

On Aesthetic Characteristics of Love Poems and Musics in Tang Dynasty

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Abstract: *Comparisons are given in this article on aesthetic characteristics of love poems and musics between the Tang Dynasty of China represented by poet Li Shangyin and modern poet Mihai Eminescu of Romania. The conclusions are that although the different artistic forms of emotional expressions in different eras or nationalities, ancient or modern times, Chinese and foreigners have been sharing similar emotional experiences. Moreover, due to the interlinked emotional experiences, different civilizations and ethnic groups can communicate with and learn from each other in the artistic expression forms of emotions, which is the cultural and artistic basis for the feasibility of the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind.*

Keywords: *Tang Dynasty; love poems and musics; Li Shangyin; emotional experiences; artistic forms of emotional expressions;*

1. Introduction and Objectives

Humans are creatures of emotions, which are as crucial as eating and dressing. In the world of emotions, do Chinese and foreigners, the ancients and the moderns, share similar emotions? If so, are there different forms in the artistic expression of such emotions? If the forms are different, what are the aesthetic characteristics of Chinese people's artistic expressions of their emotions? Among all the art genres expressing emotions, the one that integrates poetry and music stands out. And the Tang Dynasty of China was the golden era of poetry and music in the history of ancient China. Accordingly, artistic forms such as love poems and music in Tang Dynasty are picked out and compared with those of overseas nations and modern Chinese so as to figure out the similarities and differences in this paper. As one of the authors once studied in Romania in Europe, for comparison and as a reference, this paper will choose a love poem and a musical work by one of the most famous Romanian poets, Mihai Eminescu.

2. The Tang Dynasty of China was the golden era of poems and music, especially the ones themed on love.

The sublime philosophical level and exquisite artistic taste of the Chinese nation are embodied in Chinese classical poems and art songs, which are not only the precious heritage of Chinese poetry and music culture but also priceless art treasures of world poetry and music art. In all ancient Chinese literary genres, the Tang Dynasty was most famous for its poems and music, especially for those masterpieces themed on love, with tender, romantic, and

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lingering sentiments. For at least 5,000 years, the Chinese people have been a nation of endless string songs. The musical compositions related to classical Chinese poems include three main cases: first, ancient people of the same generation compose music for the classic poems; second, people of later generations write music for classic poems that have lost their music score; and third, modern people re-score for classical poems. Composers of all generations could not reconcile themselves to leaving such excellent works without music, despite many of the scores matching the poems of the Tang Dynasty having been lost due to historical changes. That urges them to compose new music for these poems, which have thrived for thousands of years, so that they can be sung continuously all over the world, especially in Chinese society, for a long time and even become "a fixture of people's everyday life without their realization".

To understand the poems and music of the Tang Dynasty of China, especially works themed on love, the first priority is to learn about the status of Tang poems in the history of Chinese poetry. Serious archaeological evidence has proven that China is a civilized country with a history of at least 5,000 years, or a splendid civilization that "pretends to be a country". Among the literary works of ancient China, the "Book of Songs", "Songs of Chu", Yuefu (a government office in the Han Dynasty for collecting folk songs and ballads), Songs of the Han and Wei Dynasty, poems of the Tang Dynasty, Song Ci (Ci is a poetic form, a type of lyric poetry, and ci form of poetry from the Song Dynasty may be called Song Ci), and Yuanqu (a type of verse popular in the Yuan dynasty) are all organic combinations of poetry and music. The "Book of Songs", the earliest collection of ancient poems in China, compiled about 2,500-3,500 years ago, comprises a total of 305 works. In terms of expressing emotions, it pioneered the composition of love poems and music. Contemporary people can be surprised to find people thousands of years ago were as "modern" in their love expression as contemporary people are. Love poems and music of later generations were inherited from the tradition of the "Book of Songs". In terms of human emotional life, this phenomenon embodies the famous statement of Italian philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce that "every true history is contemporary history". As an important part of the Chinese poetic and musical tradition, the people of the Tang dynasty were not only satisfied with combining classical poems and classical music, but also combining them with classical dances; not only creating their own, but also importing poems and music from other parts of the world that they had access to at that time, thus forming a "multifaceted" form of expression that became an unsurpassed peak in the history of Chinese art. Therefore, the Tang dynasty is a peak that organically integrates Chinese classical poems, music, and dances. It is a golden era of Chinese poetry. In terms of the number of "Tang poems" and poets alone, more than 55,000 Tang poems have been preserved, more than 49,000 poems are included in the Qing Dynasty's "Quan Tang Poems" (or Tang Poems), and more than 3,700 Tang poets are known. Shen Deqian, a poet in the Qing Dynasty, selected 1,928 poems from the "Quan Tang Poems" and compiled them into "Selected Tang Poems" (Tang Shi Bie Cai). In 1764, Sun Su, a scholar of the Qing Dynasty, selected a total of 311 poems by 77 Tang poets from the "Tang Poems", based on the basic principle of being easy to understand and popular, and compiled the "Three Hundred Tang Poems" as one of the literary primers for Chinese children. The four poets with the largest number of poems included in "Three Hundred Tang Poems" are: Du

Fu (with 38 poems included), Wang Wei (with 29 poems included), Li Bai (with 27 poems included), and Li Shangyin (with 24 poems included). Among the great four, love poems were mainly contributed by Li Shangyin, whose works were sung the most widely and exerted the most dominant influence. Therefore, we can study Li Shangyin's love poems to get a glimpse of the aesthetic characteristics of love poems and music in China's Tang Dynasty.

3. Love poems and music involving Li Shangyin

We here briefly introduce the artistic characteristics of Li Shangyin and his representative works, "Jinse" (Sad Zither) and "Bieyinan" (To One Unnamed).

3.1 Li Shangyin

Li Shangyin (c. 813 - c. 858), a famous poet of the late Tang Dynasty, was one of the few poets who deliberately pursued poetic beauty throughout the Tang Dynasty. His poems are novel and peculiar in conception and exquisite in style. Over 30 poems named "Untitled" (Wu Ti in Chinese) are based on the theme of love and longing between men and women, with far-reaching conception, delicate moods, lingering sentiments, exquisite diction, neat and antithetical sentences, beautiful rhymes, catchy and flowing sense, and touching air.

3.2 "Jinse" (Sad Zither) and "Bieyinan" (To One Unnamed)

3.2.1 "Jinse" (Sad Zither)

"Jinse" (Sad Zither) is a seven-character poem. Many of Li's love poems are titled "Untitled". To distinguish them, "Jinse" was named after the first two words in the poem. A jinse(zither) is an ornately decorated stringed instrument in ancient China, with a pillar underneath each string for support. The whole poem is interpreted as: "Why should the zither have fifty strings? Each string and pillar seems to recall the beautiful years when we were in love. But fate is changeable and confusing, just as Zhuangzi dreamt of turning into a butterfly in the early morning and woke up feeling confused, and Du Yu turned into a cuckoo bird after his death and pinned his sentiment to its cry. By the time of the bright moon shining above the sea, the pearls in the sea are like sparkling tears in the mermaid's eyes. Under the sun, the beautiful emerald lets vapour rise. Such feelings will be memories that can't be recalled again one day, but at this time, I already feel that fate makes people confused and perplexed. "

3.2.2 "Bieyinan" (To One Unnamed)

"Bieyinan" (To One Unnamed) is a poem of deep emotion and praises of gentle, touching, and loyal love. The poet expresses the pain of parting and the longing for love in a sincere and subtle way. The poem is interpreted as: "It is rare to see each other, and it is hard to part with each other. It is late spring. The east wind is weak and the flowers are fading. My longing for you is like a spring silkworm spinning silk, which is only finished when it dies, and like a candle burning, whose tears dry up when it becomes ash. When you look into the mirror in the morning, you are only grieved to think your hair is turning grey; when you croon a poem at night, you will feel the cold moonlight. The three fairy mountains you live in Penglai are not a

long way away. The blue bird will often fly to see you with my regards. "

3.3 Aesthetic characteristics of two ancient poems and music

3.3.1 Beauty of rhythm

The Chinese language has a musical beauty. First and foremost, each Chinese character corresponds to only one syllable, and each syllable can generally have four tones, endowing the classical poems composed of Chinese characters with a sense of music when recited. Second, when creating a metrical poem, the number of words in a verse is equal, the tonal patterns are antithetical, and the words at the ends of the even-numbered lines rhyme together, giving the Chinese verses an overall symmetrical beauty and musicality. Third, composing music for a poem using assembled verses that are already musical in their own right can improve the overall musicality of the poem.

For the sake of space, its musical beauty is mainly reflected in the rhythm that is mainly formed by the arrangements of tonal patterns. The tones of ancient Chinese are divided into four categories: even tone (first tone), rising tone (second tone), falling-rising tone (third tone), and falling tone (fourth tone). In the rhymes of poems, the ancients divided these four tones into two categories, "Ping" tones (the first and second tones) and "Yin" tones (the third and fourth tones). For instance: "弦 (string)" "年 (year)" "鶉 (cuckoo bird)" "烟 (smoke)" "然 (like that)" in the poem "Jinse" (Sad Zither); "难 (hard)" "残 (fade)" "干 (dry)" "寒 (cold)" in the poem "Bieyinan" (To One Unnamed) are all "Ping" tones. In this poem, verses start with "Ping" tones end with "Yin" tones. The arrangement of tones gives the poems a sense of rhythm and a beautiful artistic conception.

3.3.2 Rhyming of words at the end of even-numbered sentences

In "Jinse" (Sad Zither) and "Bieyinan" (To One Unnamed), the rhyming characters like "弦(string)" "年(year)" "鶉(cuckoo bird)" "烟(smoke)" "然(like that)" "难(hard)" "残(fade)" "干(dry)" "寒(cold)" at the end of the even-numbered lines is "an" in Chinese pronunciation. These Chinese characters are categorized as "broad rhyme" (or nasal rhymes that press the palate). The sound is produced by the final vowel "a" from our mouth with the combination of nasal resonance from the abdomen. The key to realizing the resonance is to use the tip of the tongue to touch the part of the upper gum in front of the hard palate at the moment of "ending the rhyme" so as to make a semi-nasal sound "n".

3.3.3 Song form analysis

"BIE YI NAN"

The piece is written in a quiet tempo (*Adagietto*), following the pulsation of the recited verse. It starts with a 8-measure introduction given to the piano, which introduces us into an atmosphere of story while preparing the entrance of the soloist voice.

From the beginning, we notice the unique modal sound of the lied, profoundly archaic. This makes the presence of the Doric mode being felt, almost throughout the whole song, in places with a tonal inflection towards the D-moll. The presence of the a minor third and the Doric sixth generates melodic sonorities of infinite sadness. This heptatonic way is also noticed in the Romanian folk song: in "doinas" (Romanian musical tune style), songs of longing and mourning, which reinforces our belief of a common ancestral melodic background, which is reflected in folk songs or folkloric inspiration.

Doric mode

Doric sixth

The song 's structure is strophic, asymmetrical, and the sinuous song is subordinate to the word and the expressiveness of the verse. The lyrics of love deplore the remoteness of the loved person and the suffering caused by this situation.

The exposure of verse A, with its two symmetric phrases, brings the two rhythmic cells to the foreground, which will continuously return over the entire piece. The melody voice line is supported by the the syncopated-up-beat rhythm of the pianistic accompaniment, which has a constant pulse throughout the play .

Rhythmic figure x

Rhythmic figure y

or

Rhythmic figure x

Rhythmic figure y

The syncopated rythm

mp

时 难 难, 东 风 无

B b

力 百 花 残。 春 蚕 到 死

mf

19 *b1*

丝方尽, 蜡炬成灰泪始干。泪始

19 *mp* *mf* *mp*

The climax of the song is the couplet, which impresses with tragic, painful tone. The presence of the two rhythmic figures is defining for structuring the play. The instrumental accompaniment is distinguished by the sequence of parallel succession of fourths and fifths, giving the fragment a specific Chinese sonority.

The Couplet

24

干。啊 相见难,

24 *mf*

parallel succession of fourths and fifths

The song has a subtonic cadence, a modal melody cadence specific to the Doric mode. The ending includes the obstinate repetition of a specific rhythmic-melody cell, first in octave 4 and then, in octave 5.

octava 4

octava 5

meno mosso

The general scheme of the form

	Phrase I	Phrase II	
	<i>a</i> <i>a'</i>	<i>b</i> <i>b1</i>	Couplet (+ coda)
<i>number of measures</i>	<i>4 + 4</i>	<i>4 + 4</i>	<i>10 (+5)</i>

“JIN SE”

The song begins with an instrumental introduction of four measures, which introduces us to the melancholic atmosphere of the play. Melody inflection is typically Chinese, but for a European it is reminiscent of Debussy's sound and his "floating harmonies".

The atmosphere of the play is calm, full of serenity, with a symmetrical and balanced formal structure.

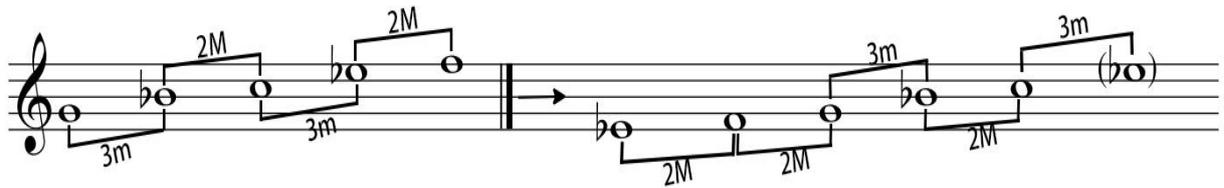
The general scheme of the form

A	Av	B	<i>piano interlude</i>	Av'	B	Coda
a c	av cv	b b¹		av^{1'} cv^{1'}	b b¹	
(4 + 4)	(4 + 4)	(4 + 4)		(4 + 4)	(4 + 4)	(4+2)
<i>Mi b</i>	<i>fa</i>			<i>Mi b</i>	<i>fa</i>	<i>Mib</i>

As can be seen from the above presentation, we note that the work has a strophic structure and includes two verses (A and B), each of eight measures. They also contain two smaller verses (4 + 4), in an antecedent-consequent relationship.

If we were to refer to the melody and harmonic construction of the song, we can say that it seems to dissociate the vocal, the pianistic, plane plan. The voice line is distinguished by the fact that it is configured on an anhemitonic³ melody pentatonic staircase, otherwise specific to traditional Chinese-type sonorities.

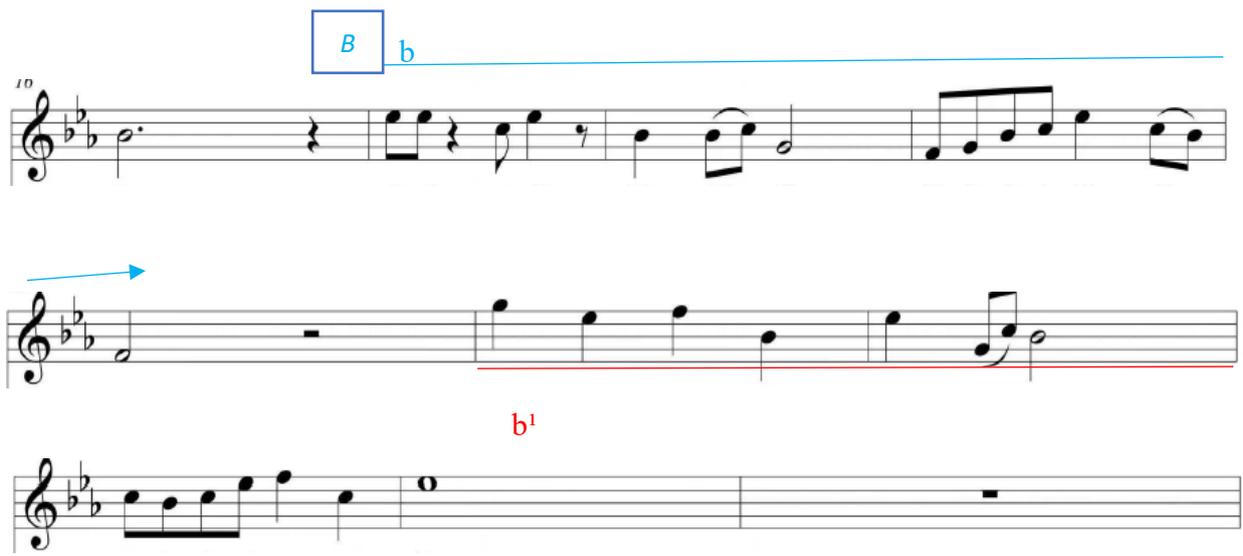
³ Giuleanu, Victor, *Tratat de Teoria Muzicii*, Editura Muzicală, București, 1986, p. 254.

*Minor pentatonic anhemitonic scale**Basic form**III-rd form*

This pentatonic structure outlines through the vocalist voice since the first musical phrase.

*(c) the consequent phrase*

The second verse (B) is the climax of the play. This fact is conveyed, not only by the suggested melody, but also by the lyrics in which the disappearance of love is dashed, seen as an illusion.



If you look at the plan of the pianistic accompaniment, you can see a deeply harmonic thought, a functional tonality, which goes hand in hand with the pentatonic scale of the vocal tune. The sound plans, though different, complement and support each other. This clash between Chinese tradition and Western music of the harmonic type has been a characteristic of Chinese Lied since its occurrence in the early 20th century. The training of professional

musicians has resulted in new European musical structures being engrafted on the traditional ancient musical background.

The melodic writing of the accompaniment follows archaic structures, on the outline of clear harmonic structures, with the role of highlighting the voice of the soloist and the poetic meaning of the lyrics.

It is not by chance that the melody line is of pentatonic essence, since the title of the play even refers to an ancient, traditionally Chinese instrument, whose sound is of the kind referred to. The string instrument is called Guzhengun⁴, and the poet uses the similarity between its smooth sound and the bird song. The good ancient times⁵ are also mentioned. The poem recalls the Chinese philosopher Chuang-tzu⁶ and his parable about the dream of a butterfly, which encompasses the essence of the Taoist view of reality and delusion.

For a better understanding of the deepness meaning of the play, I consider it necessary to give some insight of this parable: "one day, I, Zhuangzi, dreamed that I was a butterfly, flying around, by all my intentions and goals being simply a butterfly. I only realized my happiness as a butterfly, unconsciously that I was Zhuangzi. Soon, I woke up, and it was me again, my real self. I don't know whether I dreamed I was a butterfly, or whether I was now a butterfly dreaming that it was a human..."⁷

The message about Zhuangzi's dream being a butterfly is that we can never know for sure, when we dream and when we are awake. Likewise, the author of the lied conveys to us through his lyrics that he doesn't know whether his love really exists or he just dreamed of it.

Although both geographically and culturally, China and Romania are so far away, the ancestral background seems to be approaching them in unsuspected ways. So, although from another era, another cultural realm, the deeply philosophical lyrics of this Chinese piece can bring us to the "Blue flower" of Mihai Eminescu, Romanian poet. It ends on the same sad note, a deep meditation on human existence, on the disappearance of love.

*"And you went, sweet wonder,
Our love died —
Blue Flower! Blue flower!
Though it 's sadness in the world!"*

The rhetoric exclamation: "though, it is sadness in the world", using the adverb "though", highlights how painful the difference between dream and reality is.

In a conclusion, we may say that music and poetry are intended to complement, coexist and express the deepest human experiences, in every corner of the world, regardless of geographical or temporal location.

⁴ "Guzhengun the old dry-bodied musical instrument similar to the titera originating in China. The existence of the Guzheng instrument is confirmed in the Period of the Warlord Kingdoms, but it became particularly popular during the Qin dynasty. The number of strings of the instrument ranged from a minimum of 6 to a maximum of 23 during the Tang dynasty" (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guzheng> - accessed 29.04.2022)

⁵ The Tang dynasty ("Táng Cháo") ruled China between 618 and 907. This period was the pinnacle of Chinese civilization. It has conducted an expansion policy that has driven unprecedented economic growth. Civil wars led to the overthrow of the dynasty and the partition of China. It is considered the "golden age" of poetry, in which the greatest Chinese poets lived: Li Taibo, Du Fu, Wang Wei, and the time when the great schools of painting appeared

⁶ Zhuangzi (Chuang-tzu) (369-286 BC.),

⁷ <https://www.diane.ro/2018/04/parabola-vis-fluture-zhuangzi-chuang-tzu.html>

4. Conclusion

The above comparison shows that in terms of emotional experience, human beings in ancient and modern times share similar and common feelings, but in terms of the artistic expression of emotions, people of different times and different nationalities can have different forms. The love poems of the ancient Chinese can also be understood by modern people, only that they are more implicit and subtle in expression than western and modern Chinese. Chinese ancient poems use more metaphors to express love and rarely directly describe intimate physical actions such as hugging and kissing, which abound in modern Chinese and foreign love poems. Influenced by the west and the east, China started the New Culture Movement more than 100 years ago under the banner of "democracy" and "science" with the aim of achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Modern Chinese love poems have become closer and closer to the western love poems in terms of expression. Even if one ignores the words related to historical background and geographical signs and only sees the meaning of the verses themselves, it is difficult to distinguish whether the poems are written by Chinese or foreigners. This shows that, precisely because emotional experiences can be shared, it is possible for different civilizations and ethnic groups to exchange and learn from each other in terms of artistic expressions of emotions, which is the basis for the feasibility of building a community of a shared future for mankind in the field of culture and art.

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