

Manipulating the Sign: A Semiotic View of Li Shangyin's Allusiveness

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Abstract—Focusing on the formal and semantic allusive process in some of Li Shangyin's (ca. 812-858) allusive poems, this paper demonstrates how the (inter-) textual space functions "as a principle of organization for making signs out of linguistic items." (Michael Riffaterre)

Keywords--literary allusion; semiotics; marker; activation; intertextuality; "clouds and rain;" overt; assimilative; poetic signification

I. INTRODUCTION

In pre-modern Chinese poetry where tradition and imitation work as a simultaneous projection of literary models and codifications, allusive characteristics are inevitably strong. 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 (or possible 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.¹ While being illuminating, most of these studies, when referring to allusion, have not said enough about its function in texts and the structuring of texts.

Thus, it is my interest here to tackle the rhetorical function of allusion which, I believe, works as a constitutive element of the poetic system and thus contributes to the process of poetic signification.

¹ See, e.g., David Lattimore, "Allusion and T'ang Poetry," *Perspectives on the Tang*, eds. Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (New Haven: Yale UP, 1973) pp.405-439; and Kao Yung-kung and Mei Tsu-lin, "Meaning, Metaphor, and Allusion in T'ang Poetry," *HJAS* 38 (1978) pp.281-356.

To approach my subject, I propose to use some models drawn from Li Shangyin (ca.812-858), a Late Tang poet who, in James J.Y. Liu's words, "has been both admired and condemned for the highly allusive character of much of his poetry."² In my re-examining Li's allusive poems, I shall apply recent theories of allusion which were developed in the light of intertextuality which, in Jonathan Culler's words, is central to semiotic description of literary signification since it "leads us to consider prior texts as contributions to a code which makes possible the various effects of signification."³

II. ALLUSION DEFINED IN CONTEMPORARY THEORIES

In her well-known article "The Poetics of Literary Allusion," Ziva Ben-Porat says:

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.⁴

Here, by emphasizing the other one antecedent literary text, Ben-Porat calls our attention to the

² James J.Y. Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin: Ninth-Century Baroque Chinese Poet* (Chicago: The University of Chicago P, 1969) p.246.

³ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981) p.103.

⁴ Ziva Ben-Porat, "The Poetics of Literary Allusion," *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature* 1 (1976) pp.107-108.

“simultaneous activation of two texts” in patterns of interrelation in the allusive process in a given literary work. Further, and what is more significant, in her study of literary allusion, Ben-Porat emphasizes the differentiation between allusion as a process of activating the other text and allusion as a textual element within the linear sequence of the alluding text.⁵ In order not to confuse these two, she calls the latter “marker.” In other words, the marker appears in an alluding text and is the trigger for the actualization of an allusion. The marker is always identifiable as such no matter whether it assumes a conventional form or a new one. As Ben-Porat says: “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.”⁶ The marker also contains some kind of literal meaning in the context of the alluding text besides the allusive one.

In the theoretical framework above, we see clearly that three categories of allusive variables are involved in the dynamics of allusion: the “marker” in the alluding text, the function of the allusion in the alluding text, and the relation of the alluding text to the evoked text. In addition, allusion scholars like Carmela Perri put more stress on the active role the reader plays in the allusive process. That is, the alluding text requires the cooperation of its reader as a necessary condition for its realization. The reader is presupposed to be able to identify the allusive marker in the alluding text as well as to collect further information about the alluded text.⁷ This theoretical emphasis of relying on the reader’s literary competence for a deeper perception and appreciation of the allusion should have not been a problem in premodern China where a literati poet was first of all a reader. By the time the literati poet began to write, he had already read both intensively and extensively. And in many ways, his on-going writing was, to borrow Julia Kristeva’s words, still reading others’ writings. The high allusiveness in premodern Chinese poetry exemplifies that literati poets had to recourse to a common literary codification shared by past poets. Thus, from an intertextual or semiotic perspective, we see that in premodern Chinese poetry the process of allusion does not just involve the evocation of another, antecedent text, but the larger, more general field of culture in its literary form.

It is perhaps with this understanding in mind and based on a good comprehension of the allusive tradition that Li Shangyin explores ways to manipulate and extend existing allusive material to

shape the production of his poetic text and permit its readability. To see how allusive facets work in his poetry, we shall now direct our critical attention to one allusion which Li Shangyin favors, namely, “clouds and rain” (yun yu). Focusing on one allusion provides us with a conveniently limited sample for discussing Li’s allusiveness here; and examining one particular allusion in different variations in a couple of model instances will show that in Li Shangyin’s poetry one allusive instrument can produce different intertextual spaces that function as “a principle of organization for making signs out of linguistic items.”⁸

III. “CLOUDS AND RAIN:” ALLUSION TO THE GODDESS OF MOUNT WU

In alluding, Li Shangyin often goes to myths and legends which embody popular stories such as those about the Goddess of the moon, about the Goddess of the Mount Wu, and so on. In the formation of the allusions to these myths and legends, there are certain archetypal words that haunt poetic lines in the Li Shangyin corpus.⁹ The words, “clouds,” which is associated with erotic love, and “rain,” which means sexual love when used together with “clouds,” are among one certain group of words that is “associated with intimacy, feminine beauty, and amorous atmosphere,” as James Liu observes.¹⁰ These two words, used together or separately, serve as allusion markers in a great number of Li’s poems for the several dimensions of the story about the amorous Goddess of Mount Wu and her mysterious love affair with the King of Chu.

Allusion to the Goddess of Mount Wu, often triggered by the marker “clouds and rain,” was repeatedly used by previous literati poets to express their feelings of love or to refer generally to love affairs. The repetitive use of this mythical allusion thus became conventionalized in pre-Tang literature, especially during the Six Dynasties. It originated in an old myth about the goddess Yao Ji and was developed in the mythical prose poems, the “Rhapsody on Gao Tang” and the “Rhapsody on the Divine Woman” attributed to Song Yu (in the third century BC). From Song Yu’s preface of the “Rhapsody on Gao Tang” we know that Xiang, King of Chu, saw a cloud-spirit in constant shape when he was strolling in the company of Song Yu on the Cloud-dream Terrace. When he asked about this spirit, the poet told him that long ago a former king

⁵ See Ben-Porat, pp.107-126.

⁶ Ibid, p.108.

⁷ See, e.g., Carmela Perri, “On Alluding,” *Poetics* 7 (1978) p.299.

⁸ Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) p.2.

⁹ See Zhang Shuxiang, *Li Yishan shi xilun* [An analytical discussion on Li Shangyin] (Taipei: Yiwen, 1974) pp.44-57.

¹⁰ James Liu, p.221.

was wandering upon this mountain of Gao Tang and when he disposed himself lazily there for a rest he dreamed a girl visited him and offered him “the service of pillow and mat.” Having received his favor, the girl said to the king before leaving:

My home is on the souther side of the Witches Hill, where from its rounded summit a sudden chasm falls. At dawn I am the Morning Cloud; at dusk, the Driving Rain. So dawn by dawn and dusk by dusk I dwell beneath the southern crest.¹¹

Later the king built a temple to her and named it “Morning Cloud.” The image of the Goddess in the preface as well as in the poems has seductive characteristics attributable to both a human being and goddess. Song Yu “comments on the mystic powers of the deity herself, embroidering the facets of her beauty, her protean shapes, and her evanescent charms in scintillating language. She appears almost as a meteorological phenomenon, sparkling and trembling, darting and quivering. . .”¹²

This Chu deity’s sexually charming and seductive characters, which were originally kept in her as indicated in Song Yu’s poems, had been fettered in the civilized society for a long time. Hypothetically, the Goddess did not get into the written culture and was well out of use before she was revived by antiquarian literati who were possibly outsiders and who romanticized her and missed the real point that she was performing a religious function in the community. Thus the image of the Goddess in Song Yu’s poems became a revenant of the amorous figure which returned in later literature, though changed, from a mental hiding place to assume a place once again in active consciousness.¹³ As a metaphorical impulse, then, the spirit of the

¹¹ Arthur Waley, trans., *The Temple and Other Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923) p.65.

¹² Edward H. Schafer, *The Divine Woman: Dragon Ladies and Rain Maidens in T’ang Literature* (Berkeley: University of California P, 1973) p.38.

¹³ Before Song Yu, words like “clouds” and “rain” had been used in association with women. It was the “Rhapsody on Gao Tang,” however, that established the texture for the “clouds and rain” allusion because ever since this prose poem was collected in the authoritative *Wen xuan* [Selection of refined literature], it inspired later poets in composing love poems. The talented poet Cao Zhi (192-232), for example, composed his well-known “Ode to the Goddess of the River Luo,” because he was moved by the event that Song Yu told the King of Chu about the story of the divine woman.

Goddess is firmly established in medieval literature, especially in poetry, most obviously through the allusive image of “morning clouds and evening rain.”

In poetry, “clouds and rain” is thus conventionally used to allude to romantic passions, or even used as a substitute for sensual love. Between the Han Dynasty and the Tang Dynasty, poets of the Six Dynasties depict various pictures of love—its sensuousness, frustrations, and reverses—in many poems that bear the allusive marker “clouds and rain.” Reflecting the manner and matter of Han poems on the subject, the following poem, “Mount Wu High” 巫山高 in the “yuefu” genre by the Six Dynasties poet Fei Chang (fl. ca. 510), is one of such poems:

Mount Wu glimmers grow late,
Sun Terrace colors dwindle, dwindle.
The lovely woman’s vertiginous eyrie,
How to tell if her heart is true or false?
Dawn clouds strike rocks rising,
Dusk rain soaks clothes sheer.
I long to loosen her thousand gold dirdle,
And escort her back to the great king.

巫山光欲晚，
陽臺色依依。
彼美岩之曲，
寧知心是非。
朝雲觸石起，
暮雨潤羅衣。
願解千金珮，
請逐大王歸。¹⁴

The allusion of “clouds and rain,” however, does not become very commonly used until the Tang Dynasty. Starting with the “Four Talents of the Early Tang,” many Tang poets make their contributions to the development of the allusion which appears in different forms and structures. Lines like “Clouds and rain of Mount Wu arouse a hopeless heart-broken longing” 雲雨巫山枉斷腸, “Dawn clouds and evening rain joined the darkness of the sky” 朝雲暮雨連天暗, and “Evening rain and dawn clouds, when

¹⁴ Guo Maoqian, ed., *Yuefu shiji* [An Anthology of Yuefu Poems] (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1979) *juan* 17, 239. Trans. Anne Birell, *New Songs from a Jade Terrace* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982) p.176.

do you return?" 暮雨朝雲幾日歸 are seen in hundreds of Tang poems with the love theme and themes of others.¹⁵

When comparing dictions in Song and Tang poetry, Qian Zhongshu points out that Li Shangyin's creative use of the allusion to the love between the King of Chu and the Goddess of Mount Wu spawns on enormous progeny of imitations in later poems.¹⁶ Indeed, throughout his career of poetic writing, Li Shangyin seems proud of his subtly incorporating it into his poetic expressions. Hence the line, "I am admired to my songs on the Gao Tang" 眾中賞我賦高唐.¹⁷ Besides his frequent use of the allusion to the goddess, Li Shangyin also alludes to Song Yu in quite a few poems; furthermore, he directly expresses his admiration for Song Yu in a poem with "Song Yu" as its title. Noting Li's fondness of the "Rhapsody on High Tang" and "Rhapsody on the Divine Woman" and their author, some scholars have tried to search for the reason. Wu Tiaogong, for instance, remarks:

The elegant style of Song Yu's "grief of decay and decline"... and the description of the love story in the "Rhapsody on the Divine Woman" which is so rich in mythic color, these all are akin to Li Shangyin's style and character. May we further say that Li Shangyin draws on the experience of Song Yu in terms of the blend of intricate beauty and grief?¹⁸

These remarks indicate the extent of Li Shangyin's interest in this myth and his allusion to it.

IV. LI SHANGYIN'S MANIPULATION OF "CLOUDS AND RAIN"

As defined earlier by Ben-Porat, an allusion marker is the trigger of the actualization of an

¹⁵ See *Quan Tang shi* [A Complete Anthology of the Tang Poems] (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1985) pp.1703, 1178, 3296. My own translations.

¹⁶ See Qian Zhongshu, ed. and comp., *Song shi xuanzhu* [Selected poems of the Song Dynasty with annotations] (Beijing: Renmin wenzue, 1982) p.14.

¹⁷ Feng Hao, ed. and annot., *Yuxisheng shiji jianzhu* [A complete annotation of Li Shangyin's poetry] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1979) *juan* 2, 426. My own translation.

¹⁸ Wu Tiaogong, *Li Shangyin yanjiu* [A critical study of Li Shangyin] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1982) p.159. My own translations.

allusion and is always identifiable as an element belonging to another text no matter whether it takes a conventional form or a new one. When using the allusion marker "clouds and rain" for the myth of the Goddess of Mount Wu, Li Shangyin varies the form of the marker. Sometimes the reader easily identifies the allusion that is fully in its conventional form (which in Chinese is called *ming yong*, "overt allusion"). In the following poem, for instance, we encounter the allusion triggered by its conventional and straight forward marker:

The Chu Palace

The sun sets in front of the Twelve Peaks,
Gao Tang Palace is merged with the dusk.
The morning clouds and evening rain unite
again and again,
But the King of Chu regrets how rare a sight
is his love.

楚宮

十二峰前落照微，
高唐宮暗坐迷歸。
朝雲暮雨長相接，
猶自君王恨見稀。¹⁹

These four lines in the quatrain are read as the poet's nostalgic feeling, or, as his personal response to an ancient site, normally seen in a "huaigu" (meditation on the past) poem that looks back upon the past. In the title the Chu Palace was a palace located on Mount Wu where Song Yu and Xiang, King of Chu strolled. The first line describes the view of the twelve peaks of Mount Wu in the sunset, immediately giving a touch of serenity and forlornness to the poem. In the second line, by alluding to the Gao Tang myth, or Myth of the Goddess of Mount Wu, through another marker, the poem introduces an amorous yet uncertain atmosphere which is suitable for remembrance of the meeting of the king with the Goddess of Mount Wu in the last two lines. "The morning clouds and evening rain," serving as the main marker of the allusion here, symbolizes erotic love; the phrase "chang xiangjie" (unite again and again) depicts very well the king's desire. Through this kind of simultaneous activation of the allusion, triggered overtly by "clouds and rain," the poet here establishes an interrelationship, or, to use Ben-Porat's words, "a movement starting with the recognition of the marker

¹⁹ Feng Hao, *juan* 3, 701. My own translation.

and ending with intertextual patterning.”²⁰ By means of this intertextual patterning, the poet, or, the reader, expresses or experiences the sadness of unfulfilled love, much like the king’s endless, unfulfilled want.

When alluding, Li Shangyin is not always overt. In fact, like many other great poets, he often turns away from this kind of allusive mode and assimilates (*an yong*) allusions through distorting the markers and integrating them into his poems. When presented this way, his allusive art leads us into a context where the addressing voice is deepened, often attained with a shadow of mood. In dealing with such an assimilative allusion, we, the readers, are often asked to stop so we can recognize the alluding elements and measure the distance between the alluding text and the alluded text; guided by linguistic and cultural conventions, we then close the momentary gap and see the poetic meaning as well as the higher point the alluding text tries to make. The poem entitled “Thoughts during Separation” 离思 shows an instance in Li Shangyin’s poems of “clouds and rain” where the marker of the allusion is distorted and embedded in a sentimental mood describing life in a moment of peculiar disappointment and despair:

My breath is exhausted by the Dance of the
Front Brook;
My heart aches at the Midnight Song.
I seek but cannot find the cloud from the
Gorge;
What am I to do with the water in the ditch?
The northern wild goose has ceased to bring
letters;
The bamboos by the Hsiang (Xiang) are
stained with many tears.
I have no means of getting to see your face,
But let me still entrust the tiny ripples with a
message!

氣盡前溪舞，
心酸子夜歌。
峽雲尋不得，
溝水欲如何。
朔雁傳書絕，
湘篁染淚多。
無由見顏色，
還自托微波。²¹

Line 1/ Dance of the Front Brook (Qianxi Wu) is an ancient dance tune. (Cf., *Jin shu, yue xia, juan 23*.) Also, the Front Brook Village (Qianxi Cun) is said to be a famous place which produced dancing girls. (Cf., Feng Hao, *Yuxisheng shiji jianzhu, juan 1, 119*.)

Line 2/ Midnight Song (Ziye Ge) refers to a Jin song allegedly written by Ziye (“Midnight”), a singing girl of the Jin Dynasty. (Cf., *Jin shu, yue xia, juan 23*.) Later, many Yuefu love songs were also called Midnight Songs.

Line 3/ The Gorge (Xia) refers to the Wu Gorge, one of the three famous gorges on the upper Yangtze River.

Line 4/ “Water in the ditch” alludes to Zhro Wenjun’s “Song of White Hair” (Baitou yin) in which she expresses her fears of being deserted by Sima Xiangru when she grew old; in Zhuo’s poem we see the following lines: “Today I’m here, drinking wine with you, /Tomorrow I’ll be at the ditch water, alone by myself.” (Guo Maoqian, *Yuefu shiji, juan 41, 600*. My own translation.)

Line 5/ “Northern wild goose” is derived from the story that when Su Wu was detained by the Xiongnu tribes, a Chinese messenger informed the Khan that the Chinese Emperor shot down a wild goose whose leg was tied with a letter telling the Emperor of Su’s whereabouts. (Cf., Liu Xuekai, and Yu Shucheng, *Li Shangyin shige jijie*, vol. 2, p.765.)

Line 8/ This line echoes Cao Zhi’s “Ode to the Goddess of the River Luo:” “I commit my message to the care of the tiny ripples.” (“Luoshen Fu,” *Wen xuan*, 19.403. My own translation.)

Almost every line in this poem contains an allusion. Because Li Shangyin here synthesizes most of the allusions in metonymic and metaphoric play, it is difficult to correlate the significance of an allusion as it appears in the poem and the meaning it conventionally generates. Traditional commentators’ interpretations, such as that of Cheng Mengxing and Zhang Ertian, take the poem as a representation of Li Shangyin himself, who allegorically expresses his political complaint and dissatisfaction;²² whereas James Liu thinks that the poem is simply a depiction

²⁰ Ben-Porat, p.109.

²¹ Feng Hao, *juan 1, 187*. Trans. James Liu, p.116.

²² See Cheng’s and Zhang’s comments included in Liu Xuekai, and Yu Shucheng, eds., *Li Shangyin shige jijie* Expanded Edition [A comprehensive annotation of Li Shangyin’s poetry] (Beijing: Zhonghua, 2004) vol. 2, pp.839-840.

of an imaginary woman's feeling of loneliness. Both interpretations seem viable. And they both point out the intrinsic ambiguity of the poem. But, suffice it to say that since the poetic mood of the poem delivers a sort of feminine "pathetic note," James Liu's interpretation is more sound, at least for our purpose here. According to Liu, the first couplet suggests that she is a professional dancer and singer; the second couplet expresses her lovesickness. Liu paraphrases these couplets and the succeeding ones like this:

"I seek but cannot find traces of our former love, and I fear I am deserted." (The allusion to the goddess of Mount Wu [in line 3], who appeared to the King of Ch'u [Chu] in an amorous dream, arouses erotic associations, while the allusion to Chuo Wen-chun's [Zhuo Wenjun] song [in line 4] strikes a pathetic note.) Lines 5-6 might be paraphrased, "I have had no news of you, and the bamboos are stained with tears." The last two lines mean, "Although I have no way of getting to see you, I will not complain but will still try to send a message to you."²³

Through the allusions to such figures as dancing and singing girls, romantic and widowed goddesses, and deserted wives, Li Shangyin's poem describes a deserted woman's fear and despair.

In the allusive structure of this poem, the allusion to the Goddess of Mount Wu is evoked by means of revised marker in which the conventional form, "clouds and rain," is reshaped into "gorge clouds". Allusions in this kind of structure are presented through the poet's playing on the original source—lifting scattered words and phrases from the original material and synthesizing them in the new text. Presented so, Li Shangyin's allusion establishes a complex interplay of joining and disjoining forces for it builds up a link while enforcing a difference at the same time. One can sense in such poems a deliberate discontinuity and a subterranean continuity. That is, without recognizing the allusion, one can still feel the sorrowful mood—the dominant mood of the poem—conveyed by the allusion together with other allusions and images in the first two couplets; yet a competent reader cannot be blind to the image of "gorge clouds" and, while experiencing a simultaneous allusive activation, is naturally led by its possible connotation to a larger

semiotic context where the image's significance is fully revealed.

To a great extent, because the conventional form of the marker for the allusion is so much twisted, and the marker produces a sense on its own in the context and does not force a connection to the allusion, the allusive link is very inconspicuous. The allusion marker to the Goddess of Mount Wu, thus subtly presented in different variants by Li Shangyin, refers to love in some poems and in others it functions symbolically. Read his "Revisiting the Holy Lady Temple" 重過聖女祠:

The white stone on the cliff is overgrown
with green moss:
Banished from the Upper Pure Sphere, she is
delayed in her return.
Throughout the spring, a dream-rain often
flooded the tiles;
All day long, the spiritual wind has not filled
the banners.
Green-calyxed Bloom comes from no fixed
place;
Magnolia Fragrance has not been gone for
long.
The Jade Lad, encountering this, becomes
related to the immortals,
And recalls asking for the purple magic herb
from the steps of heaven.

白石岩扉碧蘚滋，
上清淪謫得歸遲。
一春夢雨常飄瓦，
盡日靈風不滿旗。
萼祿華來無定所，
杜蘭香去未移時。
玉郎會此通仙籍，
憶向天階問紫芝。²⁴

Title / the Holy Lady's Temple (Shengnu Ci) was situated on the Qingang Mountain in Wudu district (modern Baoji in Shanxi province). It is said that on the side of a cliff of the Qingang Mountain there was the image of a goddess with miracial power and local people often went to pray to her. (Cf., *Shui jing zhu*, 20.6a.)

²³ James Liu, p.117. The square brackets in the quotation are added by me.

²⁴ Feng Hao, *juan* 2, 369. Trans. James Liu, p.95.

Line 2/ Upper Pure Sphere (Shang Qing), one of the three “Pure Spheres” of heaven in Daoist legends.

Line 5/ Green-calyxed Bloom (Eluhua) is a goddess, who was said to be a beautiful young girl and appeared to Yang Quan, a young man, teaching him how to become immortal. (Cf., Zhu Heling, *Li Yishan shiji, juan shang*, 2a.)

Line 6/ Magnolia Fragrance (Dulanxiang) is also a goddess who was said to have lived with Zhang Shuo as his wife and then vanished. (Cf., Zhu Heling, *juan shang*, 2a-b.)

Line 7/ Jade Lad (Yulang) is a junior official in the Daoist hierarchy of immortals.

Vividly described with concrete imagery and appropriate allusion, this poem is able to move the reader. The first couplet is dominated by a tone of perplexity and lamentation. The second couplet, to which I shall return soon, is among the most famous lines of Li Shangyin’s poems. The third couplet, neatly crafted, delivers a melancholy note: I have nothing in terms of space and time. In the last two lines, as he does in quite a few poems, Li Shangyin expresses a kind of hopeless hope by means of dream or fantasy of the supernatural world.

Commentators and scholars hold different opinions on the meaning of this poem, which can be divided into two views. One suggests that the poem refers to a Daoist nun by talking about the Holy Lady; the other thinks that it expresses the poet’s own political disappointment through the description of the temple.²⁵ Given the illusory tone of the poem, especially in the second couplet, I suggest that we read the poem as a love poem which, however, conveys a passion more indefinite than just referring to a specific love affair.

The couplet that contains the allusion to the Goddess of Mount Wu is the most vague and difficult one to understand. In this couplet, Li Shangyin’s symbolism is deepened. With the concrete and appropriate images of rain, tiles, wind, and banner, the couplet realistically describes the speaker’s sorrowful recalling of the past in front of the temple, or his conflicting attitude towards a love affair. But given such elaborate, correlative images as “dream-rain” and “spiritual wind,” the couplet, and so does the whole poem, suggests a more general meaning. These images, as Wang Qiugui points out, “besides serving the immediate purpose of describing the natural phenomenon, stand for something abstract,

²⁵ For more information on the different views, see Liu Xuekai, and Yu Shucheng, vol.3, pp.1480-1491.

something impalpable, something larger than themselves. They convey respectively longing and unfulfilled passion.”²⁶ Almost unrecognizable, the allusion, “dream-rain,” goes beyond the original and symbolically refers to a kind of despair which is just like the faded dream of the King of Chu. In addition, these images, including the recognized allusive story of the amorous encounter of the King of Chu with the Goddess of Mount Wu in a dream, convey a “tension between moral disapproval and physical desire” in the couplet as well as in the whole poem.²⁷

V. CONCLUSION

The foregoing examination of some of Li Shangyin’s use of the “clouds and rain” allusion has illustrated how an allusion, especially an assimilative allusion, works in the dynamics of allusion in a Li Shangyin poem. Trying to read these poems more from an intertextual or semiotic perspective, we have encountered a Li Shangyin who, when alluding, pays more attention to the allusive tone or atmosphere than to specific acts or scenes of an allusion. Because the allusion marker, either the “gorge-clouds” or the “dream-rain” in the two poems respectively discussed earlier, is highly twisted and can communicate a sensory experience, Li Shangyin’s allusion to the Goddess of Mount Wu often obtains a sense of the immediate present, as a concrete image usually does. Nevertheless, to a competent Li Shangyin reader who, before approaching Li’s poem, is already “a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or...lost,” to borrow Roland Barthes’ words,²⁸ the image, the line, and by extension his poem as a whole make an implicit call for a comparative recourse to the myth of the Goddess of Mount Wu.

A reading like this allows thickening a mood for and in the poem. It is precisely this kind of thickened mood that deepens Li Shangyin’s poetic world. In many ways, we may say that Li Shangyin does not incorporate an allusion. Rather, he incorporates a mood by drawing on the atmospheric quality of an allusion. It is in this light that we see the ways Li Shangyin’s allusions generate meaning and the extent to which he manipulates and twists the semiotics of allusions.

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²⁶ Wang Qiugui, *Objective Correlative in the Love Poems of Li Shang-yin* (Taipei: Jiaxin shuini gongsi, 1970) p.64.

²⁷ See James Liu, p.213.

²⁸ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*. Trans. Richard Miller (New York: The Noonday Press, 1974) p. 10.

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