Towards Redefining Chinese Baroque Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The modernity of the Baroque is determined by its non-mimetic, non-symbolic, or, simply, its allegorical form. As allegory, the Baroque undermines and obscures the specific literal meaning of a representation open to (symbolic) understanding. Allegory contains a representational element that allows for understanding but only in order to show that the understanding it reaches is necessarily in error. Chinese poets of the mid-late Tang experienced a similar case of ostracism from their contemporaries. Although their poetry was admired, poets like Meng Jiao, Li He and Li Shangyin went unappreciated and almost forgotten until later poets discovered them and their poetry was recognized not only as great poetry, but also as “Baroque” poetry. Through a comparative translation analysis of three of the mid-late Tang poets and poems, this essay tries to redefine Chinese Baroque poetry and to illustrate a baroque poetics not only in the way they depart from traditional, or symbolic poetic modes but also in how they subvert them.

The Baroque does not belong solely to the seventeenth century in Europe nor ends with it, as Benedetto Croce had hoped.1 The Baroque is not an artistic style determined by history or literary history. On the contrary, a historical approach brings about the repression of allegory in favor of a symbolic mode of art and poetry. When understood as allegory, the Baroque has not fared well with literary critics or philosophers. Benedetto Croce, the twentieth-century Italian critic and philosopher, regarded the Italian seventeenth century as a “century without poetry” (un secolo senza poesia).2 He also denied that the Baroque can be found in any century and in any place. He claimed that the Baroque, and allegory, ended with the seventeenth century and that we were done with

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both of them. For Croce, Baroque poetry as allegorical poetry is not poetry at all, because it is not artistic, since only the symbol is artistic. Allegory is the non-artistic, the anti-artistic, and should be avoided at all costs. Croce spent a lifetime expunging allegory from poetry, and separating it from the symbol, but without success. Croce’s notion of allegory was derived from Hegel who, in the Aesthetics identified the artistic with the symbol, and allegory with the non-artistic. Hegel defined allegory as “frostig und kahl,” (icy and bleak) and dismissed it as “a product of the intellect and not of concrete intuition and of the deep feeling of imagination, and lacking inherent seriousness, prosaic, and distant from art” (Hegel 501). Similarly, Croce wrote that “Allegory is not a direct form of spiritual expression, only a kind of writing or cryptography.” Nonetheless, when we look closer at their systems, we realize that the symbol, for both Hegel and Croce, is the esthetic only in appearance and that allegory is what really defines art and the esthetic.

In art criticism, the Baroque is usually confused with Mannerism, an exaggeration of traits found in the Late Renaissance. However, they are the expression of two dominant and opposing artistic styles. The former emphasizes unity, the latter vitality, and multiplicity. Borges defined the Baroque as “that style that deliberately exhausts (or at least tries to) its own possibilities, and that borders on self-caricature.” There have been many definitions of the Baroque. Benedetto Croce, in his study on the Baroque mentioned above, defined it as “Barocco,” after the fourth mode of the second figure in the nomenclature of syllogisms in Scholasticism, or, most likely, from the Portuguese term for perrola barroca: a jeweler’s term for an irregular shaped, or flawed pearl. After presenting these definitions, and other possible variations, and despairing of a definition, René Wellek concluded that, at least, “the Baroque has provided an aesthetic term which has helped us to understand the literature of the time, and which will help us to break the dependence of most literary history from periodization derived from political and social history.”

The question of the Baroque is a version of the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, the classical and the contemporary. On the one hand, the Baroque is decidedly on the side of the ancients as a 17th century esthetic which is superseded by more modern poetic forms, such as Romanticism and Modernism. On the other hand, when the Baroque is understood as an artistic style, and not as an historical period, it belongs to the modern. The in-between character of the Baroque, which situates it both in the past and in the present, is what accounts for the complexity of the Baroque but also for its modernity. As Paul de Man has characterized it, “Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure. This combined interplay of deliberate forgetting with an action that is also an origin reaches the full power of the idea of Modernity.” In severing itself from the past, the Baroque also severs itself from the present. Modernity, as de Man writes, confronts us at all times with an unsolvable paradox: “Literature exists at the same time in the modes of error and truth, it both betrays and obeys its own mode of being” (de Man 163–64).

The modernity of the Baroque, and of Baroque literature or Baroque lyric, is determined by its non-mimetic, non-symbolic, or, simply, its allegorical form. As such Baroque’s modernity can be measured by its distance from a symbolic form, from the way it departs and undermines a concept of art as a symbol. As allegory, the Baroque undermines and obscures the specific literal meaning of a representation open to
(symbolic) understanding. On the other hand, allegory contains a representational element that allows for understanding but only in order to show that the understanding it reaches is necessarily in error. Since allegory can only blindly repeat the earlier model without final understanding, it is the negation of modernity. “The less we understand a poet,” writes de Man, “the more he is misinterpreted and made to say the opposite of what he said, the more he is truly modern, that is, different from what we, mistakenly, think we are ourselves” (de Man 164). This paradox defines the modernity of the Baroque and its essence as allegory.

Chinese poets of the mid-late Tang experienced a similar case of ostracism from their contemporaries. Although their poetry was admired, poets like Meng Jiao, Li He, and Li Shangyin went unappreciated and almost forgotten until later poets discovered them and their poetry was recognized not only as great poetry, but also as “Baroque” poetry. J. D. Frodsham was the first to apply the term Baroque to Chinese Literature, and, in particular, to the poets of the Tang dynasty, in a lecture on New Perspectives in Chinese Literature.10 Frodsham applied the term “baroque” to the poetry of Han Yü and Meng Chiao but his definition was not limited to the Tang poets or to the post-Renaissance period of the seventeenth century, but was applicable to any “recurring historical phenomenon.” Frodsham followed Nietzsche’s definition of the Baroque, which I indicated earlier, as a decline in art, adding that “tropes and catachresis, hyperboles and oxymorons in the poetry of Meng Chiao and Lu T’ung might be regarded as “the decorative overelaboration of a highly conscious, skeptical craftsman, the pilings-up of calculated surprises and effects” (qtd. in Wong 25). He argued that what these Chinese poets share with their Western counterparts is a deep concern with the mobility of things, with “Time as a creator and destroyer” (qtd. in Wong 26).

For Wong, however, Frodsham’s definition of Baroque is too limited and pejorative, and should be modified “with a more perceptive reading of the text, and a more comprehensive understanding of the term before it can be applied to the study of Chinese literature” (Wong 26). Wong is also critical of James J. Y. Liu’s The Art of Chinese Poetry (1962)11 who contends that the poetry of Meng Chiao, Lu T’ung, and Chia Tao is comparable to English metaphysical poetry in its use of “farfetched and elaborately developed comparisons, and in its tendency towards complexity and ambiguity in imagery and syntax” (qtd. in Wong 28). Wong is also critical of Liu’s other work, The poetry of Li Shangyin. Ninth-century Baroque Chinese Poet, the first comprehensive study of Chinese Baroque poetry and a major late Tang poet.12 According to Wong, with the exception of a few remarks, Liu did not illustrate, sufficiently, and with specific examples, the elements of Li Shangyin’s poetry that would identify his poetry as Baroque at the same level as European Baroque. He is also critical of Liu’s claim that if Li Shangyin had been a Western poet of the seventeenth century, he would have qualified as a Baroque poet. This historical fact alone, Wong rightly states, would not have made Li a baroque poet.

Despite his critique of Frodsham and James Liu, Wong himself does not make a stronger case for a Baroque reading of Li Shangyin, or other mid-late Tang poets. Like Liu, Wong seems to believe that a simple correspondence between Chinese and Western poets suffices to establish a Baroque comparison. He believes that it suffices to show that Tang poets share with the English Metaphysical poets similar characteristics to qualify them as Baroque poets. These characteristics are: time, historical or mythological allusions, exploitation of conventional verse, momentary resolution of opposites, the use of conceit,
and the use of language (Wong 33–35). These characteristics, however, are not exclusive to Baroque poetry and can be said to apply to any poetry without defining it as baroque. Wong’s assessment of metaphysical poets is too general to apply to a reading of a Baroque poem. It does not help to know that Li Shangyin, like Donne, is “remarkable in his intricate use of diction and dramatic situation,” or that like Crashaw Li is capable “to interpenetrate the metaphysical and the high baroque style with potentially sensual images,” or like Góngora, he is able to use “innumerable classical allusions in a constant periphrastic style” (Wong 36). These comparisons with Western baroque poets may contribute to regard Tang poets as baroque, but do not help us reading their poetry as Baroque. The same can be said for Wong’s claim that Li Shangyin’s attempt to cover the enormous range between temporality and eternity, emotion and intellect, illusion and intellect, are all strong indications of the baroque (Wong 36). These indications are descriptive and not critical and they do not explain the nature of his baroque poetry.

The main difficulty in reading Li Shangyin’s poetry, or any Chinese poetry, as Baroque, lies not in the similar devices that they share with Western Baroque poetry, but in their nature as allegory. Both Wong and Liu, however, reject this possibility and read it as they would any traditional poetry, as a symbol. In deciding between a “literal” or a “literary” approach, they choose the literal, or symbolic, reading. Liu believes that one should steer clear of the “literary,” or allegorical, because of its “excessive freedom,” which makes it not only “undesirable, but at times impossible” (Liu 35). However, the dividing line between the literal and the literary, the symbolical and the allegorical is difficult to trace, both for a translator and an interpreter. The alternative to do away with the figural or the allegorical is not only undesirable, but impossible. Still, Wong and Liu believe that a literal and symbolic approach will enable them to steer clear of these difficulties by reading baroque poems symbolically, despite the fact that, in so doing, they encounter a web of difficulties, which they cannot resolve.

Since allegory is what characterizes and defines the Baroque style of poetry in seventeenth-century Europe, or Britain, and in ninth-century mid-late Tang poetry, reading poetry symbolically is reading it against the grain, or misreading it. Once the figural, or allegorical, character of their poetry is ignored, their identity as Baroque is displaced or erased. What characterizes a Baroque poem is the way it departs from classical or traditional forms of art and privileges tropes over the meaning they produce, poetics over hermeneutics, allegory over symbol.

A similar negative attitude toward allegory is found in most Western translators and commentators of Tang poetry. Stephen Owen, for instance, the well-known sinologist, critic and translator, shares a similar aversion to allegory, which he does not believe to be a suitable way to read early Chinese poetry, but only a superficial and incidental supplement to artistic form. For Owen, allegory is a pejorative mode of representation, with which we do not need to be concerned. Frodsham, as I mentioned earlier, was the exception as he acknowledged the importance of mid-late Tang poets as Baroque, and their poems as allegorical. He understood with Nietzsche that the baroque style is not an historical concept but a style of art that is predicated on the demystification of art as a symbol. The poetry of mid-late Tang poets like Meng Jiao, Li He or Li Shangyin, does not depend on a mimetic representation of external reality, as one could claim for classical or traditional modes of symbolical art. Their models are folklore, myths, or even traditional poems, which
they re-adapt and re-construct to their own use, but do not imitate. Their poetry stands alone in the impossibility of imitating ancient poetic modes, which is why we can call them modern, and why we read them today, not as poets of the past but as poets of our modernity.

To give examples of the differences between a symbolic and an allegorical reading I would like to turn to a discussion of three of the late Tang poems: Meng Jiao’s “Cold Creek (III),” Li He’s “Su Xiaoxiao’s Tomb” and Li Shangyin’s “Written on a Monastery Wall.” All these poems appear to invite the participation of the reader with a sort of death-philosophical themes. Meng Jiao, however, was very fond of grouping poems together into a narrative. He has many of these group poems, some as many as 15 poems under one title. The narrative sequence is not itself straightforward or logical. It is allegorical. Very typical is the group of nine poems called “Cold Creek.” I quote two translations from Stephen Owen and David Hinton from the third poem in the series and try to give a sense of the whole:

**Cold Creek (III)**

寒溪九首之三
曉飲一杯酒 踏雪過清溪
波瀾凍為刀 朶朶鳧與鷖
宿羽皆翦棄 血聲沉沙泥
獨立欲何語 默念心酸嘶
凍血莫作春 作春生不齊
凍血莫作花 作花發端啼
幽幽棘針村 凍死難耕犁

**Stephen Owen’s translation:**

At dawn I drank a single cup of wine,
Threading the snow I visited the clear creek.
The waves had frozen into knives
That hacked and carved the ducks and widgeons.
Feathers that spent the night, all cut off and lost,
The sound of blood sinking into mud and sand.
Alone I stand – what shall I say?
Silently I brood, my heart cries out bitterly.
Frozen blood will never make springtime,
If it made springtime, inequality would be born.
Frozen blood will make no flowers,
If it made flowers, it would bring the widow’s weeping.
Hidden away, village of thorns and brambles,
Frozen to death, there can be no plowing.

**David Hinton’s translation:**

I sip wine at dawn, then cross the snow
out to this clear creek. Frozen into knife –

blades, rapids have sliced ducks open,
hacked geese apart. Stopping overnight

here left their feathers scattered, their
blood gurgling down into mud and sand.
I stand alone, dazed, words giving way
to that acrid clamor of the heart. Frozen

blood mustn’t beget spring. If it begets
spring, newborn life’s never evened out,

and if frozen blood breaks into blossom,
widow-tears begin. What isolate beauty:

a village all thorns and brambles, fields
all frozen and dead no one can plow.

Both translations are fairly close to the original. Owen translates what is there but does not go any further. For this reason, his translation remains somewhat vague and the reader has to imagine the rest of what he or she reads. Hinton’s translation fills in the gaps and makes the poem more readable and more understandable, if not more enjoyable. In his translation, we understand how the waves froze into knifes and cut the feathers of ducks and geese. Hinton gives us a narrative, Owen stops short from putting it together.

“Cold Creek,” is a narrative of nine poems that depict an extremely cold and horrifying landscape, in transition between winter and spring, the first month of the lunar calendar year. The series of poems focus on three major points: (1) they blame and condemn heaven for the severe cold weather that kills birds and fish and makes people’s life harder and more difficult; (2) an admonition and an attempt at dissuading the people from collecting the frozen birds and fish for food, as these creatures are killed by heaven and are not suitable to eat as food; (3) a sincere elegy for these dead creatures after he buries them. These poems are not meant to portray Meng Jiao as a naturalist or an animal protectionist. The birds and the fish are symbols of the poet’s despair at the reality of his times and his condemnation of its practices. The macabre coldness and deaths of the fish and the birds are his way of denouncing the disastrous age he lives in and the poor people like him who are made to suffer.

This third poem narrates, specifically, the morning scene when the poet sees the dead birds on the river that froze overnight and their frozen blood in the mud, and the poet’s lament at what he saw. The first six lines describe the morning landscape: the poet drinks a cup of wine to keep himself warm from the cold and steps on the snow to cross the creek. When he arrives, he sees the unexpected scene of the frozen river, which is completely different from the one he remembered and depicted in the second poem. Instead of the beautiful picture he had in mind, the frozen creek is horrifying: feathers of dead birds and blood frozen in the mud. Waves frozen in knife blades, birds killed and their feathers cut off and abandoned. The poet stands alone and does not know what to say. Here Owen’s translation is more helpful: “Silently I brood, my heart cries out bitterly.” The poet’s own speech is frozen, as he is overwhelmed by sadness and pain.

The next four lines are somewhat obscure. In “The Poetry of Meng Chiao and Han Yu,” Owen explains “The unnatural cold spell in early spring has, in spilling the blood of the birds over the landscape, created an unnatural kind of spring rain. Meng Chiao fears that this rain of blood will take the place of normal spring rain, causing the plants to grow unnaturally.”

Flowers, writes Owen, associated with sexuality, will give rise to unnatural
marriages, to widowhood, which refers back to the “widow’s cry” in the preceding poem, and here may also suggest birds” (Owen 144). The unnatural event of the frozen creek, with the death and devastation brought about by the overnight freeze has created an unnatural spring that will have drastic consequences. Instead of the usual happy spring marriages, it will bring an unnatural one and only widowhood. Here Hinton’s translation is more helpful. In this desolate land, with its frozen fields, nothing can grow. Usually, winter prepares for spring but this unnatural winter cannot bring about a spring of life and renewal but only one of mourning and death.

The imagery in this third poem portrays a decayed, withered, and abandoned landscape. The frozen waves, the abandoned feathers, the frozen blood, the ghostly village of thorns and brambles, communicate the sense of a world dark, bitter and in decay. Poem III is exemplary of the baroque poetics that characterizes the narrative of “Cold creek” and of Meng Jiao’s poetry as a whole.

1. Su Xiaoxiao’s Tomb

The second example is Li He’s “Su Xiaoxiao’s Tomb.” Su Xiaoxiao was a famous prostitute who lived during the Southern Qi dynasty (479–502). She was a very good singer and died young of an illness. There have been many stories written about her during her lifetime and after. The earliest surviving writing is a Southern Dynasties ghostly song called “Su Xiaoxiao’s Song” (蘇小小歌):

妾乘油壁車 I ride a coach with oiled sides
郎騎青驄馬 he rides a blue dapple.
何處結同心 Where will we tie a true love knot?
–
西陵松柏下 on West Mount, under the cypress and pine.

The oiled-sides coach became a symbol of Su Xiaoxiao. It is her symbol in all the literature about her. People even believe that the coach was buried with her in the tomb. In this Southern Dynasty song, the “true love knot” is knotted with two laces or belts, and it is usually a symbol of love partnership and it is used as a euphemism for sexual behavior in erotic literature. The other conventional symbols used in the song are West Mount, the cypress and the pine: West Mount is usually a place for tombs; cypress and pine are trees people usually choose to plant beside tombs. Therefore, the meaning of the song is that true love can be achieved only after death, in the tomb. In the Tang dynasty, there was a version of this story that in stormy nights, when people passed by her tomb, they could hear the sound of singing coming from the tomb. It is believed, however, that Li He never visited her tomb, which is located nowadays either in Jiaxing County or by the West Lake in Zhejiang Province. As Owen says, Li He’s poem is probably “a scene of the mind realized in poetry” (Owen 169).

The translations of this poem are by J. D. Frodsham and by Stephen Owen; one is more interpretative and the other literal. The translation by Owen is the following:

The Tomb of Little Su
Dew on the hidden orchid.
Like crying eyes.
Nothing ties a love knot,
Flowers in mist I cannot bear to cut.
Grass like the carriage cushion,
Pines like the carriage roof,
The wind is her skirt,
The waters, her pendants.
A carriage with oiled sides
Awaits in the evening.
Cold azure candle
Struggles to give light.
At the foot of West Mound
Wind blows the rain.

Frodsham’s translation:

**Su Hsiao-hsiao’s Tomb**
Dew upon lonely orchids,
Like tear-brimmed eyes.
No twining of love-knots,
Mist-wreathed flowers I cannot bear to cut.

Grass for her cushions,
Pines for her awning,
Wind as her skirts,
Water as girdle-jades.
In her oil-silk carriage
She is waiting at dusk.
Cold candles, kingfisher-green,
Weary with shining.
Under the Western Grave-mound,
Wind-blown rain.

The poem begins with a strong display of rhetorical showmanship: dew on the orchid, tearing eyes, flowers in mist, carpet like lawn, skirt of wind, pendant of water, timid candlelight in the blue color of kingfisher’s feather, and so on. The detailed description exemplifies the sensuality of the poem, which transforms the poet’s dark obsession with death into an esthetic representation. Fusheng Wu once commented on this poem that Li He “adopts some highly evocative diction and then cancels out its effects by setting it in a very different context. Thus, no one would expect the above-mentioned phrases [orchid, flowers in mist, jade pendants, candles in green color of the kingfisher’s feather, etc.] to be used to describe a graveyard scene” (Wu 109). Li He’s poem was probably inspired by the old song of the Southern Dynasties, but he goes further. The old song says true love can only be found in death, but Li He says that even in death, one waits in vain for one’s true love.

Owen’s literal translation indicates the sense of loss in the endless waiting in vain, which makes the flowers in the mist too piteous to be picked. It seems that it is the flowers’ pitiful condition which is at stake, but it is actually the situation described in the previous line: “nothing to knot a true love with.” Owen summarizes his understanding of the poem as follows: “The old singer half materializes, scattered in the scene around her tomb, then in the coach of the old song, and finally as a flickering ghost-light, waiting still – until a gust of wind-blown rain puts out the candle and ends the poem” (Owen 169). In Owen’s view, all the flowers, dew, grass, pine, etc. that the poet depicts are all materialized images of the ghost of Su Xiaoxiao, who is waiting in vain for her love.
because “nothing ties a love knot.” However, the ghost still has hopes to attract some passerby when the storm ends. This is a sad and romantic interpretation of the poem, but in the old song, the sounds of music and singing could only be heard in the storm not before or after. Owen’s translation of the title as “The Tomb of Little Su” also does not do justice to the larger-than-life figure of Xiaoxiao, especially when shortened to “little Su,” which sounds a lot like an American “little Sue.”

Frodsham’s translation, instead, captures very well the pathos of the poem and the lover’s drama who cannot bear to cut the “mist-wreathed flowers” over her tomb because it would be like cutting the lifeline that links him to her. Frodsham describes the tomb very well that the poet has created out of Nature: the grass that she has as cushions, the pines for awning, the wind as her skirt, and water as her girdle. There is also her “oil-silk carriage” where she is waiting at dusk. Finally we arrive, at the end of the poem, to see her tomb: “the Western Grave-mound,/Wind-blown rain.” All this section is described much more crassly and vaguely in Owen whose translation of these last lines does not even give the notion that we are looking at her tomb: “At the foot of West Mound/Wind blows the rain.”

2. Written on a Monastery Wall

My last example is Li Shangyin’s “Written on a Monastery Wall” in the translations by A. C. Graham and Arthur Cooper.15 Translation is already an interpretation, so when A. C. Graham believes the poem to be about Buddhism, he translates it accordingly. This is understandable as Li Shangyin, in the last years of his life, took up the practice of Buddhism and wrote poems about his new faith and to Buddhist monks.16 Cooper does not rely on this preconception and translates the poem as a poem. In other words, Graham reads the poem literally, whereas Cooper reads it figuratively.

題僧壁
捨生求道有前蹤 乞腦剝身結愿重
大去便應欺粟顆 小來兼可隱針鋒
蚌胎未滿思新桂 琥珀初成憶舊松
若信貝多真實語 三生同聽一樓鐘

A. C. Graham’s translation:
They rejected life to seek the Way. Their footprints are before us.
They offered up their brains, ripped up their bodies; so firm was their resolution.
See it as large, and a millet-grain cheats us of the universe:
See it as small, and the world can hide in a pinpoint.
The oyster before its womb fills thinks of the new cassia;
The amber, when it first sets, remembers a former pine.
If we trust the true and sure words written on Indian leaves
We hear all past and future in one stroke of the temple bell.

Arthur Cooper’s translation:
To leave life, seek the Way,
follow the others,
Which asks much, begs the brain,
Hollows the body;
Great gone, to see the World
a grain of millet,
Small comes, to make it fit
the Mystic Pinpoint:

Oysters, their wombs unfilled,
long for the full moon,
And amber until made
sighs for its past pine;

But faith in Holy Writ
for the true message
Hears Present, Future, Past
all in one gongstroke!

The poem, 题僧壁 (ti seng bi), literally means “Writing on a Buddhist Monk’s Wall.” The first four characters of the first couplet are Buddhist phrases derived from the sutra: “giving up life to seek the Way” and “offering head and body,” literally: “beg brain cut body.” The lines refer to those who are ready to give up their life and enter the monastic life, that is, their body and their mind. The couplets in the second couplet are vague. Scholars have turned to the sutras in the hope of finding some possible meaning. Essentially they are maxims. The first implies the wisdom of seeing the world in a grain of sand, here in a grain of “millet,” the other states the reverse: what is small can fit into the mystic pinpoint.

The two translations can be said to be similar up to this point, but they part ways in the third couplet. A. C. Graham’s translation is very literal and gives the impression that the oyster’s womb thinks of the new cassia, while amber remembers the pine: “The oyster before its womb fills thinks of the new cassia; The amber, when it first sets, remembers a former pine.” Cooper’s translation, instead, brings out the implied meaning of these verses; namely, that the oyster’s “womb” is that of an unfulfilled woman: “Oysters, their wombs unfilled,/long for the full moon.” The same conceit is repeated in the next line where amber, which comes from pine resin, is said to long for the pine: “And amber until made/sighs for its past pine.” However, as we know, amber does not become amber unless it is “impregnated” by an insect. So this third couplet is about unfulfilled love, about women in the monastery who yearn for love, and they wait in vain. Cooper’s figurative translation places in evidence the “real” subject of the poem, which is not about how to become a Buddhist, but about Buddhist nuns who, although religious, are still women and have not completely transcended their carnal desires. A. C. Graham either does not see the connection of the oyster and the amber with women or he chooses not to see it.

The third couplet marks a shift from being a poem about leaving life and entering a Buddhist monastery to women who live in a Buddhist Monastery and still feel the call of the flesh. The implications of this shift are clear in the last couplet where the issue is Buddhist faith. In Cooper’s translation, if the adept believes in the Holy Writ, he/she will hear eternity in the sound of the gong: “But faith in Holy Writ for the true message/Hears Present, Future, Past/all in one gong stroke!” A. C. Graham’s literal translation is not as clear: “If we trust the true and sure words written on Indian leaves/We hear all past and future in one stroke of the temple bell.” Here, there is no gong stroke that gives a sense of
eternity, only a temple bell. But the main point of this last couplet is “faith.” If we believe in Buddha and in the eternity of Buddhism, we will hear eternity in a gong stroke. Those Buddhist nuns, who Li Shangyin knew, probably did not hear eternity in the sound of the gong, but only the call of the flesh, of their unfulfilled desires, at the full moon.

Cooper’s translation as a more figurative, or allegorical, version not only provides a better understanding of the poem but also places in evidence the Baroque conceits of the oyster-womb-woman, as well as the amber-pine-insect conceit. His translation also highlights the irony in the first lines of the poem which states that in entering the monastery one ought to “hollow the body” which is precisely what is impossible for some women who live in these monasteries. Most important is the title which indicates that the poem is “written” on a monastery wall. The poem, when read literally, appears to promote Buddhist life in a monastery, but when read figuratively, or allegorically, it exposes one aspect of monastery life, which is the suffering of (some) women who live behind the walls of monasteries.

These mid-late Tang poems are examples that illustrate a baroque poetics not only in the way they depart from traditional, or symbolic, poetic modes but also in how they subvert them. This is why we can call these poems “modern,” and for this reason they must be read as baroque poems, namely, as allegory. There are more poems that can be regarded as baroque: from these three poets, like Meng Jiao’s well discussed “Laments of the Gorges” and “Autumn Thoughts,” Li He’s “Song of Heyang” and “Song: A Lovely Girl Combing Her Hair,” Li Shangyin’s most quoted and discussed “The Ornamented Zither,” the “Untitled/Wuti” poems, the “Lamp”; but also from other poets like Han Yu and Bai Juyi. It is believed that the list will be extended as the research in this field is more developed. This is not necessary to label these poems as “baroque poets,” but some of their poems, together with the previously mentioned ones, did bring in a sense of baroque into Chinese traditional poetry and would have introduced a possible Chinese baroque poetry from the perspective of allegory.

Notes
1. For Croce’s attitude toward allegory see Benedetto Croce. Storia dell’eta Barocca in Italia. Bari: Laterza & Figli, 1957. For a discussion of this work and Croce’s attitude toward the Baroque see Massimo Verdicchio. Naming Things. Aesthetics Philosophy and History in Benedetto Croce. Naples: La città del Sole, 2000, 31–66.
2. See Verdicchio’s on Croce’s Storia dell’eta Barocca in Italia, in Naming Things, 31ff.
3. For Croce’s lifelong debate on allegory see Verdicchio. Naming Things, 95ff.
4. See G. W. Hegel’s Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Arts. Translated by T. M. Knox. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1975, 549–50. For further discussion see Verdicchio’s Naming Things.
5. See Benedetto Croce. La Poesia. Milan: Adelphi, 1994, 227.
6. See Paul de Man, “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s Aesthetics.” Aesthetic Ideology, 91–104. For Benedetto Croce see note 4.
7. See Jorge L. Borges, Universal History of Infamy. New York: Dutton, 1972.
8. Wellek provides a good survey of studies on the Baroque from 1888–1946. See René Wellek. “The Concept of Baroque in Literary Scholarship.” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism. Special Issue on Baroque Style in Various Arts. Vol. 5 (Dec. 1946), 97.
9. See Paul de Man, “Literary History and Literary Modernity.” Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism. Second Revised Edition. Introduction by Wlad Godzich. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, 148.
10. J. D. Frodsham. *New Perspectives in Chinese Literature*. (1968) quoted in Tak-wai Wong. “Toward Defining Chinese Baroque Poetry.” *Tamkang Review*, 25–72. Quoted in the text as Wong and page number.

11. James J. Y. Liu. *The Art of Chinese Poetry*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962.

12. James J. Y. Liu. *The Poetry of Li Shangyin. Ninth-century Baroque Chinese Poet*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969.

13. On Owen’s esthetics see Massimo Verdicchio’s “Under Western Literary Eyes: Du Fu” *Journal of Comparative Literature Studies*, special Issue, 54.1, 2017.

14. Stephen Owen. *The Poetry of Meng Chiao and Han Yu*, 144.

15. English translations of the poem are very few. James Liu does not even include it in his study of Li Shangyin where he translates 100 of his poems. The ones available are A. C. Graham. *Poems of the Late Tang*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965; and Arthur Cooper. *Li Po and Tu Fu*. London: The Penguin Classics, 1973.

16. On Li Shangyin’s biography see James Liu’s *The Poetry of Li Shangyin*.

17. For an account of Li Shangyin’s relationship with nuns, whom he celebrated in his poetry, see the Introduction to James Liu’s *The Poetry of Li Shangyin*.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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