

# Communications to the Editor

## TO THE EDITOR:

This letter is submitted in response to Paul Rouzer's review of my book, *The Poetics of Decadence: Chinese Poetry of the Southern Dynasties and Late Tang Periods*, published in the August 1999 issue of the *JAS*. The review is filled with misrepresentations of my book.

I would like to begin with a couple of factual errors in the review. The chapter that aims to establish a theoretical framework for the book, "Defining Decadence in the Chinese Poetic Tradition," is the first, not the "second" chapter as the reviewer puts it, and in his citation he has omitted the crucial verb "Defining" from the chapter's title. This omission gives a false impression that I merely recount the notions of decadence that already existed in the Chinese poetic tradition. In fact what I aim to do in this chapter is to define, for the first time, what constitutes decadence in classical Chinese poetry, namely as a deliberate challenge to the canonical tradition.

The reviewer poses a series of questions concerning my treatment of the Late Tang poets and alleges that I fail to address them: "And how could three poets [Li He, Wen Tingyun, and Li Shangyin] whose works were so different from each other all be examples of decadence? And if all three are decadent, then why did Li Shangyin become canonical, Li He semicanonical, and Wen Tingyun a poet for connoisseurs only?" On page 6, I state that the three poets are studied together because they "are usually regarded as the most prominent representatives of this reassertion of the values and characteristics of the Southern Dynasties poetry, particularly the Palace Style poetry." In other words they share certain stylistic conventions and artistic concerns that can be traced to the poetry of Xiao Gang. In the three chapters on these poets I address in detail these questions. In addition to the close analysis of their poems, the following concluding remarks I make about these poets speak for themselves:

Moreover, his [Li He's] poetry, however unconventional, often hints at deeper meanings. This, together with the fact that many of his poems treat explicitly social and political themes, account for the very different reception accorded to his decadent poetry from that accorded to Palace Style poetry. While the latter was consistently condemned, the former was the object of both denunciation and praise.

(p. 115)

He [Wen Tingyun] deliberately chose the career of an aesthete, and as the quatrain cited at the beginning of this chapter shows, he was willing to pay for his belief, which may well be formulated as art for art's sake.

(p. 148)

The reviewer's accusation that I fail to explain why Li Shangyin is "canonical" is particularly startling because I, in fact, devote the longest chapter, entitled "Li Shangyin: Negotiation with Tradition," to address this issue. I demonstrate in great detail how Li Shangyin's amorous and ornate verses evoke two drastically different readings that regard them to be both decadent and canonical. I also demonstrate that Li Shangyin's strategy is to introduce canonical elements, such as intense personal engagement on the part of the poet, into the poems that are usually viewed as

decadent. His poems therefore “meet the canonical demands that a literary work embody meanings beyond the linguistic medium, preferably meanings that express the poet’s feelings or thoughts” (p. 155). This changed the audience’s perception of decadent poetry; “Thus, in Li Shangyin’s oeuvre Chinese decadent poetry has at last managed a successful negotiation with the canonical tradition” (p. 188).

Finally, the reviewer asserts that “the problem here is that the author has attempted to pose a historical question and answer it ahistorically.” I must say that my concern is to establish decadent poetry as a genre, and to illustrate that “there is a continuity and development from the much condemned Palace Style poetry of Xiao Gang to the much admired poetry of Li Shangyin” (p. 189). This is indeed not a history of “cultural, social” and “intellectual” backgrounds that the reviewer demands from me. Indeed as I make clear in the introduction I have no intention to take on such a grand project, which is why I call my book “an intertextual study” (p. 1). I believe that often a literary phenomenon cannot be explained, at least not fully, by a positivistic resort to the “era” that has produced it, and that by examining the intertextual relations of the texts from different periods we may gain insights into its unique nature. Therefore, the “continuity and development” that I have sketched does constitute the *intertextual* and *generic* history of decadent poetry, and as such it is not “ahistorical.” The reviewer seems to regard such an approach as inherently flawed and therefore illegitimate, but as the ancient adage *shi wu dagu* suggests, in poetry criticism no interpretation is complete and final. However, to reach a judgment of a particular interpretation one first has to investigate carefully; so let our careful readers make their own judgments.

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#### TO THE EDITOR:

I am indeed sorry that I said Professor Wu’s theoretical frame occurs in the second chapter. I had accidentally considered the “Introduction” as the first chapter. Other than that, I hold to my criticisms.

I can see how Professor Wu received the impression from my review that I thought that he was “merely recount[ing] the notions of decadence that already existed in the Chinese poetic tradition.” I was referring more to his effort to make Liang critical texts speak to his own conception of “decadence.” He treats the concept almost completely unproblematically, though he makes a cursory and ahistorical (yes, ahistorical!) gesture toward decadence in nineteenth century Europe. This vague sense that he inherits from post-Romantic literary history leads him to believe that the literary qualities he thinks he has found constituted a “challenge” to the “canonical tradition.” (I might add: *which* canonical tradition? when do canons get defined? Was the sixth-century canon the same as the ninth, or the same as the twentieth?)

The author says he studies Li He, Li Shangyin, and Wen Tingyun together because they “are usually regarded as the most prominent representatives of this reassertion of values and characteristics of the Southern Dynasties poetry, particularly the Palace Style poetry.” We should be cautious of using the passive voice, and we cannot base our analysis merely on the assumptions of past literary historians and critics. While these poets loved and imitated Southern dynasties poetry, it is another thing to see this aspect of their work as necessarily unifying them in some supposed “decadence” or in leading them to participate in an oppositionist poetics. I hold to my point that

he does not satisfactorily explain why these poets are different from each other (or especially) why they are or are not different from late Tang poetic production overall. In particular, Professor Wu merely repeats the same clichés about self-expression that accompanied Li Shangyin's (and to a lesser extent, Le He's) acceptance into the late Qing canon of Tang poets. Whether this is Li Shangyin's "strategy" or a phenomenon produced by the inclinations of late imperial poetics is still a debatable matter. Anyone familiar with traditional criticism could easily produce highly moral readings of Wen Tingyun's supposedly "aesthete" poetry that would make him seem to be a paragon of Confucian virtue (and in fact Zhang Huiyan read Wen's *ci* precisely in this way).

Finally, the author may believe that "genre" can be defined ahistorically, but I insist that it cannot. My criticism is not based on any "positivistic" assumption about a poet merely belonging to the spirit of an era; I merely think that the critic must engage creatively and imaginatively with the issue of how thinking and writing about poetry changes over the centuries. It seems that the myth of an unchanging China is still with us.

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