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Poetry and Its Historical Ground

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Between the plausible and the true there is a gulf that can never be crossed.

It is taken for granted that in traditional China great importance was attached to the relation between literary writing and contemporary history; however, the nature of that putative relation is largely unexamined. We know that various aspects of this concern, in its traditional Chinese formulations, helped to shape both the ways in which texts were produced and the ways in which they were read. However, "history," as a ground for reading poetry, may have a wide range of meaning, from the totality of circumstance behind a poem to more narrow notions of political and social history. In traditional Chinese criticism "historical ground" generally meant not the unconscious determinations of a text's historical moment (the usual presumption in most Western historicist criticism), but rather concealed intentional reference to contemporary politics or to a current social problem.[1] Intentional reference is not excluded from the idea of historical ground (nothing is excluded from historical ground), but the historicist critic must be concerned with the historical determinations of intention (both its form and content) rather than merely "uncovering" it.[2] Therefore before we consider this limited interpretation of "historical ground" as putative political reference, it is proper to consider the larger notion of the determinative force of a historical totality.

Considered from a purely theoretical viewpoint, the claim that a text is historically grounded is unassailable—if only because the claim is self-validating, setting the very conditions by which the case must be judged.[3] It is our local version of the archaic and insoluble argument about free will and determinism. However, it cannot be stressed too strongly that this a *theoretical* claim, and that anything less than the absolute historical totality cannot make such an unassailable claim.

The way in which any particular text can be *shown* to be grounded in particular historical circumstance is another matter altogether. To put it bluntly, we never see

[1]Although there is a form of Western criticism that looks for veiled political reference, the most basic assumption of historicist criticism is that the text inscribes its historical moment regardless of the intentions of the author. Thus Georg Lukács observes that Balzac wanted to articulate one set of values in his novels, but the real forces of social history inscribed another story altogether, one often at odds with the story Balzac was trying to write. To speak of such "intentional reference" in the Chinese context should also include an emotional dimension, that the poet was responding immediately and personally to a social situation.

[2]To give an example of an interpretation of the "form" of intentional reference, one might say that the claim of political reference as the product of an immediate and emotional response was the means to validate it morally (bad figures in political contexts are presumed to act out of purely selfish motives, with calculation, and without genuine feeling).

[3]In traditional China (and more commonly in Western literature) there is a large body of texts that do attempt to separate themselves from historical ground (texts that implicitly claim the aesthetic "autonomy" of a work of art); however, from the viewpoint of the historicist, such an intention is itself a relation to the historical ground (the negation of historical relation is an act within history, performed for historical motives). This is Adorno's "Art is the social antithesis of society."

the grounding of a literary text in its history; we see only the formal imitation of such grounding, the framing of the literary text within another text that pretends to be its historical ground, an "account" of history.[4] The relation between literary texts and the accounts of history constructed for them deserves some thoughtful reconsideration.

We construct our historical accounts out of other historical accounts; and in the case of interpretation, we construct such accounts to answer the demands of the particular literary text; then we interpret the literary text in the light of the historical account that we have made to serve as its context. I hope the reader did not miss the circularity in that formulation. In contrast, the poem's only truly valid historical grounding can only be the totality, most of whose components are necessarily ignored in accounts of history, which have their own generic lineages of interests.

However, because our accounts of history would like to claim to *be* the historical grounding, the sole determining ground for understanding texts and other particular phenomena, they do not welcome reflection on their own history, on the kinds of questions such accounts address and, more important, the kinds of questions such accounts ignore. When we examine such accounts of history, the way they are formed, and their relation to the literary texts they pretend to ground, we will find no comfort. The reciprocal relation between literary texts and accounts of historical context was created precisely to stabilize the meaning of literary texts. We will see that literary texts are themselves often formed in such a way as to ask for and direct the construction of such contextual accounts. But once we acknowledge how fragile and problematic our habitual procedures are in this, both our literary texts and our confidence in the historical ground will be to some degree set adrift.

Let us consider a famous example. Ever since the *T'iao-hsi yü-yin ts'ung-hua* 苕溪漁隱叢話, a swirl of controversy has surrounded the authenticity of Tu Fu's *Chiang-nan feng Li Kuei-nien* 江南逢李龜年. Without entering into the details of the controversy, the primary argument against the authenticity of the poem is that Li Fan 李範, presumably the Prince of Ch'i mentioned in the first line of the quatrain, died in the fourteenth year of the K'ai-yüan reign and that Tu Fu would have had to have been only fourteen *sui* when he saw Li Kuei-nien "so often" there. There are many obvious and conventional reasons why such an argument against the authenticity of the text is questionable: for example, there is an anachronistic assumption that forgets that adolescents and young children were commonly included in gatherings of adults during the T'ang (Wang Wei having been at Li Fan's salon at the age of nine or eleven); some scholars have reminded us that Li Fan was succeeded by another Prince of Ch'i who, while he may not have held the grand salon that Li Fan did, surely invited guests. These are the common ways to participate in historical adjudications of authenticity or inauthenticity.[5]

However, the issue that runs deeper than these formal procedures of authentication concerns the essential difference between accounts of history and the factors that would contribute to the true historical grounding of a text. We observe (in both those who argue against this poem's authenticity and those who defend it) an unquestioning

[4]By "formal imitation" I mean that the account is presented to us as if it were the internally complete whole of which the text is a part: it pretends to adequately "account for" the text. That is, however, only a generic presumption of the "account"; modest reflection reveals that it is not a historical whole and cannot be.

[5]The argument on this poem is still being waged, with nothing decisive on either side. Perhaps the finest demolition of the arguments against the authenticity of the poem has been given by Kuo Tseng-hsin 郭曾炘 in the *Tu Tu cha-chi* 讀杜劄記 (Shanghai: Shanghai ku-chi, 1984), pp. 449–450. On the other side, persuasive arguments are still made against the authenticity of the poem; e.g. Wu Ch'i-ming 吳企明 in his *T'ang-yin chih-i lu* 唐音質疑錄 (Shanghai, 1985) makes an equally spirited attack against the poem's authenticity.

willingness to throw the poem out of Tu Fu's collected works rather than question the veracity of Tu Fu's statement. Poets, especially famous ones, are always treated as reliable witnesses, possessed of perfect memories and generally credited with viewpoints that are politically and morally sound. Accounts of history and arguments for historical authentication are games played by strict generic rules, and like all games they involve the suppression of many factors that work in the world outside the frame of the gameboard. It simply does not occur to an interpreter that an aging Tu Fu, meeting an even more aged Li Kuei-nien, might have misremembered, might have allowed his poetic vision of the K'ai-yüan and his own place in it to overwhelm a more sober memory of "what really happened." It does not occur to an interpreter how much Tu Fu, meeting the famous Li Kuei-nien, would have *wanted* to say "I used to see you all the time at the Prince of Ch'i's," and to believe or half believe that it was true. Human beings really do this; they make myths of their childhood and youth (anyone who has read Tu Fu's later poetry knows the fine line between memory and fantasy); and that human fact is part of the historical ground that "might have been" the true context of a literary text.

There is no question that poems such as this one make the tacit claim of being historically true. But there is a world of difference between a poem's *generic* claim to be historically true and actually being historically true. This possibility that Tu Fu was telling a white lie, or having a memory particularly convenient for the situation, is merely one example of the many categories of "how it really was" that lie outside the game of the historical account. Too often when we read texts we forget the practical circumstances and human frailties that might have surrounded the composition. We forget that a text was often revised over the course of many years, altered for motives of art or of changing memory.[6] How much historical truth has been sacrificed for a rhyme or a lovely parallel construction? We forget the immense discrepancies between the orderly society that often appears in texts and the rough world that was the T'ang. We forget the thousands of little things around the poet that might have made him say what he did, things that have been irrevocably lost. These things may not be knowable, but in their totality they constitute "historical grounding" in the only sense that can claim historical determination.

At this point the historical interpreter will object, saying that we have to work with the material we have rather than with what cannot be known or can be only surmised. While this may be a pragmatic limitation, the objection should remind us of the immense difference between historical grounding and accounts of history. True historical grounding is unquestionably valid in its own terms and it can only be purely theoretical: it is always a totality.[7] If essential elements of that totality cannot be known from the

[6]Did Tu Fu really have clear premonitions of the An Lu-shan Rebellion in "Going from the Capital to Fenghsien: Writing My Feelings," or did a process of revision over many years gradually move the text toward what seemed so obvious in hindsight? There is much in our traditional interpretation of Tu Fu's poetry and its development that would be shaken if we imagine the old man in Ch'eng-tu or K'uei-chou recopying the poems of his younger days, adding and substracting lines, changing words. Or, to pose the question more radically, is that complex poetic development that forms such a compelling frame for reading Tu Fu's poetry something Tu Fu himself created in K'uei-chou? Perhaps not, but the way in which such a simple and not unreasonable hypothesis shakes the foundations of Tu Fu scholarship should remind us on what fragile assumptions that edifice is built.

[7]Here we might consider one of the most common and most interesting arguments against the determinative force of the historical ground, which is the self-evident synchronicity of works of art (and in a somewhat different way true of the Classics and of historical writing itself, since in traditional China canonical accounts of history were not superseded as history, as they are now). For Su Shih, T'ao Ch'ien was not past and superseded. When Su read T'ao's poems, T'ao Ch'ien was as much "present" as one of Su's contemporaries

extant written accounts, it does not change the fact that they were *essential* elements. If we cannot know, we make a guess: to construct a plausible historical account from the other accounts that do survive is a worthy undertaking, but it is wrong in basic ways to claim "that is how it really was"—not that the account itself is untrue, but that it pretends to be a whole, an adequate prior context.

We don't know how it really was; we will never know how it really was. All we have are stories of how it really was. Every story we tell is told for a motive and to solve a problem. This is fine; it is all we can do with the past. But it is essential that we understand that we are simply telling stories and that we be aware of how our motives and the problems we are trying to solve can shape the construction of such stories. Furthermore, we must be aware that we tell our own stories out of the stories of others. I tell a story about Tu Fu telling a story in his old age about having met Li Kuei-nien in his youth. Maybe Tu Fu really wrote that story; maybe not. If he wrote the story, maybe he really did see Li Kuei-nien often in his youth; maybe he didn't. In the "historical" aspect of my work all I can do is to try to tell the best stories I can without contradicting the stories of my predecessors, which may or may not have some tenuous connection to "how it really was." As a historian I only know that if I contradict their stories and invent my own, I have surrendered even that tenuous hope.

I am not at all certain exactly what "history" is; the meaning of "literature" likewise eludes me. But despite the haziness of the two terms around which we formulate the question, our present concern is what we mean by history as a ground for understanding literature. When we use "history" in this context we have left the theoretical and entered the realm of the practical: we do not mean "how it really was," but rather some account of "how it really was—perhaps." However, that honorable admission of "perhaps" is rarely heard, precisely because it subverts the security that is sought in historical interpretation.

There is one other possible ground of the historical determination of texts that is narrower than the historical totality, yet still retains a degree of theoretical validity: this is authorial intention, or more broadly, what was in the author's mind in the composition of the poem. This version of historical grounding will prove no less elusive than the historical totality of circumstance.

I do not intend here to revisit the familiar arguments regarding the "intentional fallacy" (however true and important such arguments are).[8] Like the totalized historical

when Su read one of their poems. When Su Shih imitated T'ao's poems, the standard historicist claim is that Su's interpretation of T'ao Ch'ien was mediated by a Northern Sung *episteme*; or in the traditional Chinese "historical" (but not historicist) view, that the reading of T'ao was mediated by Su's present concerns and circumstances. This formulation of historical mediation is essentially Hegelian, uncritically privileging the present historical ground as the given term (*Lebensverhältnisse*, the living relations that unconsciously shape understanding) and the object as a neutral thing that is acted on by the forms of mediation. The obvious counterclaim is the most simple inversion of the structure: at such a moment Su Shih's grasp of the Northern Sung *episteme* or his present historical circumstances were mediated by T'ao Ch'ien, who was both textually present while standing outside of the contemporary historical grounding. Both the historicist and the "historical" forms of interpretation claim a determinative force for the contemporary ground, but the hierarchy implicit there is only a hypothesis too easily taken for granted. It is the peculiar nature of literature to be able to offer a counterclaim for the determinative force of freely chosen asynchronous relations.

[8]Even if we ignore the critique of poetic intentionality, we must understand the complexity of intentionality. There is no such thing as "intended meaning" in itself; "intended meaning" is an intention of how something will be understood, which in a complex speech act like a poem creates more problems than it solves. Let me give crude examples. If I stand before a group and make obviously private jokes in my discourse, knowing that only one person among my auditors will understand those jokes, I do indeed intend that the one person will understand, but no less a part of my intention is that others know they are excluded and that something

context, the theoretical construct of poet's intention (if broadly enough defined) is an unassailable grounding for the poem—again because it reconstitutes the idea of validation in setting the criteria for validation. And again finding the intention of a particular text is as impossible as finding the totalized historical context.

If we cannot find either the total historical context or the more limited total intention of the author and instead give only an account of either or both, we must ask what forces determine the formation of such accounts. In addition to the general exclusionary rules of the game (that we do not consider what we cannot know, however crucial it might have been), one obvious force shaping the account is the demands of the literary text that seeks interpretation—or simply that the answer is a function of the question.

The circularity here is not as meaninglessly general as it might first appear. What evolved as "poetic" in the classical Chinese language was a progressive elimination of function words, an elimination of words that provided adequate determination of relations, and a shift towards indeterminate syntactic relations. To put it another way, poems begged precisely the determinations of context and circumstantial relation that historical grounding provided. Thus we have an interesting case: on the one hand there is a generic presumption in most *shih* that the poem grows out of and comments on a complete living historical ground, a presumption often strengthened by the increasing precision of occasional titles and prefaces. On the other hand, what sounded "poetic" was the withholding of precisely those elements in the language which could provide relatively adequate determination of such a historical ground.[9] From this it follows that one important aspect of classical poetry was a rule-governed system of generating historical accounts (or purely presumptive frames in reading) that would fill in what was missing in the words of the poem (recalling that when I say "historical" I mean moving towards a totalized historical ground rather that simply political reference). In the act of reading we are already moving toward such an account, silently making determinations regarding the relations of words, determinations that are absent in the surface of the text. This operates on all levels of a poem, from the most basic filling in of pronominal referents to putative reference to historical events to larger things such as the "world" of the poem or the poet's affections. It goes without saying that the complete ground can never be filled in; it is against the interests of the poem that this ever occur. The energy of the poem may lie in that very process, and for the process to have force it must continue to withhold basic information. One could map a range of poetic styles on how extremely and in what ways poems play this game.

The case of Li Shang-yin 李商隱 (ca.813–858) is instructive, for he is a master of this particular poetic game. Let me quote Li Shang-yin's *Tu Ssu-hsün* 杜司勳, "Tu [Mu], Adjudicator of Merits":

is intended that someone else can understand. Or a poet might write a poem in the midst of a political crisis, knowing full well that many of his contemporaries could and would wish to draw parallels between figures in the poem and political events; however, let us say he does not want his readers do so, which is why he adds disparate elements to block such interpretation—knowing all the time that his readers will ignore these and read the poem as a political statement. If the writer anticipates how a poem will be read in the writing, is that or is that not a part of his "intention?" The question is one of intended meaning. And if we are good historicists, rather than simplistic ones, we must recognize that intended meaning encompasses motives, circumstances, and a wide range of complicated qualifications. The fact that such motives regress infinitely and tend to complicate and draw contradictions into the understanding of discourse (Li Shang-yin both did and did not mean that his references be identified) does not mean that we should ignore them. If we are to be good historicists, truth should be more important than our discomfort.

[9]By "poetic" here I do not mean the poetic language as a whole, but a register that is usually articulated against more discursive elements in a poem. The obvious case is the diction of parallel couplets in regulated verse, though there is a "poetic" register within old style verse and *tz'u*. The "poetic" component was often what was memorized and quoted.

高樓風雨感斯文
短翼差池不及羣
刻意傷春復傷別
人間惟有杜司勳

Here is the account of the modern scholar Chou Chen-fu:

> Being in the upper storey of a building in a rainstorm caused Tu Mu to be stirred, which is to say that being in the storms and buffetings of the T'ang Dynasty Tu Mu offered up plans to help the nation and the age. He considered that the T'ang Dynasty had both internal problems and troubles on the frontiers: the internal problems were the seizure of regional control by the military satraps and the frequency of internal uprisings; the troubles on the frontiers were the Turfan invasion and occupation of Ho-hsi and Lung-yu, menacing the capital. He thought of ways to resolve these two great questions and to revitalize the T'ang Dynasty. But in his service in office he resembled a bird with short wings that could not fly quickly, and he could not match the quickness with which others of his generation advanced in office, so he had no way to put to use his capacities. Whether serving as an official in the capital or on the local level, if he didn't have the authority to participate in the discussion of major government policy, then it wouldn't work. So he simply gave his attention to the pain of spring and the pain of parting. But if he were able to put his capacities to use and were able to exert himself to the restoration of the T'ang Dynasty, then he would have had no interest in the pain of spring or the pain of parting. Therefore to pay attention to the pain of spring and the pain of parting is precisely Tu Mu's misfortune. . . .
>
> Here he [Li Shang-yin] expresses his admiration and respect for Tu Mu, and he makes use of Tu Mu as someone in whom he can invest his own disappointment. In the course of an official career he was even less successful than Tu Mu, and even more than Tu had cause to sigh about "storms in the upper storey" and "uneven short wings." His capacities to transform the world were even more difficult to realize, and he might as well "polish ideas on the pain of spring and the pain of parting."[10]

Yeh Ch'ung-ch'i disagrees:

> In taking three words from the poem as the title here, we see that this is not an ordinary presentation poem. In the first line he is moved to sighs over the peril of the T'ang Dynasty; in the next line he expresses resentment that he cannot become eminent. After that he uses the third line as a general response to the first couplet, and sighs that only Tu Mu, Adjudicator of Merit, has really deep feelings about this. The meaning beyond words is truly in this interpretation: the ocean of people is vast, yet only Tu Adjudicator of Merit, has this feeling as deeply as I. In this he completely uses Tu Mu in order to express his own feelings. "Guest" and "host" are fused together, and the spirit is conveyed on the margins of emptiness, which is very fine and far reaching and to be savoured. Some earlier critics have taken this to be praise of Tu Mu; others have taken it as lamenting Tu Mu; some even consider it to have been presented to Tu Mu; others take the first half as his self-lament; but none have penetrated the subtle points of this poem. Only Chu Yi-tsun's comment "his intention is a comparison to himself" pretty much gets the import.[11]

According to Takahashi Kazumi 高橋和巳, in the second line Li Shang-yin says that he is like Tu Mu, who was referred to in the first line; he (Li) would like to fly with

[10]Chou Chen-fu 周振甫. *Li Shang-yin hsüan chi* 李商隱選集. (Shanghai, 1986), pp.172–173.
[11]Yeh Ts'ung-ch'i 葉葱奇. *Li Shang-yin shih-chi shu-chu* 李商隱詩集疏注. (Peking, 1985), p.93.

him (Tu), but is too weak and cannot. Thus in the last line Li bows to Tu Mu's talent in poetry as superior to Li's own.

It is such a simple little poem and yet there is remarkably little agreement regarding its most basic referents. Is the poem entirely about Tu Mu (with or without an implied comparison to Li himself), or does it shift to Tu Mu in the second or third line, or from Tu Mu to Li himself in the second line? Is it a real storm, or a figurative storm? Does the phrase *ssu-wen* here refer to grand cultural writings or simply to any literary writings?[12] Are the bird's short wings and separation from its fellows simply a statement of the poet's isolation or that he has failed to rise in office like others? Or as Takahashi suggests, is it that Li himself is unable to compete with Tu Mu's excellence? Are the topics to which he devotes his poetic skill figures for his public disappointments (Feng Hao), or are they what he turns to in face of public disappointment (Chou Chen-fu), or are they simply a poetic excellence in Tu Mu that Li sees as his competitor (also Feng Hao)? The poems cited by Chu Ho-ling to give examples of "pain at spring" and "pain at parting" are not Tu Mu poems that lend themselves to grand political readings. How strongly are we to read the *jen-chien*? Are we to take it, as it often is, in opposition to "heaven," thus either true heaven or the court (conventionally referred to as heaven)? Or should we take it as "among those alive"? Does the "there is only" make Tu Mu preeminent, or does it mean he is my only competitor (Feng Hao)?

The text does not supply sufficient information to make a decision regarding these matters. Although the title of a poem can usually be taken as the implied subject, thus leading to an interpretation that would make the whole poem about Tu Mu, Yeh quite correctly points out that this is not an ordinary verse epistle, and that simply giving someone's name and office is unusual.

Although there is not enough information in the poem to make any of these decisions, the text does not say anything until we make at least some of these decisions, until someone tells a story around it. We cannot say simply that the text is indeterminate and ambiguous; without at least a few of these decisions, the text is not even language. The traditional commentators offered such decisions lightly, with a few phrases. Yeh and especially Chou Chen-fu are more elaborate, offering complete textual paraphrases. But we must observe that the text is constructed in such a way as to *require* an intentional construct of referents be discovered.

Tu Ssu-hsün represents in some ways an extreme example of the normative problems in the Chinese poetic language. Words are used in such a way as to require a context to ground the poem. However, while constructing an account of *some* ground of reference is easy, and while there are legitimate rules of exclusion that make some grounds impossible or improbable, there is often a wide range of potentially valid grounds, within which the adjudication of any one particular account over another often proves to be virtually impossible. Sometimes a conflict in accounts means we that we can

[12]*Ssu-wen* is not commonly used in T'ang poetry; however, a survey of cases shows that while it sometimes lends dignity to literary compositions, it rarely has the grandeur that it has in prose usage. The one case in poetry I have found where it does so is in a tetrasyllabic poem by Li Po. However, Wei Ying-wu, thanking a friend for the gift of an inkstone, says it "favors *ssu-wen*," and goes on to describe a situation which hardly sounds like the great Confucian cultural project. Tu Fu, the poet who uses the phrase most frequently (six times) at one point says it is his "disease." This is a common thing to say about excessive devotion to writing, but would be singularly inappropriate if *ssu-wen* were used in its grand sense. Most often it is simply "writings."

reject one historical interpretation.[13] However, the invalidation of one account does not thereby validate a competing account; an interpretive account could be validated only by the exclusion of all other possible accounts. We may read a poem one way and have it sound just right. Then, to our surprise, we read another commentator who has understood the poem in a very different way, a way that is no less plausible than the way in which we may have understood the poem for years.

Related to this larger and more fundamental problem of referential ground, there were a number of poetic subgenres which, by literary historical convention, might (but did not necessarily) contain concealed topical referents. One of the more common of such subgenres was the poem on some past event (to distinguish this usage from the other ways in which we have been using the term, let me call this a "historical" poem). In some cases we suppose that such "historical" poems used the past to refer to the present; we also suppose that many other such poems were quite simply about the past; and in most cases there was nothing in either the text or the title to distinguish these different "intentions."[14] Such poems are almost always undatable, so that the best we can say is that *if* they had been written at a certain time, the author *might well have* intended reference to such-and-such an event, and a contemporary audience *might well have* perceived such to have been his intention (whether such an opinion was erroneous or not). Comparison between the various Ch'ing and modern commentaries on Li Shang-yin's "historical" poems show remarkable variance, both in the decision as to whether reference to some present situation was intended or not, and if intended, to which particular situation. Since poems on the past often contained an element of censure, the easily censured two-year reign of Ching-tsung (r.825–826) was a favorite dating for Li Shang-yin's "historical" poems.

[13]For example, the interpretation of Li Po's *Shu tao nan* 蜀道難 as having been directed to Hsüan-tsung on his flight to the West cannot be reconciled with the poem's earlier appearance in the *Ho-yüeh ying-ling chi* 河嶽英靈集. But then suppose we playfully assume that this interpretation began because Li Po sent this poem he had already written to Hsüan-tsung on his flight West, claiming—as Li Po sometimes did—proleptic vision. We note that "authorial intention" is valid only prior to composition. Once the poem appears, the author loses any right to determine its meaning, except as a privileged interpreter of his own original intention.

[14]I will spare readers the intricate webs of allusions necessary to explicate such poems; however, interesting problems arise in the commentaries. We often cannot help being dubious at the fragility of the judgments made, even while admiring the erudition mustered to support them. As an example, we might take Li Shang-yin's *Fu-p'ing shao-hou* 富平少侯 (29303), which refers to a rather obscure figure in Han history: the Marquis of Fu-p'ing, Chang Fang. Of Chang Fang we know that he enjoyed exceptional imperial favor and that the future emperor Ch'eng-ti, in his minority, went on adventures in the city with Chang, claiming to be one of his retainers. Li Shang-yin's poem is supremely ambiguous. The commentators are determined to make it refer to the present. However, the way in which it can refer to the present depends on which aspect of Chang Fang's meager story one stresses. Yeh Ch'ung-ch'i, in his *Li Shang-yin shih-chi shu-chu* (1985) takes Li's poem as directed against some unknown T'ang nobleman: he is reading that aspect of Chang Fang's biography that speaks of the excessive imperial favor he enjoyed. Chou Chen-fu's *Li Shang-yin shih-hsüan* (1986) takes it as directed against Ching-tsung: Chou is stressing the anecdote that Han Ch'eng-ti used to go disguised in Chang Fang's entourage. This poem is exemplary of the problems in commentarial accounts in other ways as well: the anecdote of Ch'eng-ti's escapades in Chang Fang's entourage is preserved in the Sung *Tzu-chih t'ung-chien* rather than in the few sentences that constitute Chang Fang's biography in the *Han History*. This reminds us that commentators not only read accounts of past figures and events selectively, but also that T'ang writers had a far greater range of early historical sources than we now possess (one of which fortuitously was preserved in the *Tzu-chih t'ung-chien*). This should in turn remind us that when we are thinking of then "contemporary" referents in the ninth century, it is not at all clear that the range and configuration of events that appeared to T'ang writers were identical to our extant accounts.

I would like to propose that in writing such poems with possibly concealed topical referents a poet did not so much intend that any particular referent be discovered but that such a referent be sought or presumed simply to be present without necessarily being decided.[15] The poetic *act* of concealment was itself more significant than the identity of what was concealed; it signalled to the readers that this was a concerned person who was disturbed by something happening in the age and expressed his feelings and judgment in obscure figures; *i.e. it was understood more as a typological reference to the poet than as a particular reference to historical circumstance.* Indeed, even in modern commentaries the adjudication of a particular historical referent often remains simply the means by which the character of the poet is revealed.[16]

The significance of the act of concealment or withholding was presumed in "publishing" such poems in the T'ang. The poet may have known that an immediate circle of friends, seeing such a poem freshly written, might refer it to some immediate circumstance. However, in giving the poem out for wider circulation, the poet was well aware that layers of particular reference would be lost, both in a wider circle of contemporary readership and by posterity. One level of esoteric political or erotic reference (if such a level was intended, which we cannot know) might be understandable only to the poet and perhaps to an immediate circle of friends. But the poet could expect that a wider readership or future readership would not know the references. Such concealment is coded within the language of the poem and is significant in its own right.

Crucial here is a simple but subtle distinction. There is a great difference between knowing that a poem refers to X and knowing or suspecting that a poem refers to *some* X. That is, the poems were written in such a way that the poet knew that future readers might suspect that these poems referred to some particular circumstance but that such a circumstance would be irrecoverable or uncertain.

This is to say that insofar as the poet considered how his poem would be understood by the exoteric circles, he did not intend that they know, he intended that they suspect; he did not intend that they identify, he intended that they recognize the act of concealment and infer his motives in concealing. This is the significance of the title *Wu-t'i* 無題 in Li Shang-yin's poetry; it is not so much the absence of a title but a title withheld, and the act of withholding a title is a way of forcing the readers to ask what the circumstance might have been. Readers, of course, turned to those two aspects of life which would merit such a concealment of referent: political and sexual relations.[17]

[15]It should here be pointed out that comments on political reference in Li Shang-yin's hermetic poetry and interpretations determining such references are quite late and develop fully only in the Ch'ing. Such elaborately topical interpretations are clearly filiated to *Shih ching* criticism and do have earlier examples in the tradition of "secular" poetry—early comments on Su Shih being an excellent example. However, widespread and fullsome topical interpretation of major poets is a relatively late phenomenon.

[16]That is, we cannot now know what topical referents were intended or even if topical reference was intended. The poet's contemporaries, knowing the moment of the poem and a fuller set of circumstances could feel more secure in assuming topical reference—but such relative security was ultimately illusory. However, what we can discover is the pure form of topical reference as a possibility in certain kinds of poems. Rather than an actual particular determination of reference, we *can* discover a typology of judgment, putatively linked to some contemporary circumstance.

[17]Lest any reader too quickly persuaded by the authority of the great Ch'ing commentators to prefer the political reading to the erotic, one might take a look at the contextual frame given the early Northern Sung poet Sung Ch'i's 宋祁 *tz'u Che-ku t'ien* 鷓鴣天 in the *T'ang Sung chu-hsien chüeh-miao tz'u-hsüan* 唐宋諸賢絶妙詞選, *chüan* 3, which is surely one of the earliest "readings" of Li Shang-yin's *Wu-t'i* that we have, and it is an erotic reading.

(The fact that essentially the same image set can be used for love affairs, pleas for political preferment, and political satire should give any commentator a moment of profound unease.) Speaking from the point of view of history (as most modern commentaries do), the act of identification of circumstance is a proper task. However, in regard to poetic intentions, decisions made in carrying out this task will always be inadequate.

A second point should be made regarding the degree of determination of referent that was satisfying for T'ang readers (and hence, what a T'ang poet would have presumed in the readership of his poems), as opposed to the degree of determination of referent sought by Ch'ing and modern interpreters; i.e. were contemporary readers content to know that "some" reference was intended, or did they want to discover the details putatively hidden? We recognize that a large body of "traditional" interpretation consists precisely of such filling in of referential detail, the sort of thing done by Chou and Ye in the interpretation of the quatrain on Tu Mu. Less often do we consider that, even though it can be traced to the *Mao Shih* and does occur earlier in secular poetry, the widespread use of such interpretation comes primarily from the Ch'ing. Indeed, this may be another case when Ch'ing practice is taken as the unquestioned representative of the "traditional" and imposed as a model back on earlier periods.

It is true that in the T'ang we have *Pen-shih shih* 本事詩, anecdotes that provide the circumstance for poems and thus reveal to us their "secret" references. Whether such anecdotes are truth or gossip or simply a good story matters less than the fact that they reveal the existence of such an interest on the part of readers. However, earlier poems could be satisfying with the presumption of "some" reference, without the precise identification of such reference. In this century we have had elaborate interpretations of the putative historical references in the *Yung-huai* 詠懷 of Juan Chi 阮籍; but here is what Yen Yen-chih 顏延之 (or Shen Yüeh 沈約) wrote in the commentary to the first *Yung-huai* in the *Wen hsüan*:

> Juan Chi served a dynasty in turmoil, and was always afraid that he would be slandered and come to a disastrous end. For this reason in his poems there are always expressions of anxiety about his life. Although he intended attack and ridicule, his writing is very dark and obscure. Now, a hundred generations later, it is hard to penetrate. Consequently I have only roughly clarified the general meaning and given only the synopsis (*lüeh*) of his secret purport.[18]

In practice such acceptance of a degree of indeterminacy in the referent meant typological interpretation: normative statements which had been applied to particular historical circumstances then beyond recovery. Such admirable tact on the part of Juan's earliest commentators has given way, in this century, to elaborate attempts to identify the circumstance.[19]

[18]*Wen hsüan* 32.

[19]One of the most careful works addressing the question of topical political reference is Donald Holzman's *Poetry and Politics*. Here he raises important issues such as the poet's inability to ignore how contemporary readers would have understood allusions and stories used in poems.

Let us take up an interesting case. Holzman first discusses the *fu* on "Shou-yang Mountain" which is internally dated 254, and thus after the coup d'etat of 249. Here Holzman correctly argues that it would be very difficult for a contemporary reader not to have associated the treatment of Po Yi and Shu Ch'i with the situation of the Wei royal house. But the argument gets more problematic when he carries it next to the

Although they liked a good story on the particular background of a poem, T'ang readers seem to have been generally content with the normative interpretation of poems and the fact that the poem must have referred to "some" particular historical situation. If the particulars were supplied by a juicy story, they would not disdain it on austere grounds of historical authentication: yet the universal human inclination to allow gossip to be true differs from a scholarly search for stories behind every text, many of which suffer from a grim banality quite distinct from the T'ang love of a juicy story. Earlier readers did not feel the same need that their Ch'ing and modern successors have felt to close the gap, to give accounts of historical ground for all poems. By not seeking to determine the particular historical ground (though assuming in a general way that some poems may have referred to *some* historical ground) the typological and normative aspect of poetic response was strengthened. It was that normative aspect of poetry that allowed it to be flexible in reference to a variety of particular situations. It is interesting that Li Shang-yin, the supposed master of concealed reference that impels modern commentators to want to close the space between indeterminate norm and determinate reference, was also the poet who also made the most radical statement that I have ever seen in the tradition of the transferability of the poem: writing about his poems to a friend he says (29295):

夫君自有恨
聊用此中傳
If you have some bitterness of your own,
you may be able to transmit it using these (my poems).

To permit such a "reuse" of a poem for another person's personal circumstances required that such a poem *not* be entirely reducible to the poet's own particular circumstances. The poem's mode of meaning is given as essentially typological. The poem may arise from a set of particular circumstances; and whether those circumstances can be determined or not, they will constitute a privileged "application." But the poem itself is essentially typological rather than particular and can be "reused" in other circumstances. In the same way the poem on history comprehends both the earlier historical situation and (potentially) a contemporary analogue. What we come to at last is not a poetry that signifies by *making* reference to a particular historical circumstance, but a poetry that works by an essentially literary movement between text and putative

undatable *Yung-huai* IX, which begins with reference to Po Yi and Shu Ch'i. Holzman points out similarities with the *fu* "Shou-yang Mountain"; but that is inadequate to date the poem. It is one thing to say that readers of a certain moment in history would be unable to avoid drawing obvious analogies from a text written in that period. It is something else to suggest that a poem was composed at a certain point because the analogy would be appropriate. *Yung-huai* IX *can* be interpreted as referring to the usurpation of the Wei by the Ssu-ma's, but such an interpretation rests on no historical grounds whatsoever. It is merely a "good story." That is the theoretical truth. Now we may complicate it with a simple piece of literary historical evidence, which is the *Pu-ch'u Hsien-men hsing* attributed to Ts'ao Jui, a *yüeh-fu* that also begins with Po Yi and Shu Ch'i and goes on to autumn motifs just as Juan Chi's *Yung-huai* IX does. In his notes Holzman mentions it and observes that it "begins with an excursion to Mt. Shou-yang"; he does not add that it continues with discussion of Po Yi and Shu Ch'i. This *yüeh-fu* is a great inconvenience for the political interpretation of *Yung-huai* IX, for Ts'ao Jui died in 239, a decade before the coup d'etat. And indeed many of Juan Chi's *Yung-huai* are reworkings of *yüeh-fu* and *ku-shih* motifs. Without the Ts'ao Jui antecedent the argument for dating *Yung-huai* IX after the coup d'etat would be very "plausible" indeed; but how many merely plausible arguments do we accept as true simply because all complicating evidence is lost?

circumstance, a *process* of application that must remain active and open. The mediating category between text and its putative circumstance are typologies of both personality and circumstance; and such typologies, unlike the putative circumstance, are not concealed.