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1995

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Recommended Citation

Chan, P. L. (1995). Text, context and intertext: Li Bai's ascending the Phoenix Terrace in Jinling. Bulletin of Chinese studies department of Chinese. 2. 18-25. Retrieved from <http://commons.ln.edu.hk/chbc/18>

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Text, Context and Intertext — Li Bai's “Ascending the Phoenix Terrace in Jinling”^a

Ping-leung Chan

In his article “The Contemplation of the Past in [Tang] Poetry,” Professor Hans H. Frankel discusses the topoi of the poetry which contemplates the past. One of the examples in his discussion of this particular genre of poetry is Li Bai's “Ascending Phoenix Terrace [in Jinling],” which is rendered as follows:

On Phoenix Terrace phoenixes used to roam.
The phoenixes are gone, the terrace is empty, the river just flows.
The flowers and grasses of the palaces of Wu are buried among neglected paths,
The robes and caps of the Chin court have become old tombs.
Triple Mountain is half submerged beyond the blue sky,
Double River is split in the middle by White Egret Island.
As drifting clouds manage to cover the sun,
[Chang] -an is invisible, how sad! ^{(1)b}

This paper attempts to make a further close study of this poem, as Allan Rodway asserts that “Intrinsic Criticism should not merely be justifiable, it should also be adequately inward. Thus generic criticism turns out to be an instrument for fairly refined and precise intrinsic analysis.” ⁽²⁾

The above poem, according to one legend, was composed after Li Bai had declined to write a poem about the Yellow Crane Tower, since Cui Hao^c had already done so.⁽³⁾ Perhaps being influenced by this legend, Cui's poem was praised by the Song critic Yen Yu^d as the best of the seven-syllable regulated poems in the Tang.⁽⁴⁾ Owing to Yen's statement, Wang Shi-zhen and Wang Shi-mou^e of the Ming also made some disparaging remarks on Li's poem.⁽⁵⁾ This paper does not intend to verify the truth of this legend, which was already doubted in the Song dynasty,⁽⁶⁾ but to discuss the deeper meaning of the text through the study of its context and intertext.

Even if we do not believe the above legend, we cannot overlook the similarities in the technique and the general meaning of these two poems. Let me quote Cui's poem first.

Where long ago a yellow crane bore a sage to heaven,
Nothing is left now but the Yellow Crane Terrace.
The yellow crane never revisited earth,
And white clouds are flying without him for ever.

..... Every tree in Han-yang becomes clear in the water,
And Parrot Island is a nest of sweet grasses;
But I look toward home, and twilight grows dark
With a mist on the river waves, [I am saddened].^{(7) f}

We can see in the first half (4 lines) of this poem, the poet repeats *yellow crane* three times, *gone* and *merely*^g two times each ⁽⁸⁾ in emphasizing the contrast between the transiency of human life/human affairs and the ever-flowing time (qianzai).^h Similarly, Li Bai also uses *phoenix* three times and *terrace*ⁱ two times⁽⁹⁾ to describe the same contrast. In the 5th and the 6th lines of the two poems, Li and Cui both depict some scenery. However, they attempt to convey different meanings. In using the *sweet grass*,⁽¹⁰⁾ ^j Cui expresses his desire to go home, as sweet grass is symbolic of home return in the Chinese literary tradition. This allusion is derived from the short piece of writing entitled “Beckon the Hermits” by Liu An.⁽¹¹⁾ It says, “Young Lord is travelling, not coming home! Luxuriant grows the spring grass!”^k On the other hand, Li says in his poem, “The flowers and grasses [grown on the ruins] of the palaces of Wu are buried among the neglected paths.” (1.3) By using the same grass symbol, Li seems to respond negatively to Cui’s beckoning to hermitage, as the paths were neglected.

Instead of accepting Cui’s defeatism or eremitism and retiring from the political arena to compete for an official position, Li still yearns to enter the officialdom, despite all the obstacles. This echoes Li’s aspiration expressed in “Difficult is the Journey”:

A time will come to ride the wind and cleave the waves,
I’ll set my cloud-white sail and cross the sea which raves.^{(12) l}

From this understanding we may draw a collorary. The Triple Mountain and Double River in lines 5 and 6 may have double meaning. Besides referring to the actual geographic entities, Triple Mountain may signify the legendary fairy residence in the Eastern Seas, namely the three islands of Penglai, Yingzhou and Fangzhang, which are called in classical Chinese literature as Three Sacred Mountains.^m Similarly, Double River alludes to the Jing and the Wei ⁿ River, the former is said to be clear and the latter, muddy, or *vice versa*. In fact, in Li’s poems the Triple Mountain often refers to the Sacred Mountains. For instance, in “Thinking of the Immortal”, Li asks the immortal to wait for him until he has finished helping the Emperor to become a sage king like Yao and Shun in ancient times. At the end, he writes, “Colossal Turtle, do not carry the Triple Mountain away yet; I wish to walk on the top of Penglai.”^{(13) o} Furthermore, it is known that Li Bai admired Xie Tiao of Qi Dynasty ^p very much. Therefore, Triple Mountain may also refer to the title of one of Xie’s poems, namely “Walking in the Evening up the Triple Mountain, and Looking Back Towards the Capital.”^q In fact Li wrote a poem entitled, “Send This to Yin Shu, When Looking Towards Jinling from Triple Mountain”.^{(14) r} This intertextual reference enables us to suggest that Li, by alluding to this title, expresses his desire to serve in the royal court, which is more explicitly stated in the last line of “Ascending the Phoenix Terrace in Jinling.” In Chinese literary tradition, the Jing and the Wei River symbolize the

incompatibility of the righteous and the mean people. In “Classic Ode no. 59” Li expresses his unconsolable feelings:

Sad tears are shed at the forked path,
Grievous thoughts brood on the [tarnished] pure silk.

.....
Birds flock on the blooming boughs, but
The unfortunate fish stays in the dried up pool.⁵

Thus, lines 5-6 may be paraphrased as this:

Despite the fact that Li Bai was an enthusiast of the Daoist religion, whose goal was to become an immortal, he thought that this religious ideal was, at least for the time being, unrealistic. (1.5) Taking this stand, he was not unaware of the incompatibility of the righteous and the corruptible. (1.6)

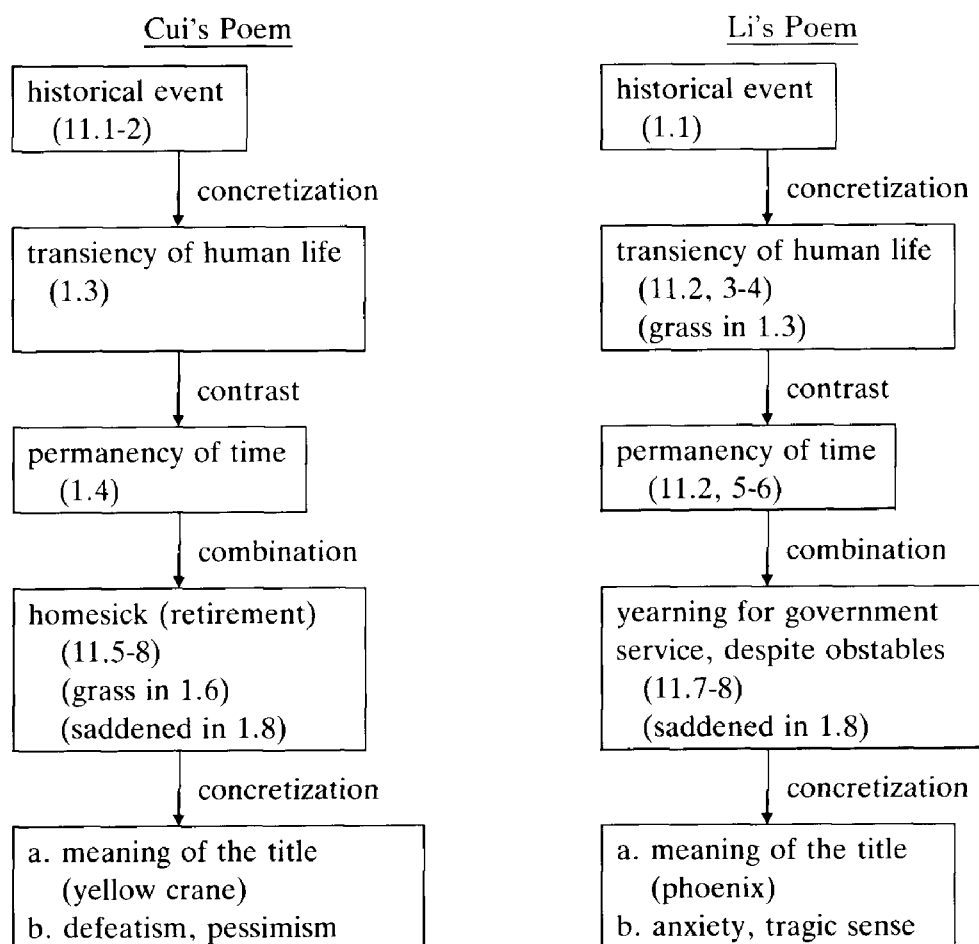
It seems that line 6 is another response to Cui’s poem, whose theme is to retire from the worldly entanglements for the pursuit of Daoistic goal of immortality as exemplified by the yellow-crane rider, whoever he might be (mentioned in line 1 of Cui’s poem). Moreover, the incompatibility is further reinforced by the last couplet, the meaning of which is rendered as follows:

Only because the corruptibles are blocking my access to the Emperor.
It saddens me that I cannot find my way to Changan, the capital [which is a metonymy of officialdom].

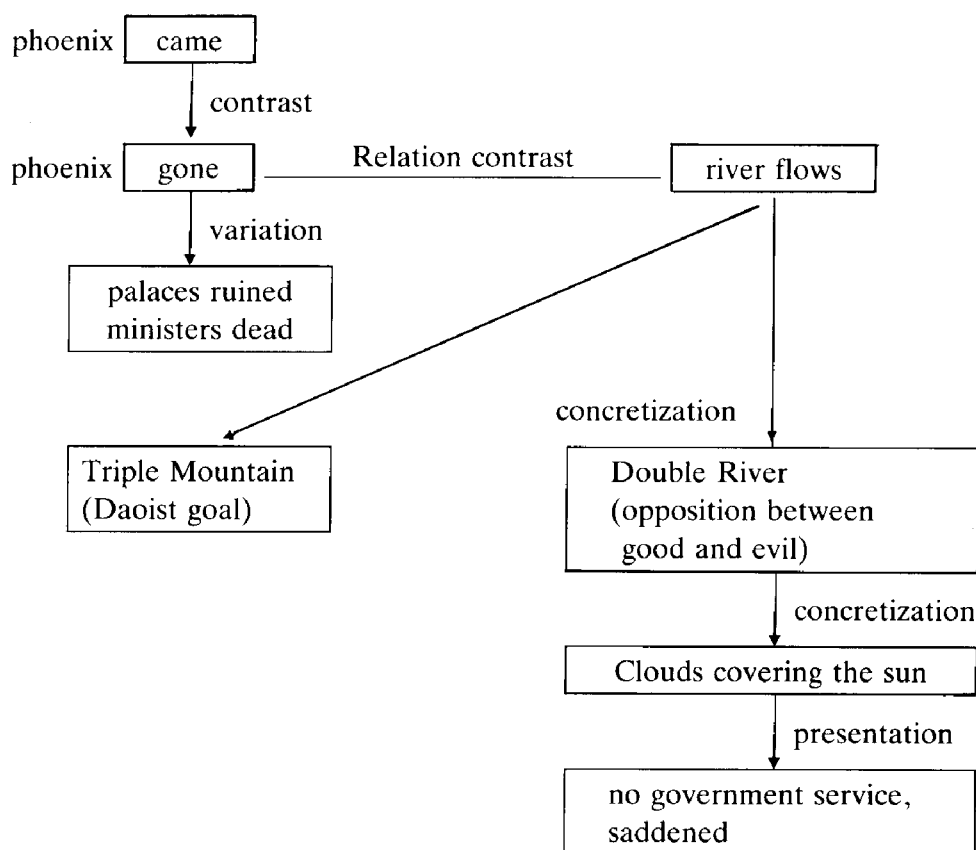
This is reminiscent of Qu Yuan’s “Lisao,”^t in which the poetic “I” laments that because of the jealousy of the corruptibles, the righteous are estranged by the king; and he vows to abide by his high principle. His persistence in fighting the losing battle gives a tragic sense to this poem.⁽¹⁵⁾ Li’s veiled protest against the corruptibles and his determination to serve the government during his short stay in this world correspond to the main theme of “Lisao”. Li makes himself more explicit in another poem “To Bid Farewell at Yao Shrine in Lu County to Magistrate Dou Bohua on His Return Trip to Western Capital.” He pronounces that “Why don’t we order Gaoyao to get hold of a broom to traverse the eight corners, going right up to the blue skies to clear the floating clouds away.”^u However, his idealism clashes with reality. His high hope of making some contributions to the royal court in his prime years^v was dashed, and he could not help but to moan that “looking at the way to Changan, he mainly harboured his affections to the Emperor.”^w It is the manifestation of this internal conflict that gives “Ascending the Phoenix Terrace in Jinling” a tragic vision of life. Resigning to the fact that it is difficult for him to achieve his political goal, he made a cathartic statement the “Even [Confucius] the great sage was not appointed to the court, small scholars [like us] should not be disappointed.”^x

It should also be noted that, the phoenix in the title symbolizes in Chinese folklore tradition a harbinger of peace.⁽¹⁶⁾ In the light of this, the meaning of the poem is made clear. Contemplating the meaning of the legend that a phoenix had alighted in the area where he was sightseeing, the poet was saddened by his being estranged by the Emperor who was surrounded by corruptible officials. Comparing Li’s poem with

Cui's, we can see the difference in their deep meaning as well as the similarity in literary technique. The analysis in the following illustration is done by means of the formalistic method in *Poetics of Expressiveness* by Yuri Shcheglov and Alexander Zholkovsky.⁽¹⁷⁾



To conclude, I would like to point out that the meaning of “Ascending the Phoenix Terrace in Jinling” can be understood through close reading of the text. Recognising the double meaning of Triple Mountain and Double River, I suggest a new interpretation of lines 5-6, which changes the sentiment of self-pity in Cui's poem to the reaffirmation of Li's life-long aspiration, that is, to serve the government. The historical context of the phoenix's visit in 437 or 439 A.D. of the very place where the Terrace was later built arouses in Li a hope, however slim, to be summoned to the court. (A diagrammatic analysis is given below.)



Professor Frankel comments on the meaning of this poem by saying that “The lament for things invisible, made explicit in the last line, informs the whole poem. It applies to the phoenixes, the vegetation of the Wu palaces, the Chin courtiers, half of Triple Mountain, the sun, and the present capital, [Chang]-an. They are invisible for diverse reasons, some having to do with time, others with distance, others with permanent or temporary obstructions. We are reminded again that distance in time is commensurate with distance in space.⁽¹⁸⁾ However, we should note from the above diagram the contrast between transiency and permanency and the course of action the persona in the poem chooses to take. Thus, the tone of the last couplet is “a combination of yearning, regret, and lament.”⁽¹⁹⁾

Not only would we know the significance of the phoenix, we also find out the meaning of spring grass, the crane, and the Triple Mountain in Chinese literary and Daoist traditions. In these contexts the hidden theme of these two poems can be detected. Even though we do not accept the allegation that Li Bai wrote “Ascending the Phoenix Terrace in Jinling” in imitation of Cui Hao’s “Yellow Crane Tower,” we may use the latter as well as Li’s other poems as intertexts, by means of which we may shed new light on the former. Indeed, we find that Li’s poem is a response as well as a tribute to Cui’s. However, the pathos in the latter is superseded by the tragic vision of the former. Their different attitudes towards adverse political situation epitomize the dichotomy of government service and eremitism in the life of scholar-bureaucrats in old China.

注釋

- [註 1] Hans H. Frankel, "The Contemplation of the Past in T'ang Poetry," in *Perspectives on the Tang* (ed. Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett), (New Haven: Yale University Press), pp. 345-365. "Double River" in l.1 is given as "A River" in the Song edition; see 平岡武夫編,《李白の作品(資料)》(京都:京都大學人文科學研究所,1958)。
- [註 2] See Allan Rodway, "Generic Criticism: The Approach through Type, Mode and Kind," in *Contemporary Criticism (Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 12)* (London: Edward Arnold, 1970), pp. 100-101。
- [註 3] See 傅璇琮,《唐才子傳校箋》(北京:中華書局,1987), pp. 202-203; 孫映達,《唐才子傳校注》(北京:中國社會科學出版社,1991), pp. 105-110。
- [註 4] See 郭紹虞,《滄浪詩話校釋》(北京:人民文學出版社,1962), pp. 181-182。
- [註 5] See 彭國棟,《唐詩三百首詩話薈編》(台北:中華文化出版事業委員會,1958), p. 282。
- [註 6] See note 3 above.
- [註 7] Witter Bynner, *The Jade Mountain* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929), pp. 142-143. According to some earlier editions, "yellow crane" in l.1 is given as "white cloud"; and Shi Zhe-cun (施蟄存) argues quite forcefully that we should accept the earlier text. See 《唐詩百話》(上海:上海古籍出版社,1987), pp. 184-195. However, since the Yellow Crane Tower was built on account of the folktales about a certain Daoist immortal, it seems proper for us to accept the popular version. Moreover, there seem to be incoherence between the first two lines of the earlier text, if we accept the "white cloud" alternative. The third reason for our choice is that the poem "The Parrot Island," the alleged imitation of Cui's poem, also repeatedly use "parrot" three times. I therefore would prefer the popular version to the earlier text, because the former has survived criticism through hundreds of years. See 劉曾遂,《略談崔顥〈黃鶴樓〉的體制特徵》in《唐詩論稿》(杭州:杭州大學出版社,1992), pp. 67-78; 李慶甲,《瀛奎律髓彙評》(上海:上海古籍出版社,1986), p. 25。
- [註 8] See 彭國棟, pp. 273-274; 傅庚生、傅光,《百家唐宋詩新話》(成都:四川文藝出版社,1989), p. 169; 孟慶文,《唐詩三百首精華賞析》(海口:南海出版公司,1991), p. 391。
- [註 9] See 彭國棟, pp. 273-274。
- [註 10] A variant of "sweet grass" in l.6 is "spring grass", which is better, because it directly alludes to the original source.
- [註 11] See 蕭統,《文選》(各版本),卷三十三。

- [註12] Translation quoted from Xu Yuan-zhong et al., *300 Tang Poems: A New Translation* (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1987), p. 109.
- [註13] See 葛景春,《李白思想藝術探驪》(鄭州:中州古籍出版社,1991), pp. 357-359。
- [註14] See 葛景春, pp. 128-129。
- [註15] See Ping-leung Chan, "The Tragic Theme in 'Li sao,'" *New Asia Academic Bulletin*, Vol. 1 (December, 1978), pp. 97-107; also in *China and the West: Comparative Literature Studies* (ed. William Tay, Ying-hsiung Chou and Heh-hsiang Yuan) (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1980).
- [註16] See 袁珂,《山海經校注》(上海:上海古籍出版社,1980), pp. 16 (南山經), 457 (海內經)。
- [註17] Yuri Shcheglov and Alexander Zholkovsky, *Poetics of Expressiveness: A Theory and Applications* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1987).
- [註18] Hans H. Frankel, p. 354.
- [註19] *Ibid.*, p. 365.

Glossary:

- a. 李白,《登金陵鳳凰臺》
- b. 鳳凰臺上鳳凰遊,鳳去臺空江自流。吳宮花草埋幽徑,晉代衣冠成古邱。三山半落青天外,二水中分白鷺洲。總爲浮雲能蔽日,長安不見使人愁!
- c. 崔顥
- d. 宋嚴羽
- e. 王世貞 王世懋
- f. 昔人已乘黃鶴去,此地空餘黃鶴樓。黃鶴一去不復返,白雲千載空悠悠。晴川歷歷漢陽樹,芳草萋萋鸚鵡洲。日暮鄉關何處是,煙波江上使人愁。
- g. 黃鶴 去 空
- h. 千載
- i. 鳳凰臺
- j. 芳草
- k. 劉安《招隱士》,“王孫遊兮不歸,春草兮萋萋。”
- l. 《行路難》,“乘風破浪會有時,直掛雲帆濟滄海。”
- m. 蓬萊 瀛洲 方丈 三神山
- n. 涇 渭
- o. 《懷仙歌》,“巨龍莫負三山去,我欲蓬萊頂上行。”
- p. 齊謝朓

- q. “晚登三山還望京邑”
- r. 《三山望金陵寄殷淑》
- s. 《古風五十九》，“惻惻泣路歧，哀哀悲素絲。……衆鳥集榮柯，窮魚守枯池。”
- t. 屈原《離騷》
- u. 《魯郡堯祠送寶明府薄華還西京》，“何不令皋繇擁篲橫八極，直上青天掃浮雲。”
- v. 《鄴中贈王大勸入高鳳石門山幽居》，“建功及春榮。”
- w. 《觀胡人吹笛》，“卻望長安道，空懷戀主情。”
- x. 《書懷贈南陵常贊府》，“大聖猶不遇，小儒安足悲。”