like Wang Meng, Weng Shihan likes to read Tang poetry.

In their youth, Lan and Weng were neighbors; he was involved in Party activities, and she was starting to get involved. After missing an important appointment, however, she was accused of having a traitor. A few weeks later, she heard about the opportunity to study in the United States and reluctantly decided to leave. Having returned to China, she hopes to be able to explain to her old friend what actually happened thirty years before.

Lan and Weng had radically different lives and yet were both labeled traitors—she for leaving the country, he for allegedly keeping in touch with her and acting as an agent for foreign powers. Both think of themselves as "survivors" and mourn their "previous selves." At the ceremony for her father, for instance, Lan Peiyu thinks that she "had spiritually died an unjust death in America" (204). Weng Shihan, on the other hand, felt that something in him was dying in 1972, when he was leaving the village where he had spent his last ten years (101). But while Lan is prone to self-analysis and somehow manages to come to terms with her past, Weng appears unable to mediate between the different discourses that haunt his mind. He often embodies the voice of the Party and finds momentary comfort in formulaic narratives about the achievements of the Chinese revolution (169, 221), but the opportunistic behavior of some colleagues and the bureaucratic excesses of the Party (a recurrent theme in Wang Meng's fiction) have dampened the political fervor he professes in theory. In addition, when questioned by Lan on the relationship between his ideals and the Cultural Revolution, he becomes hesitant and is unable to come up with a definite answer.

Indeed, one of the central issues of the novel is the death and destruction brought about by the Cultural Revolution, which emerges from Weng Shihan's account as an aberration, a usurpation of power by a small group, a break in the tide of progress, a "trick" of history (221-222). In short,
Weng is the loyal Party member, a character type that appears in several other Wang Meng stories, to whom the Cultural Revolution only brought pain and destruction. At the same time, he also asks himself whether his ten-year imprisonment among the peasants has been “a disaster or the best of luck” (88). Now that Weng is severed from the countryside, he has to emerge from the ashes of his previous self and contribute to the building of a new society in the urban environment where he belongs. He badly needs to believe in a brighter future, but the Party narrative no longer satisfies him on an emotional level, his trust in rationality and historical progress wavers, and he can only find consolation in a declaration of faith: “But I still believe in the self-confidence and cohesiveness of the Chinese people!” is Weng’s only response to the questions that continue to plague him (222). At the center of this story lies an unresolved tension among historical necessity, human agency, and chance. This tension, however, is not fully explored, but rather dissolves in the sentiment of trust among fellow countrymen, through which what appears to be lost may be partly recovered—certainly not the past, but perhaps some of one’s ideals, and the sense of belonging to a national community.

The epilogue of the story brings us back to the motive of the meeting. After a first brief encounter, Lan writes a letter to Weng expressing her hope to have a more in-depth conversation with him. At this point, Weng invites her for dinner, but because of the intrusion of the second wife of Lan’s late father (a greedy and vulgar woman), he is obliged to cancel it. He finally sends Lan a farewell note, which includes the quatrain by Li Shangyin: “Ye shan” (Visit to the Mountain), and she goes back to the United States without having talked to him in any depth.

Before venturing any hypothesis on their narrative function, let us look more closely at the two poems by Li Shangyin referred to in the novella. Through the complex images in the first couplet, “Xiang jian shi nan” alludes to the inevitability of the passing of time and of nature playing its course, and conveys a sense of sad resignation. This mood is, however, overturned in the last verse, in which the poet summons a mythical messenger—the bluebird—to do what he cannot with his all-too-human means, namely overcome distance and all other barriers and visit his beloved in cold comfort indeed, but the point is that a supernatural being can achieve what humans cannot. On the other hand, no supernatural element intervenes in the quatrain “Visit to the Mountain,” which is a straightforward expression of disappointment at the inevitable passing of time. When the poet attempts to “buy the sun” (here, a symbol of eternal life) from the immortal Magu, all he gets is “a small cup of spring dew cold as ice.”

Li Shangyin’s two poems thus convey different moods, including anger, resignation, hope, and disappointment. They express the sense of regret and disorientation felt by the protagonists, as well as the frustrated wish to reverse or undo the events that changed their lives. But they are not the only literary texts mentioned in this story: various novels, poems, songs, and movies are quoted as elements that define the characters’ backgrounds and mold their attitudes, expectations, and beliefs. Books create similarities and distinctions among people; they bring them together and pull them apart. In one of their conversations back in the 1940s, for instance, Weng and Lan discussed the books they liked and Weng warned her that the drama On the Eve (Ye wei yang) of her favorite playwright was an expression of “petty bourgeois nihilism,” not the best reading for a young revolutionary (116). The drama is set on the eve of the 1905 Revolution, and focuses on a small group of young Russian activists who desperately sacrifice their personal lives to their political beliefs. Described by Bai Juyi as one of the major influences on his life as a teenager, On the Eve must have struck quite a different note in the 1940s, at a time when party discipline was emphasized and political acts solely based on personal initiative were reprimanded. Not long after this discussion, Lan Peiyu fatally misses the crucial appointment that would have transformed her into a revolutionary because she is absorbed in reading of Xu Ku’s
sentimental novel *Jibunai de youhoo* (The lure of the gypsies). Reading such decadent works signals Lan's increasing insubordination to Party discipline. More in general, Wang Meng's novella shows that references to works of twentieth-century literature imply a specific political stance. Modern literature creates distinctions in terms of degrees of revolutionary fervor and can strongly affect the course of one's life and of relationships.

Yet, the novella also reveals how such distinctions are time-sensitive: as the case of *On the Eve* exemplifies, the cultural and political significance of literary texts is susceptible to substantive revision over time.

What is it, then, in Chinese culture that can remain unscathed by such recurrent revisions, and reconnect Lan to her friend and to her country? The spoken Chinese language does not constitute much of a common ground: Lan observes that the spoken language has undergone transformations over time (157, 207–208) and that the language she remembers from her childhood years is no longer heard in Beijing. It is, instead, classical literature (which here also includes vernacular fiction and drama) that serves as a connective texture unaffected by the fractures of recent history and brings together people of diverse political experiences and backgrounds: Lan Feiyu can talk about *The Romance of the Western Chamber* with another overseas Chinese, even though their political views were on opposite ends of the spectrum (154). While modern literature, language, material goods, and money are markers of class and nationality, classical literature is recuperated as a suprapolitical element that unites Lan with other overseas Chinese, with Weng, and with China.

Li Shangyin's poetry, in particular, appears able to convey the sense of pain, sadness, and powerlessness of individuals who were confronted with historical events that were beyond their control and understanding and that caused disruption, separation, and loss of any coherent sense of self. The quatrain that Weng writes to Lan in his farewell note comes as a possible solution for a question to which the story has no answer: "How can one communicate?" The poem is a lament, and it takes

literally. It would seem to convey Weng Shihuan's disappointment at their inability to communicate. Yet on the narrative level it does reestablish a tenuous contact between the two protagonists. In this respect, the poem corresponds to the "blue bird" in the poem "Xiang jian shi nan," acting as a "supernatural agent" that intervenes in a situation in which direct human contact has failed. Symmetrically to the final verse in the poem "Xiang jian shi nan," the quatrain functions as a magical solution that offers imaginary relief from a separation that is otherwise recognized as inevitable.

Written at a time when people were settling aside the struggles of the recent past and collectively mourning the victims of the Cultural Revolution, Wang Meng's novella suggests that Li Shangyin's poetry may function as an element of cultural cohesion and help to heal the wounds inflicted by recent history, precisely because it dwells on feelings of loss and uncertainty. Weng's insistence on cultural commonality, however, implies the centrality of a specific type of intellectual background and knowledge. If, as this story suggests, the discourse of class led to social disruption, and if it therefore needs to be replaced by an emphasis on culture and morality, it is also true that the apparent cohesion created by a shared cultural competence is based on obvious distinctions between what is elevated and what is low, what is refined and what is vulgar. Two uses of "culture"—one in the sense of cultural competence, the other in the sense of common social background—are here conflated. Culture in the first sense can be "high" or "low," refined or crude; it is characteristic of particular social groups or classes. Culture in the second sense is "Chinese culture," imagined as shared by all Chinese and coextensive with the Chinese nation. What unites Weng and Lan is culture in the first sense, a specific form of cultural capital. This, incidentally, is also what separates them from the "opportunist" who blindly follow the party line, on the one hand, and from the "materialists," on the other—people like the ex-wife of Lan's father who are only interested in expensive foreign goods. "Culture" as a specific set of competences and attitudes is not what all the

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[1] William Sewell (1990: 35) has proposed a distinction between a meaning of culture as "a theoretically defined category or aspect of social life that must be abstracted out from the complex reality of human existence" and a second meaning according to which "culture stands for a concrete and bounded world of beliefs and practices. Culture in this sense is commonly supposed to belong to or be immanent in a "society" or with some clearly identifiable subcultural group."

[2] Herein Brackenridge (1986) has illustrated this link between cultural taste and social stratification. John Piro (1986) has also discussed the relationship between culture and social status, but has pointed out that the ways in which culture is tied to social status are by no means homogeneous and universal.
protagonists of this story have in common.

The appeal to this ambivalent notion of culture is all Wang Shih-han has at his disposal to infuse new vigor into a patriarchal discourse threatened by historical failure and to reclaim his sense of self. But the invocation of this class-bound notion of culture with a supposedly classless Chinese culture also serves to legitimate specific social groupings. In Wang Meng's story, this representation of culture indeed reaffirms the urban intellectual as a figure organically connected with the peasants, and at the same time provides Chinese communities abroad with a possible source of self-identification.

In Wang Meng's *The Strain of Meeting*, Li Shangyin's poetry represents the "supernatural language" of poets, imagination that can convey a complex message in a situation in which "conventional language" is insufficient, and thus overcome the barriers put up by history, which is here represented as being as superstitious as nature itself. An unsettling parallel emerges between the valorization of a kind of poetry that demands abandonment to aesthetic appreciation and a notion of national identity according to which one does not need to understand recent history: just love your fellow countrymen, and that will do. But the imagining of a sentimental cohesion really had all sorts of defectors, and in fact, does not provide a clear-cut answer: the text of Li Shangyin's quaerain, after all, expresses nothing but disappointment. Yet, Lan reads it as an expression of hope (236) and later feels that "her country's demented, crowded collective life...had changed something in her" (248). If Wang Meng's story leaves things unresolved, his theoretical essays on Li Shangyin, which were mostly written in the late 1980s and early 1990s, are much more straightforward, and it is to these that I now turn.

Wang Meng's Imagism

Wang Meng devoted a considerable number of essays to Li Shangyin's poetry, dealing with their form and language and with the poet's attitude toward politics. In these essays, Wang Meng argues that everyone and not just "experts" should be able to appreciate Li poetry. In contrast to such authors of the early twentieth century as Hu Shi, who emphasizes the dissonance between classical Chinese and the colloquial language, Wang Meng understands this gap. Adhering to the common perception that "brocade zither" is one of Li Shangyin's most difficult poems, for instance, Wang claims that its vocabulary is actually quite simple: "almost every character and word can be used in the vernacular, without altering them at all." And yet, he also argues that this poem—and classical poetic language in general—occupies a completely different linguistic plane, because it serves no specific communicative function.

To go shopping, to lecture children, to apply for a job, all this requires that you speak clearly, requires that language is standardized, unified, and made to sound logical. . . . So what we mean by "language" in these cases is the superficial language of communication. Poetry is the language that seeks the ineflfble and that seeks to directly reach the "idea" (yi); this is the "deep language" (shenling yun). (Wang Meng 1996c: 16)

What distinguishes "superficial language" from "deep language" is syntactically discontinuity. Wang Meng (1996d: 24) insists that each word and character in Li poems (and again in Chinese classical poetry in general) is "extremely important and relatively autonomous," and that the relationship between them is flexible:

The illogicality and discontinuity of this structure are a great characteristic of Li Shangyin's lyrical poetry, particularly of the "untitled poems" and of his universally praised "Brocade Zither." The gaps between words, between verses, and especially between couplets are relatively wide. (Wang Meng 1996c: 20)

Feelings that are extremely deep, Wang argues, are beyond the reach of an overly-logological language, the power and beauty of Li Shangyin's poetry thus, lies exactly in its syntactical and logical looseness and hence in its ability to express the inexpressible. Li Shangyin's language, writes Wang Meng
Wang Meng's notions of a direct relationship between poetic language and "indefinable" ideas or feelings echo similar views in traditional Chinese aesthetics. At the same time, they deliberately downplay the importance of parallelism, rhyme, and tonal prosody in Tang poetry and their effects on the overall effectiveness of the poems. Indeed, syntactic discontinuity is what made Tang poetry proactive to the imagistic poets of the 1920s, who were "impatient of the logical connectives which thwart the achievements of a language of pure sensation" (Graham 1977: 24). In this sense, Wang's views recall Ezra Pound's ideogrammatic writing as "a model of all poetry" (Hayter 2003: 32), and as "a possibility inherent in all verse—a sort of deep structure or primitive substratum of poetic utterance that is prelogical, pregrammatical." Semantic ambiguity and syntactic discontinuity may indeed characterize Tang poetry, but what is highly disputable is that Chinese poetic language can function as a universal model for a "language of pure sensations," or a "language of the heart" as Wang Meng calls it, if only because of the different "reinforces, implications, and associations of words" and the more or less conventional uses of images and allusions (James Liu 1999: 23-38).

In the context at hand, however, it is not so much the accuracy of Wang Meng's ideas on literary Chinese that concerns us. It is rather the fact that, in his writings, Li Shangyun's poetry is recuperated as the crystallization of the supposedly universal qualities of the Chinese language. The features that Wang Meng emphasizes are those that were read into Chinese poetry by Anglo-American modernists. Even though Wang does not explicitly mention them, he seems to imply that since Tang poetry traveled abroad and inspired foreign writers, it could also function as a native source of inspiration for literary experimentation.

The Future of the Past
Li Shangyun's poetry is central to Wang Meng's articulation of his aesthetic vision. In an open letter titled "Guanyu 'xihilu' de tongzhan"
Communication on the "stream of consciousness," 1972), in which the
writer explains his use of the techniques of yishiliu in the story "Eyes of the
Night" (Ye de xia, 1979), he singles out Li Xun's prose collection, "Villa Grass" (Puyao), and Li Shangyin's poetry as native examples of "stream
of consciousness."* Wang Meng describes "stream of consciousness" as
a mode of writing that privileges free associative thinking and image
over predetermined concepts and fixed content, its aim being to capture
the "raw" human feelings and perceptions, which "some people call
artistic intuition. From a materialist viewpoint, they indicate the first
immediate reaction to the world, to life, to objects." (Wang 1993a: 71).
Wang Meng articulates his argument by resorting to two familiar notions
of Chinese traditional aesthetics, namely xing ("affective image") and bi
("comparison"). Xing, in his view, is a form of associative thinking, and
hence, a pristine form of stream of consciousness. In xing, he claims, the
point of departure for writing is the image, which inspires a plurality of
thoughts and emotions in the writer. The image is the source and origin
of meaning. In Wang's view, after many decades in which an emphasis on
bi—the exposition of a predetermined idea or concept—predominated,
the world was about to recuperate xing, and to give full rein to the "flux" of
contradictions that characterize the human experience of the world.**

The stories by Wang Meng considered by several critics as early
examples of yishiliu in the late 1970s and early 1980s do not allude to Li
Shangyin, but a brief look at them will allow me to further explicate the
affinities of Wang Meng's prose and his own literary practice, and
help clarify his idiosyncratic appropriation of Li Shangyin. Such stories
as "Eyes of the Night," "Hadise" (Butterfly), 1980, and "Chun zhi sheng"
(Voices of spring, 1980) exemplify the author's bent for investigating the
multiple facets and contradictions of the individual psyche, even though
the psychological discourse is here contained within a precise (and rather
predictable) set of contradictions that generally find resolution in a hopeful,
if rather incongruous, epilogue.

* In "Eyes of the Night," essentially a denunciation of some privileged
"aesthetic" indifference to the people, and as such akin to many other stories
in the "critical realist" mode, the perceptions and thought of a middle-
aged writer who returns from the country to the city after an absence of
two decades are presented in "free indirect discourse," mostly unmarked
by any introductory sentence that would clearly delimitate them from
the narrator's voice. An abrupt passage from the third to the first person
reveals the intimate feelings of the protagonist at a difficult moment,
highlighting the effect of psychological introspection (Wang Meng 1993b:
240). However, the various sequences of associative thoughts that cross his
mind are ultimately logical and easy to follow. "Butterfly" consists of a
long flashback reconstructing the life events of the protagonist, a successful
cafe owner who reflects on the duties and privileges that his position entails.
The narration shifts seamlessly from the thoughts of the protagonist (associative
series of monologues) to descriptions of the setting in which he finds
herself. It is often the sight of an object (an "affective image," as
in the notion of xing) that evokes the memory of some person or past
event. As in several other Wang Meng's stories, we find an exploration of
the conflicts between two "personalities" within the same character, here
conveyed through an allusion to Zhuangzi's allegory of the butterfly,
which is presented as a hopeful image of life and rebirth leading to a new free self that
transcends all mundane constraints and contradictions.

Wang Meng's own writing practice, then, reflects a rather cautious
appropriation of Li Shangyin's figurative language. His short stories adopt
the "associative" qualities that he detects in Li's poetry only insofar as
they help illustrate the characters' heightened perception of an unfolding
environment and their uncertainties about their public roles. In this
respect, Wang's fictional writing does not fully exhaust the shift from bi to
xing that he advocates in his essay. Perhaps the most successful of Wang
Meng's experimental stories in the 1980s is "Laojun" (Thrilling, 1987), a
humorous account of the tragicomic adventures of a character called

** At least xing are primarily discussed in Wuxin diying by Liu Xun (1986:52).
According to Cheuk, "The Liu Xun idea of affective image is in contrast from
rational understanding, and it is this that radically separates it from
conceptions of the mechanism by which affective images function in
modernist and postmodernist writing and thus it works on the affective area
directly, unmediated by the understanding." (Cheuk 1986: 236).
Xie Xing (whose name appears variously in a range of homophonous Chinese characters, and at one point even in pinyin). Throughout the narrative, multiple possibilities of events and actions are juxtaposed. Here the "combinatory potential" that Wang Meng saw in Li Shangyin's poetry seems to find its deepest fictional equivalent, albeit on a paradigmatic rather than syntagmatic axis, and with a playfulness that is alien to Li Shangyin's poetry itself.

Considering his creative writings alongside his theoretical essays, we can see that for Wang Meng Li Shangyin's poetry represents an unmatched paragon of allusiveness and psychological complexity, a source for cultural cohesions that could help overcome recent historical traumas, and an early native example of "associative" writing. However, a slightly different vision of Li Shangyin seems to emerge from one of Wang Meng's later talks, which transcend his preoccupations as a writer who sought to legitimize experimental forms and reflect a renewed enthusiasm on the centrality of literary studies in the context of major socioeconomic and cultural transformations. As the honorary president of the Society for Li Shangyin Studies established in 1992, Wang Meng delivered a talk at its third meeting in 1995 in which he welcomed the resurgence of interest in Li Shangyin from "all sectors of society" as an indication of the broadening of the concept of literature. Like several other critics before him, Wang Meng conflates traditional literary exegesis with literary practices of the Mao era. Traditional Chinese literary thought, he claims, all along privileged content over form, public affairs over sensual love, optimism and grandeur over melancholy and sadness (1996: 1-2). Because of this tradition, which continued after 1949, Li Shangyin did not receive enough critical attention, a regrettable trend that was finally being reversed in the present. Although Li Shangyin's poetry does not convey any near ethical message, Wang notes, in the present time of reform, opening up, and fast economic development, Li Shangyin's poetry has an educational value, because "it might help reinforce an elevated (guoyu) aesthetic taste, valorize our national cultural treasures, and develop an interest in China and Chinese literature" (4).

Once again Wang emphasizes the characteristics of the Chinese language and the relationship between lack of fixed grammar rules and poetry, equating Chinese language, poetic value, and Chinese culture. Perhaps also because of the "public" nature of the talk, he unequivocally links passion for Li Shangyin's poetry with the survival of Chinese national identity: "by reading Li Shangyin's poetry and Chinese classical literary works, we can save the characteristics of the Chinese language and appreciate its charm, so that we may have 'Our Chinese Heart,' and this heart will live forever." In short, the eternal life of poetry ensures that "Chinese culture will not perish, China and the Chinese nation also will not perish" (9-10). Finally, Wang explains that Li Shangyin's poetry poses a challenge to Chinese literary history and to both Chinese and Western literary criticism, because the categories and critical tools they offer are not adequate to analyze it.

Li Shangyin's poetry—which can be intuitively apprehended, appreciated, enjoyed, but not fully understood—has survived, when so many other things have perished. Its very complexity reminds readers of the incomprehensible depth of the Chinese past, of a Chinese culture that is here to stay. This mode of thinking could perhaps provide some comfort during the rapid transformations of the 1990s. To abstract from the flow of time where things neither change nor persist, to "recognize" one's own "deep language" in it, and thereby contribute to the strengthening of the national self, these are, in Wang Meng's view, the aims of literary education, and this is the role of the writer, literary scholar, and public intellectual that Wang Meng envisioned for himself in his writings on Li Shangyin.

Ge Fei's Brocade Other: Poetry in Fiction

Ge Fei (1964-), one of the writers of the literary avant-garde of the late...
1980s, currenty teaches Chinese literature at Tsinghua University in Beijing. His fictional works, including his novel Renmin tiaohua (People's face, peach blossom, 2004), contain several allusions to Li Shangyin's poems. When asked what he finds attractive in Li Shangyin's poetry, he mentions that they are “not very realistic” (bu yu xianxian), “reserved” (banhua), “mysterious” (xuanwu), and “empty” (xuanwu).6

While none of Ge Fei's theoretical writings focus exclusively on Li Shangyin, a reference to Li appears in his study of Fei Ming (Ge Fei 2001), specifically in a section comparing the latter's treatment of time in the novel Qiao (Bridge, 1932) with the chronological structure of Li Shangyin’s poem “Night Rains: To My Wife Up North,” which represents the future as the time when the present will be a memory of the past:7

In the poem “Night Rains: To My Wife Up North,” the poet's time of writing is the moment in which “the night rains on Mount Ba swell the autumn pool,” while “When shall we, side by side, trim a candle at the west window. / And talk back to the time of the night rains on Mount Ba?” represents the imagined future of the writer, namely the time when he will talk with his beloved at the western window at night and recall the continuous autumn rains of “now.” (Ge Fei 2001: 283)

Ge Fei writes that whereas in these verses what is imagined to be recalled in the future is an actual event, namely the rain, in several passages of Fei Ming's Bridge the object of the imagined memory is itself an act of imagination. In this context, Ge Fei quotes the last couplet of Li Shangyin's “Brocade Zither” (“I did it wait, this mood, to mature with hindsight. / I was there from the beginning, then as now,”8) as an example of this kind of recollection, without further commenting on the poem. These have been interpreted in various ways, suggest that the poet's experiences of the past cannot be made into a clear memory, because they were confused (or the poet was confused) already at the time of perception. Ge Fei compares passages from Fei Ming's Bridge with Li Shangyin's final couplet because they all refer to an object of memory that is not the past itself, but a confused feeling of the past. He then argues that Fei Ming's fiction “transcends the barriers between the present, the past, and the future, providing the reader with an infinite space of poetic imagination.” (281)

Such instances of “synchronicity” (gangshengxi) are, in his view, what Fei Ming's narrative style, Western modernist fiction, and Li Shangyin have in common. This focus on the chronological dimensions of Li Shangyin's poetry suggests similarities between Ge Fei and the critics who saw Li Shangyin as an example of native modernism. However, to learn more about Ge Fei's reading of the poet, we need to turn to his fictional works.

Among Ge Fei's narrative works, the novella Jinze (Brocade Zither) contains the most conspicuous references to Li Shangyin. In fact, it can be read as an extended fantasy on Li Shangyin's poem of the same name. The novella is deliberately puzzling; the author himself describes it as a “dream in a dream” (Ge Fei 2000: 6). Brocade Zither consists of four tales set in different landscapes and eras, the main character in all of them is called Feng Zicun. In each story, Feng dies; but before dying, he tells a tale or dream that constitutes the following story in the novella.9 This engenders a cycle of retributions that take place thanks to the act of storytelling. In the first tale, “Butterflies,” Feng Zicun is a itinerant caring for a woman and by her sudden death. In the second, “In a Daze”—the one mentioned at the opening of this essay—Feng is a scholar who, after a long journey to the capital, fails to pass the state examination and hangs himself. In the third, “Story of a Tea Merchant,” he is a wealthy tea merchant whose business is thriving and who is invited to attend a ceremony at court; he then falls ill and, after a period of confinement to bed, dies. Finally, in the fourth, “The Dream in the Dream,” Feng Zicun is the sovereign of a state called Canghai who is unable to defend his country from the army of West Chu and migrate with his people to the land of Lantian. He knows that his son is going to kill him, and when asked by his gardener why he does not escape somewhere else, he replies that a dream he had the night before

6 In the second story, it is Feng Zicun's sister who tells a story she heard from a tea merchant.
suggestions that, even if he were to escape, he is doomed to die anyway. The
king then starts to tell his dream to the gardener, in which Feng Zizun is a
hermit who hears about the death of a woman.

The end of the fourth story thus brings the reader back to the
beginning. Only in this last tale—which is a dream itself—does the reader
realize that the first story is also a dream. Reciprocating: the first tale
coincides with the dream of the Feng Zizun of the last story; this, in turn,
is the dream of the Feng Zizun of the third story, which is narrated by the
sister of the Feng Zizun of the second story, which is narrated by the Feng
Zizun of the first story, which is the dream of the king in the last story,
and so on.

In the context of his discussions of narrative levels, Gérard Genette
(1980: 229-234; 1988: 84-95) defines a metadiegetic any "story within a
story," namely any story told by one of the characters represented at the
main diegetic level in the case of Ge Fei's story, however, there is no diegetic
level that can be said to be safely above the others, since the first story
eventually reveals itself to be a dream told by the protagonist of the last
story. This, in turn, is also a dream, and incidentally the one set in the most
remote past. Borrowing Genette's terminology, we can say that the last story
is at the same time on the main diegetic level (as frame of the dream that
corresponds to the first story) and on the metaphoretic (as the dream framed
by the third story). What we have here is a series of embedded tales that
temporally reproduce one another in infinite circularity.

The novella shows that in narrative, as in dream, chronological, historical
sequence does not matter. All the Feng Zizuns recurrently recite or rewrite Li
Shangyin's verses, even though some of them live in times long preceding
the period when the poem was actually written. The "chronological
displacement" of the poem—the fact that it anachronistically appears
at a time in which it had not actually been written—might suggest an
erasure or downplaying of all fundamental difference between historical
episodes in favor of a communality of feeling conveyed by the poem itself.

Historical time is subordinated in the novella to tight narrative framing,
with its fixed sequence of acts of narration or dreams. In addition, within
each of the stories themselves, narrative time is broken up into sequences
of analepses and prolepses that follow the chaotic thoughts, perceptions,
and fantasies of the protagonists. These perceptions are inseparable from
the confused memory of previous instances of similar perceptions or
fantasies. In other words, they are inevitably tainted by the past, as if they
had always already been there. All this contributes to the sense of
"synchronicity" in the novella. Feng Zizun occasionally seeks to retrieve the
crucial event or turning point that caused his present state and to isolate it
from preceding or subsequent events. In most cases, however, the crucial
moments or events remain blurred.

It is possible to read the four stories that form Brocade Zither as
Buddhist fables, illustrating the notion that being in the world means to
be exposed to desire and sorrow in ways that might feel always different
but are basically repetitive. All four episodes, after all, tell the story of
an aporia, a man who, in the exact moment he is about to achieve success or
self-realization, is struck by a tragic twist of fate that unmasks the illusions
of the apparent stability he had achieved. This allegorical mode of reading
is occasionally represented within the novella itself. A couple of instances,
the protagonists read Li Shangyin's poem as an allegory of their destinies,
which, however, they are unable to interpret. Feng Zizun, the hermit, for
instance, says that in reading the poem "he had the presentiment of a fear
never felt before... In his view, this poem contained a terrifying allegory
(lepian de yiyian) in its depth, there was an imperceptible emptiness" (Ge
Fei 1994: 256). But reading the poem neither leads the protagonists to
a higher degree of self-awareness, nor does it bring any hint in the narrative
that self-awareness might actually help escape the cycle of rebirths.
Personal experience, in other words, does not lead to enlightenment and
salvation. All is contingent—even the "emptiness" the protagonists find
in the poem—and living as a hermit does not save Feng Zizun, for he remains
solve a mystery or personal dilemma, provide fulfillment to a protagonist’s desires, or reveal their fundamental illusions; often dreams are the result of some deep impression or emotion in the protagonist’s waking life. The time-honored notion of dream as an allegory of the illusions of existence dates back to early philosophical texts and is rehearsed in several famous narratives through the centuries, but in late imperial fictional narratives the very illusoriness of dream served as a literary device leading to all sorts of unexpected twists, often subverting the philosophical tradition itself (Zitlin 1993: 138-164).

How exactly does Ge Fei revive the old cliche of the impossibility of distinguishing between dream and waking? And what are the functions of dream in his story? On one level, the dream is the source of the narrative. Within this oneiric-fictional space, however, dream frequently emerges as a ruinous, destructive experience, an instrument of doom. Pleasurable dreams inevitably become a reason for regret. Feng Zicun the hermit and Feng Zicun the literatus are so overwhelmed by the sensorial experience they go through in their dreams or in their imaginations that they are killed by it. Even when dream seems to offer an insight into the future, it does not offer any way out. For instance, it is a dream that provides the king of the fourth story with a prophecy to his destiny, but it does not help him to escape it. What seems to be the novel’s original response to the literary tradition of dream, then, is not so much the mere rehearsal of the question of what is dream and what is real, but rather an illustration of the ruinous effects that dream itself has on the protagonists, and especially of the relationship between such dreaming and the (rewriting of Li Shangyin’s poem.

I would like to suggest that through the oneiric adventures of the various Feng Zicuns the novel proposes a set of imaginative circumstances in which “Brocade Zither” might have been written and used, playfully imitating an evocative tradition that sought to reconstruct the contents and personalities involved in poetic writing and performance. In the novella,
of course, such reconstruction is explicitly fictional. Feng Zizun is often portrayed as an alter ego of the poet, occasionally writing the poem as if it were the first time, as if it were his own. This emphatic identification between reader and poet is presented as a model of reading. From this perspective, I believe that the novella attempts to eschew all allegorical readings that might reduce it (and Li Shangyin’s poem) to an exemplum of an absolute signified.

That the story might be enacting a resistance to allegorical readings is supported by the fact that Li Shangyin’s poem remains a heterogeneous space that does not serve a clear narrative function, but never fails to elicit strong emotional responses from the protagonist. The descriptions of scenes of reading and writing in the novella emphasize the materiality of the poem. Li Shangyin’s verses are scattered throughout the narration and repeated as if they were incantatory spells: the various Feng Zizun rewrite them verbatim, pander their words, but are generally unable to paraphrase them. These verses are irrepressible. Feng Zizun, the hermit, we are told in the first episode, tells his interpretation of the poem to the village teacher, yet we never learn what this interpretation is. All we get from these various stories is the repetition of the verses themselves, the description of the paper and ink on which Feng Zizun the literatus and the king rewrite them, and the tears that they bring to their eyes.

The narrative of Ge Fei’s Bracade Zither reenacts the poem, adopting its structure and borrowing its evocative language. The poem begins with the word 見 adec, which means “no beginning,” “no end point,” or “no reason.” Similarly, in the story, the beginning and the end coincide, and apparently there is no external referent apart from the narrative performance of the protagonist. Second, thematic threads link story and poem: the central verses of the poem refer to legends of transformation of things or people and evoke feelings of longing and loss. These are themes that return in the story: the tale of Zhuangzi and the butterfly is mentioned in the first story, and there are several other episodes in which the borders between the real and the imagined are blurred. Both poem and novella are composed of elements that are only loosely connected and both are interspersed with intertextual references. Moreover, some of the words of the poem are used in playful ways. For instance, the words 長江 (ocean, vast sea) and 蘭訕 (Indigo Fields, a place southeast of Chang’an) become the names of the realm of the king of the last story and of the place where he goes in exile with his people, respectively.

Finally, some of the poem’sensorial images, such as mist, smoke, and heat, are embroidered in the narrative text and give rise to chains of metonymical substitutions. In the second story, for example, Feng Zizun the scholar is in a monastery outside of the city of Jiangning. On an evening a few days before the examination, the view of the mist on the river and the smell of rouge make him feel sad and lost in “empty fantasies.” The smell of rouge then gets confused with the aroma of the jasmine tea that his sister put on his table, calling to his mind the face of his sister, which in turn blurs into the image of his mother and of yet another woman. Each perception is associated with yet another perception, from which new fantasies arise. These flights of imagination often seem to interrupt the sequence of events that lead the protagonist to his death, but in fact they are the very cause of his ruin. It is the workings of imagination and dream, the story suggests, that robs the various Feng Zizun of their hard-won stability, but it is precisely this loss of stability that compels and enables them to write.4

4 Their imaginative minds make them fall prey to sexual desires. Women are alwaysnenous in this story, and they are associated with fantasy.

This might be a reference to traditional stories of lovers who bring the course of the beloved back to life. Such an episode is included in Murat Yagci’s story "Percy’s secret" by Yang Jian in the "magical story collection by Yang Jian (1950–1951).

It is precisely this loss of stability that compels and enables them to write.

The multiple temporalities in Ge Fei’s story calls to mind what Jorge Luis Borges did in his short story “The Garden of Forking Paths” (written to Tsai Pei, the imaginary Chinese author of a book full of contradictions in which “in the third chapter the hero dies, yet in the fourth he is alive again”). In Tsai Pei’s book, there are “several futures,” "several histories," which themselves proliferate and fork” (Borges 1982:125). Ge Fei mentionsorges (though not this particular story) in his preface to the Italian translation of this novel (Ge Fei 2009).
this novella—is not simply the "synchronic" time of imagination, as some critics and Ge Fei himself would have it. Rather, moments of synchronic time exist within a scheme of progressive (even though circular and ultimately repetitive) decline, which the narrator describes as the "rigid pattern of time" (shejian de hijiao, and which the protagonists attempt in vain to escape. In the third story, when the tea merchant rereads Li Shangyin's poem on his deathbed, he feels that the poem itself expresses the perception of being entrapped in such a temporal scheme: "One could see that Li Shangyin and himself were one and the same, trapped in the rigid pattern of time, with no way of getting out" (271).

To return, then, to the question raised in the title of this essay, why exactly are there poems in these stories? In Wang Meng's The Strain of Meeling, intertextual allusions to Li Shangyin's poetry establish a relationship of affinity and continuity between the Chinese poetic tradition and contemporary literary practices. Wang establishes such affinity on the basis of the "raw" human perceptions and psychological complexity that were supposedly buried by previous interpretive and writing practices and that Wang Meng aims to recapture in his fiction. In terms of narrative function, Li Shangyin's poetry reestablishes a tenuous contact between the protagonists, and provides a possible element of cultural cohesion for a national community that is seeking to recover from years of political violence.

In Ge Fei's Bawade Zither, Li Shangyin's poem shapes the narration on multiple levels, while the novella provides a context in which the poem is reread and rewritten, and in which it continues to invite and elude interpretation. Both Wang Meng and Ge Fei appreciate Li Shangyin's poetry primarily because of its hermeticism. However, Wang Meng's appropriation of Li Shangyin presupposes the possibility of instrumentally selecting specific aspects of the literary past and is predicated upon a vision of literary history as an uninterrupted sequence of qualitatively distinct segments. Ge Fei's novella, on the other hand, suggests a vision of the literary past that is at

odds with ideas of linear development and selective recuperation. Rather, the literary past emerges as an effect of reading and writing, as an integral dimension of the present that remains partially inscrutable.
Appendix: Poems by Li Shangyin

$baihua$
$Bel Dao$
$bi$
$biao meng yuyan$
$bu te xi xian$
$"Chun zhi sheng"$
$dashuren$
$duo ceng de kongjian, shijian jieou$
$Fei Ming$
$gaoya$
$gongshi hong$
$Gu Cheng$
$guwen$
$hanyu de qin xiao$
$hanxu$
$heian fuxi$
"Hufu"$
"Jingre"$
jinshi$
$kepa de yuan$
$Lanlian$
$Li He$
$menglong$
$Mudun ting$
$nei$
$neixi de shuqing de qian yuan, chao yuan$
$qianwun$
$pukelpai xiaoshuo$
$qiao dao foutai$
$qimen$
$jiangu zhi mi$
$Qiao$
$qin$
$qine$
$Annmin bahuai$
$se$
$shengchun$
$shengqiu yuyan$

Glossary

白话
北魏
比
表徵語言
不太現實
流連
春之聲
國人
多層次的空間，粗糙結構
姓名
章德
兵時性
紛繁
古文
深暗的奇妙性
生靈
脫離侷促
縛縛
詩人
可伯的語言
斟酌
學賢
騰躍
巴丹亭
內
內心的抒情的趣味
語言
鮮美
朴質
細微
小県
流風
青年
詩人
花花
僧人
漫漫語言
Bibliography


Looking Back at Ann Hui's Cinema of the Political

Ka-Fai Yau

In an interview in 1982, the year Britain initiated negotiations with China on the status of Hong Kong, Ann Hui said, "I really do not understand politics. I don't know if it's too simple so I don't care to understand it, or if it's too complicated, so I can't understand it" (Ho 2001: 201). In 1990, asked about the issue of Hong Kong's 1997 return to Chinese control, she said,

[the] problem is that this involves the whole of society, and you don't know where to begin. . . . My personal view is that without sufficient time, there is no way one can filter the issue, and so it's impossible to shoot a film. There has to be enough time for research; it takes patience. There is no need to rush into films about the question of 97. (In Ho 2001: 201)

In contrast with Hui's reservations about political involvement, Akbar Abbas (1999: 362) believes that what makes the Hong Kong cinema of the 1980s intriguing is precisely its confrontation with "a new cultural and political space . . . after the announcement of Hong Kong's return to China." However, he adds, political events did not simply give birth to a political cinema in 1980s Hong Kong. Drawing on Deleuze (1989: 215–224), Abbas (1999: 363) describes Hong Kong cinema as one in which "the people are missing," not an Eisensteinian one in which "the people are already