The imagery of Tang "poems on things": a semiotic approach

Summary / Zusammenfassung
An important feature of Classical Chinese poetry is its complex figurative language. Its imagery, viz. its usage of tropes, symbols and, more generally, the conventional poetic lexicon, were continuously influenced by the following factors: the creation of a poem often required reciting verses considered prominent in the tradition, of imitating the style of other poets, and of appealing to a large number of well-known historical events, anecdotes, philosophical texts, etc. These requirements eventually led to the stabilization of a number of recurring patterns in the Chinese poetic tradition. The stricter the rules of composition, the more constrained the core of reoccurring images became. After the rise of eight-line 'regulated verses' (lüshi) in jintishi 'recent style poetry', a genre quite constrained in terms of permissible linguistic and stylistic structures, composition of a poem increasingly became a mere play with preexisting templates and patterns. The underlying idea of creativity is thus represented by a poetic corpus which displays a relatively restricted use of figurative language. Moreover, the lexicon of this corpus was highly conducive to semantic clustering, the resulting clusters in turn often being predictably interrelated, which renders them suitable for structural analysis.

Research on medieval Chinese poetry often tends to be descriptive, whereas semiotic approaches to traditional prose and poetry in China typically have given priority to the study of phonological patterning, argument construction and the methods of translation so far. The present proposal aims to counterbalance this lopsidedness by putting a special emphasis on the analysis of the poetic discourse and lexicon as a semiotic "system", i.e. by targeting the interrelations between units of figurative language in separate poems, as well as parts of the shared encyclopedia of conventional imagery. Such an approach is expected to provide new insights into the techniques of writing and reading Classical Chinese poetry against and beyond the canvas of its broader sociocultural settings.

The corpus of the proposed study will be focused on shi poetry of the Táng period (618–907) with its two basic forms, i.e. gutishi 'ancient style poetry', which experienced a great revival during the Táng period, and jìntǐ shī 'recent style poetry', which rose and flourished at the same time. Both forms have a fixed number of characters per verse line and a number of rules governing the syntactic constituents in parallel lines. If compared to some other poetic forms that either have a high variability of syllabic patterns or decidedly more fuzzy rules of composition, these forms provide material more conducive to formal approaches to poetic structure and composition. Moreover, the proposal will limit itself to the discussion of yongwushi or 'poems on things' which describe objects in the natural world and a person's immediate social environments, such as plants, animals, celestial objects, items of everyday use etc. to convey meaning and thought. While precedents of this style arguably may be traced to the Shijing and Eastern Zhou "ekphrastic" epigraphy, it was only during the Táng period that poetic activities at commonplace margins escalated the style to a substantially new quantitative and unprecedented aesthetic level.

Methodologically, the corpus will be approached in a broadly semiotic framework, i.e. via a delineation of paradigmatic and syntagmatic clusters and a grouping of separate units into "isotopies", to be analyzed by their distribution, oppositions, and dominance in texts. It is hoped, that this approach will allow for a principled discussion of imagery and its functioning in the process of composition and reading. The study will thus mostly rely on now "traditional" Jakobsonian methodologies and their Russian and French structuralist extensions, but not restrict itself to any particular school, as traditional Chinese poetry is a relatively new subject for semiotics and the methods applied are bound to require substantial revisions, as the project proceeds.
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