

The resistance to allegory, according to Tian, occurs within a poem whose subject is “too detailed, sensuous, and circumstantial to qualify as an abstract allegorical figure” and even extends beyond the work of Xiao Gang to “a number of poems in *Yutai xinyong* [which] express male desire.”

Perhaps because the palace style cannot be read as political allegory, it has been attacked on moral grounds for its lecherous and depraved tendencies. Even the more recent aesthetic reading has sought to downplay the erotic aspects in an attempt at redeeming the style. The central question is, how do we understand what “erotic” means with the poetry in the palace style, if not in moralistic or aesthetic terms?

Up to this point, the word erotic (or alternatively “eroticism”) has been used in the same sense as in the descriptions of scholars and critics of palace style poetry. In such usage, the term indicates something which arouses sexual desire and often also implies a dissolute nature. Here, however, we will understand the erotic in terms of Tian’s language of illusion and deception. Whereas Tian’s focus is on the realm of form (*se* 色) as something alternatively visual and illusory, our focus here will be to examine how the erotic language of illusion and deception functions on both a literal and figural level.

Analogous to the figural, to be discussed below, the erotic functions through sight, both in the sense of looking and of reading. As palace style poets cast their gaze to the object of a poem, so too do readers cast their eyes to the words on a page. It is this act of looking which founds the erotic. In a famous formulation of the erotic, Roland Barthes writes,

Seeded Content – **Chinese architecture** – New World Encyclopedia
http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Chinese_architecture

Features

Certain features are common to most Chinese architecture, regardless of specific region or use:

Horizontal emphasis

The most important feature is an emphasis on the horizontal axis, in particular the construction of a heavy platform with a large roof that appears to float above it, with little emphasis on the vertical walls. Chinese architecture stresses the visual impact of the width of the buildings. The interiors of the halls and palaces in the [Forbidden City](#) have rather low ceilings when compared to equivalent stately buildings in the West, but their external appearances suggest the all-embracing nature of imperial China.

This emphasis on the horizontal axis may have been dictated by the timber-frame construction supporting a heavy [tiled](#) roof that is prevalent throughout Chinese architecture, which limited the height that could be achieved in each story of a building. The absence of load-bearing walls placed a greater importance on foundations and roofs. Buildings were constructed on platforms of rammed earth or stone both to indicate their social importance and to protect the wood timbers from flooding, moisture and rot. The earthen walls used in most buildings necessitated wide overhanging eaves to protect them from rain and snow.

Architectural bilateral symmetry

A timber hall built in 857 during the [Tang Dynasty](#),^[1] located at the Buddhist Foguang Temple in Mount Wutai, [Shanxi](#)

Another important feature is the emphasis on articulation and bilateral symmetry and balance, found everywhere in Chinese architecture, from palace complexes to humble farmhouses. Buildings and building complexes are constructed around a central room or hall, with additional buildings or rooms of equal numbers and sizes added on either side. Rooms and halls are designed for specific purposes, and their positions and sizes are determined by their intended use. Whenever possible, plans for renovation and

extension of a house maintain this symmetry, if there are enough funds available to add construction on both sides of a building.

Confucianism was a powerful formative influence on Chinese architecture. The *Classic of Rites*, said to have been edited by [Confucius](#) (551 – 479 B.C.E.) himself, summed up the theory of using the axial symmetric layout of a complex of buildings to distinguish the status of the elite from the lowly. This concept, called the theory of *Ze Zhong Lun*, or “choosing the center,” stated that main halls should be built in the most important position near the center of the axis.

The *Book of Changes*, another Confucian classic, emphasized that architecture should be an expression of greatness and magnificence, firmness and grandeur. A great hall should manifest beauty and dignity consistent with its social importance. The Confucian school advocated a "gentle and honest and simple" artistic style, pursuing universal harmony, in which each part should not be too prominent.^[2]

Enclosure

Much of traditional Chinese architecture is characterized by buildings or building complexes that occupy an entire property but enclose open spaces within themselves. There are two forms of enclosed spaces: the open courtyard (院) and the "sky well" (天井). The use of open courtyards is a common feature in many types of Chinese architecture. It is best exemplified in the *siheyuan* (Chinese: 四合院; [pinyin](#): sìhéyuàn), a historical type of residence commonly found throughout China and particularly in [Beijing](#), which consists of an empty space surrounded by buildings connected with one another directly or through verandas.

Although large open courtyards are less commonly found in southern Chinese architecture, the concept of an "open space" surrounded by buildings, which is seen in northern courtyard complexes, can be seen in the southern building structure known as the "sky well." This structure is essentially a relatively enclosed courtyard formed from the intersections of closely spaced buildings and offering a small opening to the sky from the floor up through the roof space.

Hierarchical placement

The projected hierarchy, importance and use of buildings in traditional Chinese architecture are based on the strict placement of buildings in a property/complex. Buildings with doors facing the front of the property are considered more important than those facing the sides. Buildings facing away from the front of the property are the least important. Buildings in the rear and more private parts of a property are held in higher esteem and reserved for elder members of the family, while buildings near the front are typically for servants and hired help.

Front-facing buildings in the back of a property are designated especially for celebratory rites and for the placement of ancestral halls and plaques. In multiple courtyard complexes, the central courtyard and its buildings are considered more important than peripheral ones, which are often used for storage or as servants' rooms or kitchens.

Confucianism emphasized maintaining hierarchic order and the distinction between the elite and the lowly and the great and small by means of size, quantity, height, placement, color and ornamentation. As the Confucian system of government developed, laws were passed dictating exactly the type and size of house that could be occupied by each level of the political and social hierarchy.

"There was no architecture in time immemorial. People lived in caves in winter and in trees in summer. Later, the wise men thought out a method by which they used fire to melt metals and burn earthenware pipes. Only then were various buildings constructed with which to call up the gods and the ghosts of ancestors, clearly defining the great and small between the monarch and ministers, enhancing the feeling between elder and younger brothers and father and son, so that there was order between the high and the low and a distinctive demarcation line between men and women." Confucius, *Classic of Rites*^[3]

Geomancy

The use of certain colors, numbers and the cardinal directions in traditional Chinese architecture reflected belief in a type of immanence, in which the nature of a thing could be wholly contained in its own form, without reference to an evanescent belief.

The earliest Chinese text on architecture, "*Kao Gongji*" (*Notes on the Inspection of Engineering Work*), written during the [Zhou dynasty](#) (1122 – 256 B.C.E.) laid out the plans for the capital city and palace of Luoyi and established basic principles that were never disputed for centuries afterwards. [Beijing](#), as reconstructed throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, remains the best example of traditional Chinese town planning.

Construction

The Fogong Temple Pagoda, built in 1056 during the Liao Dynasty, is the oldest existent fully-wooden pagoda in China

Classification by structure

Chinese classifications for architecture include:

- 樓 (楼) *lou* (Multistory buildings)
- 台 *tai* (terraces)
- 亭 *ting* (Chinese pavilions)
- 閣 (阁) *ge* (Two-story pavilions)
- 塔 *ta* (Chinese pagodas)
- 藻井 *Caisson* domed or coffered ceiling
- 軒 (轩) *xuan* (Verandas with windows)
- 榭 *xie* (Pavilions or houses on terraces)
- 屋 *wu* (Rooms along roofed corridors)
- 斗拱 *dougong* interlocking wooden brackets, often used in clusters to support roofs and add ornamentation.

Is not the most erotic portion of a body *where the garment gapes*? In perversion (which is the realm of textual pleasure) there are no “erogenous zones” (a foolish expression besides); it is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance.⁸⁷

Describing palace style poetry, Birrell has likewise noted, “The poet does not seek to gain an unobstructed view of his female object, but to enact a series of little erotic rituals of avoidance.”⁸⁸ Barthes’ formulation suggests the same act of avoidance with the word “intermittence.” There is only the briefest moment, only a “flash,” of an unobstructed view, before the object in view disappears again. Hence, Barthes defines the erotic as “the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance” (*une apparition-disparition*). The intermitting quality, *i.e.*, being there without being there, of the erotic is further suggested by a pun in Barthes’ phrase, *i.e.*, the French *apparition* meaning both “appearance” and “apparition.” Hence, the erotic is marked by a spectral quality in that it does not appear constantly within plain sight, but rather flashes before the eyes in a ghostly manner.

The wordplay on *apparition* points to an important consideration in defining the erotic, namely the central role of figural language. For example, Xiao Gang’s “On a Lady Sleeping during the Day,” discussed briefly above, concludes as follows:

簾文生玉腕，香汗浸紅紗。夫婿恒相伴，莫誤是倡家。

Bamboo mat patterns appear upon her jade wrists,

Perfumed sweat moistens the red gauze.
A spouse will always accompany her,
So do not mistake this for a singing girl's house.

Whereas the penultimate couplet might lead a reader to think the poem describes a brothel (the “singing girl’s house”) with its nearly explicit wording, the final couplet is itself an emphatic, hortatory statement which aims to reconfigure the previous lines. To paraphrase, “By all means, do not think this suggestive scene I describe is that of a brothel. Rather, it is simply a moment from the life-long commitment between husband and wife.” Even though it may be in negative terms, however, by naming the brothel, Xiao Gang effectively suggests the poem’s imagery and wording are not limited to matrimony. While the poem’s grammatical referents are, in fact, husband and wife, there remains a distinct possibility of mistaking the scene for that of a brothel. Hence, the final line attempts to banish the possibility, while simultaneously reaffirming it. In other words, the grammar of the line denies the brothel (*i.e.*, “Do not mistake this scene for a brothel because it is not one.”), while the figural, or rhetorical, reading of the line retains the possibility of the scene being other than that of a husband and wife (*i.e.*, “Do not mistake this scene for a brothel because it certainly looks just like one”).

Addressing a similar point, Paul de Man has written about the “tension between grammar and rhetoric.”⁸⁹ In discussing the rhetorical question “What’s the difference?” de Man writes, “The same grammatical pattern engenders two meanings that are mutually exclusive: the literal meaning asks for the concept (difference) whose existence is denied by the figurative meaning” (9). The literal meaning of the rhetorical question seeks to

find out what the difference truly is. On the other hand, the figurative meaning of the rhetorical question is, of course, that the difference is irrelevant because there is no difference.

The tension identified by de Man is hardly a novelty in Chinese. In Six Dynasties literature, Richard Mather has discussed the troublesome phrase *jiang wu tong* 將無同 from the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語.⁹⁰ As Mather notes, commentators have alternately understood the phrase as an emphatic affirmative (“they are completely the same”) or as an emphatic negative (“they are completely different”).⁹¹ As a result, Mather chooses to translate the phrase as a rhetorical question (“Aren’t they the same?”) to suggest both possibilities at once, a literal meaning (“they are not the same”) and a figurative meaning (“they are the same”). Hence, with the three graphs *jiang wu tong*, there is the same divergence of literal and figural meaning described by de Man.

How do we decide whether such a rhetorical question is to be taken literally or figuratively? It may seem that there is a possibility of discarding one meaning for the other, thus resolving this dispute between the literal and the figural. However, de Man argues,

It is not so that there are simply two meanings, one literal and the other figural, and that we have to decide which one of these meanings is the right one in this particular situation. The confusion can only be cleared up by the intervention of an extra-textual intention... (10).

This conflict between literal and figural language is apparent in Xiao Gang's "On a Lady Sleeping during the Day." Another example appears in the final couplet of Xiao Gang's "Winter Dawn" ("Dong xiao" 冬曉).⁹²

冬朝日照梁，含怨下前牀。帳褰竹葉帶，鏡轉菱花光。
會是無人見，何用早紅妝。

On a winter's day, the sun shines upon the rafters,
Harboring a grudge, she descends from the front bed.
Curtains are held up by a bamboo leaf belt,
In the mirror turns the light of a water chestnut flower.
Certainly no one will be there to see,
And so what is the use in putting on rouge so early?

The poem's concluding couplet forms a rhetorical question. If we think of the question in de Man's terms, then on one hand a reading of the line would suggest a neglected lady who begrudges her absent lover but nonetheless puts on makeup in vain. On the other hand, there is also a reading which suggests a lady who, perhaps bearing ill will towards an absent lover, has already invited the affections of another. Hence her preparations clearly are not in vain.

Without favoring one reading over another, the rhetorical question of the last line suggests both possibilities, each denying the other. As De Man has noted,

Barthes, Roland. *Le Plaisir du texte*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973. [Trans. Richard Miller. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.]

Birrell, Anne. *Chinese Love Poetry, New Songs from a Jade Terrace: A Medieval Anthology*. 2nd edition. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.

———. *Games Poets Play: Readings in Medieval Chinese Poetry*. Cambridge, England: McGuinness China Monographs, 2004.

Borgen, Robert. “The Politics of Classical Chinese in the Early Japanese Court.” In *Rhetoric and the Discourses of Power in Court Culture*. Eds. David R. Knechtges and Eugene Vance. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005. 199-238.

Brooks, Peter. “Narrative Desire.” In *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1984. 37-61.

Brower, Richard H. And Earl Miner. *Japanese Court Poetry*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961.

De Man, Paul. “Semiology and Rhetoric.” In *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.