

# 3 Untitled Desire: Li Shangyin's Untitled Poems and the Discourse of Desire

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## ABSTRACT

Distinguished by his exquisite vision and elegant language, Li Shangyin 李商隐 (AD 813–858) has been one of the most celebrated Tang poets (AD 618–907) in the Chinese literary world. As beautifully crafted as they are, his poems can be difficult to explain, however. Among his most famous works come a group of fifteen untitled (*wuti* 无题) poems, which are written in ornamental rhetoric filled with opulent imageries, yet encrypted with obscure meanings. As the lack of titles suggests, the poet deliberately leaves the themes and his intentions for these poems unspoken. Their allure lies in part in this ambiguity. According to many scholars, the best way to approach them is to abandon the quest for precision and simply immerse oneself in their rich sensibility. If Li Shangyin's genius can only be contended with intuitively, discerning how his works touch the cord of our intuition deserves more than an aesthetic deduction. Indeed, how can one approach these poems, especially those who might be unfamiliar with Chinese language and culture like American college students? This paper proposes that Li Shangyin's untitled poems be read against the modern concept of "desire," which, hopefully, can provide an alternative discourse to decipher the mystery of this illustrious yet enigmatic poet.

## KEYWORDS

Li Shangyin, Tang poetry, Untitled (Wuti) Poems, Desire, Jacques Lacan

## INTRODUCTION

There is something enchanting and exquisite, yet elusive about the poetry of Li Shangyin 李商隐 (AD 813–858), whose works not only set him apart from other Tang 唐 (AD 618–907) poets but also make him a celebrated figure in Chinese literary tradition. However, his dexterously crafted and densely allusive poems are often difficult to explain (Yu 1990). Chinese literary theorist James Liu (1969) even notes that Li Shangyin "is one of the most ambiguous, if not the most ambiguous, of Chinese poets" (p. 25). Among his most renowned masterpieces is a group of untitled (*wuti* 无题) poems that are embodied with vivid images, but embedded with vague meanings. Despite their ambiguity, or perhaps because of it, these untitled poems, together with other verses that share similar obscure imagery and rhetorical structure, have kept

Chinese readers spellbound for ages. Through a marvelous use of language, the poetry of Li Shangyin offers his audience a unique aesthetic experience, provoking one's innermost feelings, yet leaving ample room for individual imagination.

The initial intentions behind these nameless poems, of course, can never be ascertained. Their allure lies in part in this uncertainty. According to many scholars, the best way to approach them is to abandon the quest for precise meaning and simply immerse oneself in their richness and beauty. One can supposedly appreciate these poems without understanding what they actually mean.<sup>1</sup> If Li Shangyin's genius can only be contended with intuitively, discerning how his works touch the cord of our intuition deserves more than an aesthetic deduction. This undoubtedly poses a challenge for those readers whose intuition might derive from different linguistic, historical, and cultural contexts. How can one explain these poems, for example, to college students in the United States? One cannot help but be tempted by the desire to unravel the magic behind these inexplicably charming poems, especially for non-Chinese readers.

The concept of "desire" indeed provides an exciting framework to reexamine Li Shangyin's popular untitled poems. From portraying illicit love affairs to referencing patronage to venting political discontent, these are among diverse interpretations that scholars, long striving to decode the original messages, have offered over time.<sup>2</sup> Without a clear subject matter, these poems are, on the surface, overwhelmingly concerned with "love," or at least using the idea of love to express other intense emotions.<sup>3</sup> Much attention has been paid to identifying the romantic interests of Li Shangyin, whether it be a Taoist nun or a court lady about whom these poems are allegedly written (Su 1927; Chen 1998). Discussions of his employment of brilliant imageries and allusions are also copious. Still, the examination of love itself in terms of desire has fewer rejoinders, which is the focus of this essay.

Surpassing his contemporary love poets, Li Shangyin has taken an extremely personal look at love and transformed the stale poetic trope into a lively evocation of desire. The "inexpressible" beauty of his poetry is to a degree related to his capturing of the subtlety of desire at work, giving this most basic yet repressed human emotion a poetic form that speaks intimately to readers throughout the centuries, even in modern times. It is not the historical context that makes these poems an enduring favorite, but their universal sensuality and sentiment. Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), the influential French psychoanalyst, famously states that a "man's desire is the desire of the other" (1998, p. 235), and that "it is only once it is formulated, named in the presence of the other, that desire appears in the full sense of the term" (1997, p. 143). Accordingly, the identity of Li Shangyin's love interest is far less important than his simply having the presence of someone, whoever they might be, to play the role of the "other," the "symbolic representation." This is how "desire" emerges, excites, and exercises its power. Nevertheless, the goal of this essay is neither to cement an absolute explanation nor to produce a grand theory on Li Shangyin's untitled poems. Rather, it wishes to offer readings of four of these poems inspired based on the Lacanian notion of desire, as the complex world of Li Shangyin's poetry seems to possess a transcendent quality that defies time and space. Before we venture into the romantic realm of Li Shangyin, a brief overview of Lacan and his impact on the Anglo-American literary world is pertinent to our discussion.

## LACAN AND LITERARY CRITICISM IN THE ANGLO-AMERICAN CONTEXT

Although Lacanian psychoanalysis is widely practiced throughout Europe, Lacan's works are primarily associated with literary theories rather than clinical psychology in the United States (Malone 2000). A quick glance at American university catalogues will easily find Lacan's name headlining courses, seminars, and lectures across the humanities. In particular, contemporary cultural studies, film theory, semiotics, and literary criticism "all share Lacanian concepts as a common intellectual currency" (Van Pelt 1997, p. 57). According to Lacan, literature and psychoanalysis have symmetrical functions, and he dedicated a considerable amount of time in his half-century career to a close, creative, and critical study of canonical Western literature, from Plato to Shakespeare, and from James Joyce to Edgar Allan Poe (Azari 2011, p. 58,

73). Drawing on Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), Lacan maintains that the subject is an effect of language, and therefore, there can be no subjectivity without language. The best known and most quoted maxim of Lacan—that “the unconscious is structured like a language”—became a founding principle on which many postmodern literary theories are built.<sup>4</sup> Since the late 1960s, notably after his three visits to the United States between 1966 and 1975,<sup>5</sup> Lacan’s writings have begun to make their way into the English-speaking world through major literary critics, such as Slavoj Žižek, Julia Kristeva, and Frederic Jameson. Starting from “Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject” (1977), Jameson, for example, has incorporated and interpreted Lacan’s ideas, along with those from the Frankfurt School and Marxism, in his construction of “the cultural logic of late capitalism,” which was deemed a seminal cultural theory in contemporary American academia, and had an equally profound impact on post-Mao Chinese intellectuals.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, “desire,” an iconic concept in the Western metaphysical tradition, has acquired new layers of meaning and new dimensions of force with Lacan (Azari 2011, p. 9). From a Lacanian perspective, desire is not merely implicated more in language than in the body, but is also inaugurated with the subject’s assumption of “lack,” which is inherent in signification (Coats 2004, p. 78–80). It is thus no surprise that desire has long captured the fancy of novelists, playwrights, and of course, poets. Since the 1980s, “desire” has gained significant popularity and flexibility in American poetry, as it is “employed by poets of vastly different stylistic temperaments and affiliations” (Kellogg 1995, p. 411).<sup>7</sup> Desire has become “the most commonplace of topics,” and the word itself has turned into a “commonplace signifier” (Bedient 1991, p. 212; Kellogg 1995, p. 411). From Shakespearean sonnets to postmodern poems, many scholars have applied Lacanian theory to offer richer and more diverse interpretations. Seldom has classical Chinese poetry been examined under this light, though, which this essay makes a modest, novel attempt to do.

## LI SHANGYIN AND HIS “UNTITLED” POEMS OF DESIRE

Li Shangyin was not the first Chinese poet to write about love or desire, yet he accomplished more than just being a romanticist and thus significantly redefined the genre. Poetry of love is no stranger in Chinese literature, notably beginning with the *Book of Songs* 诗经 (11th–7th century BC). Selected love poems are then anthologized in the *New Songs from a Jade Terrace* 玉台新咏 (c. 545), which brings forth the so-called “Palace Style Poetry” 宫体诗.<sup>8</sup> The convention of exploring the female body, voice, persona, and symbol, especially in the form of boudoir lament, was well established before Li Shangyin. Even though love is the subject of these earlier songs and verses, they are by and large “social genre in which the seemingly intimate moments of the bedroom are turned into *jeux d’esprit*,” a fantastic “manipulation of common expectation” and an exercise of the poet’s technical control of language (Rouzer 2001, p. 289). The imageries are stock, and the emotions are stale. Moreover, the social marginalization and psychological insecurity of the literati during the late Tang period added an extra dimension of politics to these romantic verses of longing and loneliness. Consequently, poetic love is more about word game or political allegory than genuine affection.

Exploiting the extant romantic discourse, Li Shangyin takes one step further and invests his poetry with a fervent passion that befits the name of “love.” The familiar elements of traditional love poems remain—such as flower and moon, gold and pearl, candle and wine, butterfly and mandarin duck—but the romance Li Shangyin sets out to tell is rather unfamiliar. His poetic world is enigmatic and erotic, blazing with an all-consuming passion that is rarely seen in other love poems. That some of these poems are “untitled”—his deliberate refusal to identify and clarify his intents—further intensifies their mystery. Together they create a distinctive representation of desire, with which a new perspective of appreciating this “ambiguous” late Tang poet can commence. One of the most famous entries in the untitled series is an excellent beginning:<sup>9</sup>

昨夜星辰昨夜风，	Last night's stars, last night's wind—
画楼西畔桂堂东。	West of the painted pavilion, east of the cassia hall.
身无彩凤双飞翼，	Our bodies have no paired wings of the colorful phoenix in flight;
心有灵犀一点通。	Our hearts possess the single link of the magic rhino horn.
隔座送钩春酒暖，	In separate seats, we pass the hook, the spring wine was warm;
分曹射覆蜡灯红。	Divided into teams, we guess at riddles, the waxen lanterns were red.
嗟余听鼓应官去，	Alas, I had to answer the call of duty upon hearing the watch drum;
走马兰台类转蓬。	Cantering my horse to the Orchid Terrace like uprooted weeds.

The assumption that this poem is about an unfulfilled love connection is reasonable. The poetic “I,” most likely Li Shangyin himself, bestows on the poems an extraordinary subjectivity and poignancy. Because of his official duty at the Imperial Library, also known as the “Orchid Terrace 兰台,” the protagonist is “uprooted” from the fantastic party the previous night and thus forced to leave the object of his affection.<sup>10</sup> The images of blockage, partition, and failure are obvious. The opening line has already set up this “coupling” as a bygone reminiscence, as the term “last night 昨夜” is repeated twice. This starry night of love was over before the poet even begins to write.

Beside this temporal distance is a geographical one. The location is mentioned in opposite directions: the “West” of the painted pavilion and the “East” of the cassia hall. The “lovers” are physically apart during their meeting at the banquet. They are in “separate seats 隔座” and “different teams 分曹,” and therefore, unable to be together. “Without the paired wings of the colorful phoenix 身无彩凤双飞翼,” their bodies cannot be united in flights of fancy. However, their “hearts possess the single link of the magic rhino horn 心有灵犀一点通.” According to Lacan, “desire” pushes for recognition, which is essentially a desire for recognition from the “other.” The physical barrier turns this unspeakable and unattainable “recognition” into an enthralling mind game for the poet and his “other.” Just when he is about to make his move, it is time for him to resume official duty. In the end, the protagonist compares himself to the “weeds” (*peng* 蓬) in the wind, a common metaphor for the despairing wanderer who is far away from home because of political exile. Reversing the poetic standard usage, the librarian unwillingly leaves his paramour at the party, where his heart belongs, and goes to work at court, where he feels like a castaway.

The situation is not entirely hopeless, however. The physical inability to fly side by side is compensated, at least in the protagonist’s wishful thinking, by a psychic bond. The single line of the “magic rhino horn” 灵犀 has strung the two hearts together. As the rhino horn has been seen as a symbol for aphrodisiac (Graham 1965, p. 148), viewing the poem with regards to eroticism may not be inappropriate. The party of wine and games can certainly be considered a prelude to sexual union. The “spring” wine is “warm,” and the waxen lanterns are “red.” While spring is a customary sign for romance, red is the color for marriage. The game of guessing the hidden hook or “shooting” at riddles is ostensibly as much a test of his mind as a tease of his heart. Unfortunately, a whole night of sensuous foreplay does not lead to what he expects. Instead of retreating to the bedroom with the person he desires, the protagonist is reminded of his official duty. As reality sets in, he feels like rootless weeds, helplessly lost, not least due to his sexual frustration. In a Lacanian sense, the protagonist’s defeat ensures the perpetuation of his desire, precisely because it is not only prohibited but also impossible to attain.

Sex, of course, is a taboo subject. The fact that writing about one’s feeling for someone met at a drinking party, a common pastime of the literati, is left without a title implies some sort of secret liaison that dares not to be named in public. From a poetic point of view, the identity of the librarian’s love interest, if there is one, is less important than how his forbidden desire is represented and recognized. In light of psychoanalysis, there is something in the nature of the sexual life that denies people full satisfaction (Freud 2010). The doomed pursuit of a union by the protagonist, hence, exemplifies this eternal discontentment and disappointment about desire. Likewise, the game of constant passing, concealing, and guessing is indicative of the mechanism of desire. The literary text is bonded to the idea of desire—the desire of the author

to tell a story, and the desire for the audience to read and keep reading. Desire “by definition is not a relation to a real object independent of the subject but a relation to fantasy” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1974, p. 483). Anticipating a final fulfillment of desire, in the form of sex after a long night of seduction, proves to be futile. Only through the obscure line of the magic rhino horn, a fantastic sexual symbol, can the protagonist be linked to his object of desire. Whether the librarian really must go to work at the Orchid Terrace is a minor detail in this unsuccessful quest for “love.” The dream of satisfying one’s desire is destined to be awoken by the harshness of life.

That desire is essentially mobile, always escaping capture, is evident in Li Shangyin’s other untitled poems. The following piece, highlighting the plight of a forlorn lady, is an example:

凤尾香罗薄几重，	The Phoenix Tail type of scented silk lies in thin folds;
碧文圆顶夜深缝。	Under the emerald-patterned round top, sewing late at night.
扇裁月魄羞难掩，	The moon fan can barely hide her bashfulness.
车走雷声语未通。	In the thundering sound of the departing carriage, no word is passed.
曾是寂寥金烬暗，	Once she was lonely, the golden censer grows dim.
断无消息石榴红。	Absolutely no news arrived, the pomegranate is red.
斑骓只系垂杨岸，	The piebald horse is only tied by the willowy bank.
何处西南待好风？	Where can one wait for the good southwest wind?

Although the untitled poetic drama has moved from the drinking party to the elegant boudoir, the shadow of unfulfilled desire continues to loom large over the protagonist. This time the spotlight shines on a woman, surrounded by the ornate décor of her bed with scented “Phoenix Tail” silk and an emerald-patterned round top. Suggesting solitude and abandonment, the second couplet of “moon fan” and “rumbling carriage” seems to contain allusions from the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 221). The third line may refer to the tale of Lady Ban (1<sup>st</sup> century BC), who compares her loss of imperial favor to the fan discarded in the autumn moon. The fourth line appears to allude to a verse from Sima Xiangru’s 司马相如 (179–117 BC) “Tall Gate Rhapsody 长门赋”—“Thunder rumbles and echoes rise; the sound just like the voice of your carriage 雷殷殷而响起兮，声象君之车音”—that describes the tribulation of Empress Chen 陈皇后 who was dismissed by Emperor Wu 武帝 (156–87 BC) but later enjoyed a restoration. Returning from the past to the present sets up a peculiar contrast of two visions: loneliness with the dimming golden censer and seclusion with the red pomegranate. Concluding the poem is a questionable hope against hope. Her lover may have tied his horse by the “willowy” bank 垂杨岸, probably suspicion of him staying in the courtesan quarter. She is perplexed, as her longing for her man is as unfulfilled as waiting for the rare good wind from the southwest. Since the last line is lifted from Cao Zhi’s 曹植 (192–232) “Poem of Seven Sorrows 七哀诗”—“Wishing to become the southwest wind, flying far away into your bosom 愿为西南风，长逝入君怀”—the mention of the red pomegranate in line six can also be an insinuation of the second-century poet’s “A Deserted Wife 弃妇篇,” which starts with the image of “pomegranate growing in the front court 石榴植前庭.”

Imbued with an air of feminine sensibility and stories of forlorn ladies, this untitled poem features a sense of impediment similar to the previous male lament. The opening backdrop of the scented “Phoenix Tail” silk curtain inside the bedroom at night is seemingly an “erotic” gesture. In spite of her painstaking effort to “sew 缝” this fabric of desire, her destiny has long been cast. Her loss is no different from the metaphorical “weeds 蓬” of the despondent imperial librarian. The fundamental component of the two homophones “sew” and “weed” is the word 逢 (*feng*), literally meaning “to meet.” Whether she and her man will come together and her desire be met, in fact, is her obsessive pining.

Sadly, in place of a fulfilling union with her lover in the silky fragrant bed is loneliness. The usage of negative words is ubiquitous: such as “thin 薄,” “difficult 难,” “not yet 未,” “dim 暗,” and “absolutely none 断无.” Like the “thunder sound of the departing carriage 车走雷声,” desire is an absence, a “fantasized object” that is not only “detached” from her reality

but also incommunicable by “language 语未通.” Inexorably, the “golden censer falls into gloominess 金炷暗,” as its light dies out. However, this “once loneliness 曾是寂寥” in the past, an elegant object getting cold and dark inside the boudoir, is instantly followed by the “red pomegranate 石榴红,” something organic and colorful outside the bedroom. The intense “redness” once again incites burning passion that parallels strong sexual yearning, as the pomegranate, with numerous seeds inside its fruit, is widely thought to be a symbol for female fertility. In addition, pomegranate wine is used as a wedding wine, further stressing her desire for a physical union. Regardless of “absolutely no news from her lovers 断无消息,” or perhaps owing to their absences, the woman becomes sexually frustrated.

In the hand of Li Shangyin, the once standard lament of “golden loneliness,” as both a literary trope and a state of mind, becomes a stimulus for vivid imagination, a sexual reverie of sort. Waiting with eagerness, yet in vain, she envisions her man stopping by the courtesan quarter and indulging in the sensual pleasure that she desperately desires. As a result, she is “red” like the pomegranate, ripe and ready for an erotic encounter. Unfortunately, there is nothing she can do as a woman but wish for the bliss of liberation by her man, the southwest “wind” that almost never comes. To believe that she is longing for her lover is definitely logical. Nonetheless, the reader is also aware, from the very beginning, that she stays alone in her scented boudoir and appears as flushed as the red pomegranate. Perhaps it is why “the moon fan can barely hide her bashfulness 扇裁月魄羞难掩,” and to some extent, her strong feelings of desire. In this regard, her waiting for the southeast wind may be not only a pledge to her lover but also an invitation for a sexual adventure, something that she is too “shy” to say out loud and too controversial for the poet to give it a “title.” Whether this projection of female sexual readiness is a mere male “voyeuristic” fantasy or not is another story.

The wind that this lady is waiting for apparently blows and howls with romantic longing. Wind plays an important role in Li Shangyin’s world of desire. In Chinese poetic tradition, wind, rain, and cloud have long been associated with eroticism and sexual union. Furthermore, “wind 风” also rhymes with words such as “weeds 蓬,” “sew 缝,” and “phoenix 凤,” some of the most recognizable rhetoric in Li Shangyin’s repertoire. If these untitled poems provide an excavation of desire, “wind” should be a crucial element. A quatrain by Li Shangyin, precisely titled “Wind 风,” illuminates this conjecture:

撩钗盘孔雀， Stirring the hairpin and bending the peacock,  
 恼带拂鸳鸯。 Annoying the girdle and brushing against the mandarin ducks.  
 罗荐谁教近， The sleeping mat, who told it to come close?  
 斋时锁洞房。 Fasting time, and the secluded chamber is locked.

Wind is charged with sexuality in this poem, signifying an uncontrollable and irritating desire. It is an “invisible” force—the word “wind” is never mentioned in the text—that messes up the hair and the girdle of a lady. It even dares to approach the sleeping mat, as explicit as the suggestion of sex in a verse can go. Still, a decent lady cannot yield to her amorous desire. This is conceivably what the protagonist finds “annoying 恼,” as she is “stirred 撩” by the “wind” and reminded of the embroidered “mandarin ducks 鸳鸯,” a symbol of happy lovers, on her skirt. The “fasting time 斋时,” which is conventionally although unnecessarily read as a reference to the heroine as a Taoist nun, can simply denote a general awareness of self-censorship. She is trying to rein in her sexual aggravation by following religious discipline. To shut out desire completely and observe the precept of spiritual purity, the woman “locks her secluded chamber 锁洞房.” It is interesting that the words “secluded chamber” can also be applied to the “bridal chamber,” in particular the night of the wedding when the new couple first comes together as husband and wife. The more determined she wishes to turn away from the “wind,” the more powerful this desire appears to be. In Li Shangyin’s poetic realm, wind seems to be closely associated with eroticism, if not standing for it. Accordingly, the “wind” in the first discussed untitled poem belongs to “last night,” as the librarian’s sexual desire is a past rendezvous, a nostalgic memory. The “wind” in the second poem, on the contrary, lies in the remote future, the odd direction of southwest that foretells the hopelessness of sexual fulfillment for the doleful lady.

Bearing this concept of “wind” in mind, the reading of another untitled poem as an expression of the impossibility and failure of desire becomes more convincing.

飒飒东风细雨来，	Zip, zip the eastern wind, a fine drizzle arrives,
芙蓉塘外有轻雷。	Beyond the lotus pond there is light thunder.
金蟾啮锁烧香入，	The golden toad gnaws the lock—burning incense enters;
玉虎牵丝汲井回。	The jade tiger pulls the silk cord—turns as it draws from the well.
贾氏窥帘韩掾少，	Lady Jia peeped through curtains at young Secretary Han;
宓妃留枕魏王才。	Princess Fu left a pillow to the gifted Prince of Wei.
春心莫共花争发，	The spring heart must not vie with the blossoming flowers:
一寸相思一寸灰。	One inch of longing, one inch of ashes.

The atmospheric setting of the opening couplet has created an “erotic unease,” and the light thunder echoing beyond the lotus pond “introduces the theme of sexual frustration” and the allusion to a pining court lady deserted by her lover mentioned in the earlier poem (Rouzer 2001, p. 298). Announcing the “arrival of a fine drizzle 细雨来,” the “eastern wind 东风” whistles a “zip, zip 飒飒” sound. Packing three words with the component of the character “wind 风” in the first line, the erotic overtone is hard to miss. The “eastern wind,” the seasonal bearer of “spring,” is indeed a symbol for romance and sexuality itself.

Familiar images like “gold,” “fragrant,” and “silk” show up again in the second couplet, although the picture they form is somehow unfamiliar: “the golden toad gnaws the lock—burning incense enters 金蟾啮锁烧香入; the jade tiger pulls the silk cord—turns as it draws from the well 玉虎牵丝汲井回.” The third couplet reveals two tales of illicit love affairs. Both are initiated by women, a court lady and a river goddess, respectively, as they fall for the beauty and talent of the young scholars. Be it human or divine, desire indiscriminately inflicts one with lust, longing, and exasperation. Infatuated with her father’s handsome secretary Han Shou 韩寿, Lady Jia 贾氏 gives her lover the exotic incense from the West 西域异香, an imperial reward granted to her father, as a token of affection (*Tangshi Sanbaishou Xinzhu* 1980, p. 284 n. 5). In the famous “Luo Goddess Rhapsody 洛神赋” by Cao Zhi, the Goddess of Luo River, Princess Fu 宓妃, is said to have an affair with the author himself, the gifted Prince of Wei 魏王才.

In this milieu of surreptitious relationships, the strange *mise-en-scène* of the preceding couplet as the symbolic representation of desire seems agreeable. Believed to be a “secretive animal” for it can hold its breath under water for a long time, the “toad 蟾” was used as ornament for door locks during the Tang period.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the pulleys on wells were at times carved in the shape of “tiger 虎” as a guardian emblem (Rouzer 2001, p. 298). In any case, the penetrating power of desire is profoundly felt in this mystifying couplet. The “burning fragrance 烧香,” probably referring to the zealous obsession of Lady Jia, is able to “enter 入” the boudoir, and hence the territory of sexual union, despite the tight-lipped golden toad gnawing on the lock. This highly erotic action of “going in” is followed by “pulling out” the “silk cord” and drawing from a “well,” another image that is saturated with sexual overtones. If the immersing incense in the third line corresponds to Lady Jia’s story, the water imagery in line four can be tied to Cao Zhi’s dreamy river goddess, who has left him a “pillow,” a not too subtle reminder of their love affair. As in the other untitled erotic escapades, the attempt to either resist or realize desire is ill-fated. Stepping out of the subjective domain and historical allusion, the poet concludes with a warning, or a reflective criticism of himself, about being consumed by searing passion: “The spring heart must not vie with the blossoming flowers 春心莫共花争发.” This is a path that leads only to self-destruction—“one inch of longing 一寸相思” generates “one inch of ashes 一寸灰.”

In any consideration of the link between Li Shangyin’s untitled poems and the idea of burning desire, one inevitably comes to his most celebrated work that features the popular couplet: “The spring silkworm’s thread will only end when

death come 春蚕到死丝方尽; the candle's tears will only begin to dry as it turns into ashes 蜡炬成灰泪始干”

相见时难别亦难，	Hard for us to meet and also hard to part,
东风无力百花残。	The eastern wind is powerless as hundreds of flowers wither.
春蚕到死丝方尽，	The spring silkworm's thread will only end when death comes;
蜡炬成灰泪始干。	The candle's tears will only begin to dry as it turns into ashes.
晓镜但愁云鬓改，	Before the morning mirror, grieving the lush hair may change,
夜吟应觉月光寒。	Reciting poetry at night one should feel the moonlight's chill.
蓬山此去无多路，	The road to the fairy Mountain of <i>Penglai</i> is not far away,
青鸟殷勤为探看。	The blue bird works diligently for visits.

The images from the famous second couplet are not only visually but also conceptually compelling. The silkworm, imprisoning itself in the cocoon formed by its own endless silk, suffers the same fate as people who enwrap themselves in the endless sorrow of their own making. The candle may shine radiantly, yet it is burning by its own heat at the same time, just as passion has consumed the poetic protagonist (Liu 1969, p. 66–7). This innate devastation, and to some extent masochism, of desire is noticeably marked by the equivalent of “longing 相思” to “ashes 灰” in the last line of the earlier poem. The homophones of the words “thoughts 思” and “silk 丝” are at play, while “ashes 灰” may take on the pun of “regret 悔.” Other memorable elements also reoccur, underscoring the precarious and problematic nature of desire.

Being trapped in the vortex of desire is “difficult 难.” The first line emphasizes this hardship by using the word “difficult” twice: it is difficult to meet, and it is also difficult to part. No matter what, desire is a torment. The sexual agony becomes even harder to bear when that person is “impotent.” If “wind” signifies sexuality and eroticism, the “powerless 无力” eastern wind” can only make “hundreds of flowers wither 百花残,” instead of bringing them to blossom. The lack of potency is the cause of the fading flowers. Having lost its “strength,” both meeting and parting are a miserable case. The well-known couplet of “spring silkworm” and “candle’s tears” further deepens the desolation of the situation. Desire remains unfulfilled. To make a bolder speculation, the crying “candle” may represent a “phallic” symbol in demise, either physically or metaphorically, as it watches its own “power” burn and deplete. In a poem titled “Intoxicated Under the Flower 花下醉,” the erotic relationship between candle and flower is established.

寻芳不觉醉流霞，	Looking for fragrance unconsciously drunk with the streaming cloud,
倚树沉眠日已斜。	Leaning against a tree, soundly sleep as the sun already set.
客散酒醒深夜后，	After the guest dispersed and woke up deep in the night,
更持红烛赏残花。	Holding a red candle appreciating the remaining flowers.

Again, after a drinking banquet, the protagonist, who has initially been “looking for fragrance 寻芳,” a common expression for seeking sexual pleasure, particularly with courtesans, becomes intoxicated. He has had too much “steaming cloud” wine to drink. As night befalls and the guests disperse, the now somber protagonist “holds a red candle 持红烛” in order to “enjoy the remaining flowers 赏残花.” Since a typical literati party often invited sing-song girls as companions and entertainment, it may not be too farfetched to picture the “red candle” holder is the “aroused” protagonist and the “remaining flowers” those wasted female performers. The act of “appreciation,” then, needs no elucidation.

In the traditional heterosexual relationship, if the man is “powerless,” the possibility for the woman to thrive is faint. Returning back to the untitled poem, it is not surprising that the protagonist becomes depressed in front of the morning mirror, worrying that his youthful appearance, exemplified by the cloud-like hair 云鬓, will soon vanish, and that his “candle” will utterly burn into ashes. When a person is deprived of erotic pleasure in his or her prime, what is the chance



that such desire will be fulfilled at an older age? Since Chinese poetry is never short of lament on the evanescence of life and disillusionment of love, one cannot help but “feel the moonlight’s chill” while “reciting poetry at night 夜吟应觉月光寒.” Certainly, the moon is a loaded sign. Whether the line is meant to compare the protagonist to the lonely moon goddess or contrast him or her with the brightness of this symbol of union, the sense of “coldness” is felt.

Fortuitously, this heartrending plight ends on a whimsical note. The last two lines of the poem—“the road to the fairy Mountain of *Penglai* is not far away 蓬山此去无多路; blue bird works diligently for visits 青鸟殷勤为探看”—may allude to the legendary encounter between Emperor Wu of the Han and the Queen Mother of the West 西王母. The “blue bird 青鸟,” the messenger of the goddess, is often taken for a romantic “go-between” in poetry. Thus, there is a hint of a potential union, a magical solution to all the difficulties 难, ruins 残, exhaustions 尽, and impotency 无力. This final couplet reveals that “the road to the fairy Mountain of *Penglai* is not far away 蓬山此去无多路,” and the “blue bird has been visiting and checking regularly 青鸟殷勤为探看.” This positivity, frail and fantastic notwithstanding, may well be the reason why this verse has been one of the most acclaimed, if not the best known, love poems of all time.

## CONCLUSION

There is a resonance between the working of desire and the writing of poetry. As desire can never be fully fixed or fulfilled, the language and meaning of a poem can never be closed or confined. At times, it is even inappropriate to give a poem a name. The untitled poetry series of Li Shangyin is one such case. Many of these poems concern love and passion, although this reading is only one of a variety of ways to approach them. Image after image in these poems, as stunning as they are, foreshadow the idea of inaccessibility, inscrutability, and impossibility. That his readers are fated to misunderstand them is inevitable and probably intentional. Perhaps the spirit of poetry lies not in clarity and completion, but can be found only through confusion and contradiction.

In Li Shangyin’s poetic world of desire, both the poet and the reader share this confusion and contradiction. Li Shangyin obviously wants to express his emotions, whatever they may be, and put them into words for others to read; otherwise, he would not have written these poems. Yet, he also feels the need to conceal his desire, purposely making them ambiguous and denying them a title. The paradox of reading, of course, is that the audience always desires an end, a resolution, or an explanation, but this end cannot be the end of desire itself. The inability to find rest in a single object, a final meaning, which will make sense of all the others, is exactly what desire is about (Eagleton 2003, p. 145). Consequently, to demand an absolute answer or a precise meaning of these untitled poems is simultaneously both missing and demonstrating the point. On the one hand, it is pointless to mark them with personal or political specifics. The endless spinning silkworm, the connecting line of the magical rhino horn, or the ashen tears of the burning candle are strikingly poignant, partially due to the beauty in these imageries, and partially because of the ambiguity of their allusions. On the other hand, this impulse to speculate on details in order to satisfy one’s intellectual curiosity is a perfect manifestation of desire at work. Just like the drinking game of guessing the hook or solving the riddles, this desire is a seductive prelude to great disappointment, for desire itself can never be satisfied.

“Desire,” then, is both a fundamental topic of writing and fundamental to the experience of reading (Bennett and Royle 1995, p. 146). A couplet from another untitled poem, with recurring motifs like moon, perfume, and candles that bewail the emptiness of desire, is appropriate to sum up this intrigue and conclude this discussion:

梦为远别啼难唤， Dreaming of long separation, I can hardly summon my cries;  
书被催成墨未浓。 Hurried into writing a letter, the ink has not yet thickened.

Juxtaposed with a “dream” in which one fails to summon his cries for a distant separation, the protagonist, most likely a poet like Li Shangyin, instinctively rushes to articulate his tender feelings in words. Writing seems to be a sort of release, and seemingly the best way to mediate the strain of desire. After all, the unconscious is structured like a language, and language is what hollows being into desire. The complex entanglements among dream, language, and desire are intricately woven into an impulsive piece of literature. If we are to receive this hurried “letter,” written with ink that has not even had time to thicken, it would probably read like one of those untitled poems.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Quoting the American sinologist Watson (1971), Wu (1998) argues that the untitled poems of Li Shangyin can be best approached “by setting aside the question of precise meaning and... instead [giving in to] the richness and beauty of their imagery and the striking skill with which they are put together” (p. 169). Meanwhile, one of the most renowned modern Chinese scholars Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) admits that even though he is unable to explain the literal meaning of Li Shangyin’s poems, he can strongly feel their “beauty.” When he reads them, they give him “a new kind of pleasure.” See Liu (1969, p. 31).
- <sup>2</sup> Liu (1969) summarizes the ideas proposed by three major schools interpreting Li Shangyin’s ambiguous poems. The first school, represented by Feng Hao 馮浩 (1719–1801), sees these poems as veiled references to Li Shangyin’s patron Ling-hu Tao 令狐綯 and therefore revealing his hope for official advancement. Spearheaded by modern scholar Su Xuelin 蘇雪林 (1897–1999), the second approach believes that most of these poems allude to Li Shangyin’s various clandestine love affairs with certain Taoist nuns and court ladies. Scholars of the third school, led by Gu Yiqun 顧翊群 (b. 1901), advocate that these poems are mostly political satire, reflecting the factions at and decadence of the imperial court (p. 27–33).
- <sup>3</sup> Not all of Li Shangyin’s untitled poems are about love, although the majority of them seem to be. There are fifteen untitled poems in Li Shangyin’s extant collection. They cover a wide range of different patterns, including one five-character ancient-style poem 五古, one seven-character ancient-style poem 七古, two five-character regular verses 五律, four seven-character quatrains 七絕, and seven seven-character regular verses 七律. See Xu (1998, p. 117).
- <sup>4</sup> “The unconscious is structured like a language” first appeared in the essay “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud” [*L’instance de la lettre dans l’inconscient* in French], originally delivered as a talk on May 9, 1957, and later published in his book *Écrits* (1966). According to Lacan, “what the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language. This maxim, and its exegesis, is repeated in one way or another in his work from the 1950s onwards. He says that the unconscious knows something, but this knowledge is neither primitive nor instinctual, it is rather a knowledge of the elements of the signifier, that is to say, a knowledge of the most basic unit(s) of language. As such, the unconscious in its formations follows the laws of the signifier.” See Owens (2006). Also see Miller (1977) and Bowie (1991) for their interpretations of Lacan’s theories.
- <sup>5</sup> Lacan’s three visits to the United States, twice in 1966 and then in 1975, led to the publishing of *Écrits* in 1966 as well as *Seminar 23* and *Joyce and the Sinthome* in 1975. *The Symptom 13*, <https://www.lacan.com/symptom13/lacan-american.html>.
- <sup>6</sup> For Jameson’s theoretical and intellectual influence in post-Mao China, see Zhang (2004).
- <sup>7</sup> Kellogg (1995) further dates the popular emergence of “desire” in American poetry to “precisely 1977, the year of the English abridgment of Lacan’s *Écrits*. In the late seventies and early eighties desire was quite strongly encoded; as it proliferated through the eighties [...], its specific resonance diminished. Nonetheless, one can see traces of its original specificity in the overwhelming preference more recent poets have for desire in its noun form. Desire, desiring, desired: while in the abstract desire is as respectable a verb as a noun, contemporary poets gravitate toward the potential of the word as thing. In addition to referencing a specific zone of knowledge, this preferred usage points toward a crucial feature of the word’s recent importance: its intersubjective character” (p. 414).
- <sup>8</sup> *New Songs from a Jade Terrace* (*Yutai xinyong* 玉台新咏) was compiled by a court poet, Xu Ling 徐陵 (AD 507–583) in about AD 545. It consists of 656 “love” poems in ten volumes arranged in chronological sequence from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE to the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century CE. For an English translation of this anthology, see Birrell (1982).
- <sup>9</sup> All English translations in this essay, with modifications by the author, are based on Liu (1969).
- <sup>10</sup> Li Shangyin did work at the Orchid Terrace in AD 839 and 842. See Liu (1969, p. 87).
- <sup>11</sup> “The toad is good at holding its breath; ancient people use its image to decorate door locks (蟾善闭气, 古人用以饰锁),” see *Tangshi Sanbaishou Xinzhū* (1980, p. 284 n. 3).

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