A STUDY OF BAI JUYI’S SENTIMENTAL POETRY

ABSTRACT

This study is a detailed analysis of Bai Juyi’s (白居易, 772 - 846 AD) sentimental poetry (感伤诗). Bai Juyi is hailed as one of the most prominent poets of the Tang Dynasty (618 - 907 AD). As a prolific poet, he is especially renowned for his satirical poetry (讽刺诗) and sentimental poetry (感伤诗).

Past research on Bai Juyi’s works has primarily focused on his satirical poetry, particularly his famous collection of allegories, Xin Yuefu (新乐府). Little attention has been given to his sentimental poetry as a whole. Instead, literary critics have been drawn to two outstanding individual sentimental works of Bai Juyi, namely Song of Everlasting Sorrow (〈长恨歌〉) and Song of the Lute (〈琵琶行〉). The purpose of this study is, therefore, to provide a detailed critical analysis of Bai Juyi’s sentimental poetry as a whole.

This thesis analyses and explores the following aspects: (1) Bai Juyi’s literary viewpoints and the historical setting in which his sentimental poetry was written; (2) sentimental poems which are narrative in nature; (3) sentimental poems of varying themes; (4) problems in Bai Juyi’s own classification of his poetry, and (5) some contradictions in Bai Juyi’s self-evaluation of his sentimental poetry.

The study shows that Bai Juyi’s sentimental poetry, popular and less popular alike, is a manifestation of the poet’s deepest feelings and emotions towards events that have happened in his entire life. These poems are either lamentations of his frustrations and disappointment in his political pursuits or grievances about the inevitable vicissitudes of life. Bai Juyi’s sentimental poems are definitely closer to the reader’s heart than his poems of other emotional inclinations. That alone is sufficient to convince us of the immense affective function of poetry.