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Multiple Interpretations in Secondary School Chinese Language and Literature Teaching: A Case Study of The Song of Everlasting Sorrow

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Abstract: As a treasure of classical Chinese poetry, Bai Juyi's The Song of Everlasting Sorrow has long been a poem whose theme is debated on all sides. Several representative positions have taken shape: the "love theory," the "allegory theory," the "sentimental theory," and the "dual theme theory." Taking The Song of Everlasting Sorrow as its example, this paper attempts to break with the traditional model in secondary school Chinese teaching that fixes a single "orthodox" reading on the theme of a canonical text. It systematically examines the reasonableness and the limitations of each school of thought on the poem's theme, and explores how to guide students toward multiple interpretations in teaching practice, so as to cultivate their capacity for close reading, their historical insight, and their critical thinking, to bring academic research effectively into the secondary school classroom, and to enhance students' core competencies in the Chinese language subject.

Keywords: The Song of Everlasting Sorrow; theme-based teaching; multiple interpretations; critical thinking; secondary school Chinese

1. Introduction: From Academic Controversy to Teaching Resource

The controversy over the theme of The Song of Everlasting Sorrow began the moment the poem appeared and has continued for a thousand years without ceasing [1,2]. From the "allegory theory" championed by Chen Yinke, to the "love theory" advocated by Zhang Anzu and other scholars, to the "sentimental theory" put forward by Wen Bin and others, and to the "dual theme theory" that seeks to reconcile the contradictions, every position rests on detailed evidence [3-6]. This unending academic debate is itself proof of the richness of the poem's content and the complexity of its art. In traditional secondary school Chinese teaching, however, we have grown used to finding a "standard answer" for our students, either stressing "allegory" in order to bring out the poem's social function or favoring "love" in order to stir emotional resonance. This imperceptibly flattens the depth of the classic and narrows our students' horizons.

The Chinese Language Curriculum Standards for Senior Secondary Schools stresses the need to develop students' critical thinking and to attend to personalized reading and creative interpretation of literary works. Converting the thematic controversy surrounding The Song of Everlasting Sorrow into a teaching resource, and guiding students to distinguish among the various schools of thought and to live through the process of analysis themselves, can not only deepen their understanding of the text but also strengthen their capacity for independent thinking and their awareness of scholarly inquiry. This paper attempts to connect academic research with basic education and to explore practical teaching strategies for multiple interpretations of The Song of Everlasting Sorrow.

2. An Analysis of the Theories on the Theme of the Song of Everlasting Sorrow: Reasonableness and Limitations

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2.1. The "Love Theory"

The "love theory" focuses on the latter half of the poem and its lavish rendering of the undying love between Li Longji and Yang Yuhuan (quotations from the poem in this paper follow Xu Yuanchong's English translation) [7]. The vow "On high, we'd be two lovebirds flying wing to wing; / On earth, two trees with branches twined from spring to spring"; the loneliness of "Fireflies flitting the hall, mutely he pined away; / The lonely lampwick burned out; still he could not sleep"; and the unrelenting search that goes "Up to the azure vault and down to deepest place" — together they build a poignant and moving tragedy of love [8]. This theory most readily stirs students' emotional response, accords with the features of adolescent emotional cognition, and can quickly narrow the psychological distance between students and classical poetry. Bai Juyi's own remark that *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* is "full of romantic feeling" is commonly read as a reference to the love between man and woman, and it has become an important piece of supporting evidence for this theory [4, 9].

The weakness of the "love theory" is that it cannot respond effectively to the clearly critical tendency of the poem's first half. Lines such as "The beauty-loving monarch longed year after year / To find a beautiful lady without a peer," "She slept till sun rose high, for the blessed night was short, / From then on the monarch held no longer morning court," and "All her sisters and brothers received rank and fief" plainly expose how Emperor Xuanzong neglected state affairs and lavished favors and titles because he was sunk in sensual pleasure. If the theme is attributed purely to a celebration of love, the allegorical tone of the first half looks abrupt or even contradictory and damages the poem's integrity. At the same time, becoming wholly absorbed in the love narrative easily leads students to overlook the poem's historical background and social reality.

2.2. The "Allegory Theory"

The "allegory theory" is rooted in the Chinese poetic tradition of "expressing aspiration and conveying the Way," and it stresses the poem's critique and warning directed at Emperor Xuanzong for letting his craving for beauty ruin the state. Through his study of the poem together with its companion tale, Chen Yinke identified the creative intent behind Chen Hong's Biography of the Song of Everlasting Sorrow — "to punish the femme fatale and block the road to disorder" — and held that this was also Bai Juyi's own purpose in writing the poem [3, 10, 11]. In the poem, the movement from the upheaval of "But rebels beat their war drums, making the earth quake," to the military remonstrance of "Six armies would not march — what could be done?" and then to the tragedy of "The monarch could not save her and hid his face in fear" plainly traces a causal chain in which the swelling of one man's desire brings about the turmoil of the state. This theory brings out the poem's value as historical reflection and helps cultivate students' awareness of social responsibility.

The limitation of the "allegory theory" is that overemphasizing "allegory" easily reduces *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* to a poem of political criticism and weakens the emotional expression and artistic power it possesses as a long narrative poem. The delicate depiction of Xuanzong's deep yearning in the latter half of the poem is filled with profound sympathy and compassion, which differs markedly from simple satire and censure. Moreover, Bai Juyi himself placed the poem among his "sentimental poems" rather than his "allegorical poems," and this explicit act of classification poses a direct challenge to the "allegory theory" at the level of authorial intent [8].

2.3. The "Sentimental Theory"

The "sentimental theory" attempts to move beyond the binary opposition of "love" and "politics" and to examine the emotional keynote of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* from a broader vantage point. On this view, what the poem "everlastingly regrets" is not merely the love tragedy of Li and Yang, but also the lament for the inevitable passing of all beautiful things — love, youth, a golden age — and a profound sigh at the inconstancy of fate and the helplessness of human life. Bai Juyi fused his own tragic experience of love with Xiangling, together with the collective melancholy of mid-Tang literati over the

irretrievable passing of the Kaiyuan golden age, into the story of Li and Yang [12]. The metaphor of flourishing and decline in "Or when in vernal breeze were peach and plum full-blown / Or when in autumn rain parasol leaves were shed," the fading of splendor in the "Rainbow Skirt and Feathered Coat" imagery, and the closing line "But this vow unfulfilled will be regretted for aye" all transcend concrete historical fact and rise to a universal human experience and a mood of the age [5, 9].

Limitations: the "sentimental theory" is highly general in character, and if it is not handled with care it may become vague and empty, weakening attention to the poem's concrete historical content and its social criticism. It lays greater stress on grasping a mood and an atmosphere, and for the explicitly satirical lines in the poem its explanatory power is sometimes less direct and forceful than that of the "allegory theory."

2.4. *The "Dual Theme Theory"*

As a compromise solution, the "dual theme theory" holds that *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* both criticizes Xuanzong's debauchery and misrule and celebrates the steadfast love of Li and Yang [13, 14]. It acknowledges the twofold voice within the text, avoids the one-sidedness of an either/or judgment, and accords better with most readers' intuitive response on a first reading.

The crux, however, is that this theory fails to explain satisfactorily how the inner contradiction between the two "themes" is reconciled into unity within the poem. A great work of art usually has a dominant emotional keynote or intellectual core; if the "dual theme" is handled poorly, the work may seem spiritually split and its theme diffuse, for "dominant" and "dual" stand in a certain logical opposition to each other.

3. Teaching Practice for Multiple Interpretations

In the secondary school Chinese classroom, the teacher should not act as the announcer of conclusions but as the organizer and guide of a process of inquiry. For teaching the theme of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, the following paths may be designed:

Close reading to lay a solid foundation: guide students to analyze the poem passage by passage and to look for textual evidence that supports different views. Groups may, for example, sort out the lines with a critical edge (such as "From then on the monarch held no longer morning court" and "The emperor was never tired the whole day long") and the lines steeped in feeling (such as "The monarch's heart was daily gnawed by sorrow keen" and "Like a spray of pear blossoms in spring rain impearled"), and compile an "evidence list." This is the foundation of all discussion [8].

Understanding the poet and his times to restore the context: supply the historical background of the An Lushan Rebellion, the life of Bai Juyi (especially his love affair with Xiangling), the social atmosphere of the mid-Tang, and Bai Juyi's theory of poetic creation (Letter to Yuan Jiu) [12, 15]. Encourage students to consider: How did the poet's personal experience and his sense of his age shape the writing? What does his act of placing this poem among the "sentimental poems" indicate?

Clashing views and debate to clarify reasoning: organize a "debate competition on the theme of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*." Set up the "love camp," the "allegory camp," and the "sentimental camp," among others; each group states its position and questions the others. In the debate, students must engage deeply with the text, marshal what they know, and hone their logic and expression.

Introducing scholarship to broaden horizons: at appropriate moments, introduce students who have capacity to spare to the representative views of scholars such as Chen Yinke, Zhang Zhongyu, and Wen Bin (simplified summaries may be provided), so that they come to know the scholarly frontier and understand that plurality and openness of interpretation are the norm in literary research [3, 5, 13, 14].

Moving toward integration and encouraging original insight: on the basis of full discussion, guide students to consider whether a higher-order "theme" might encompass or explain these different facets. For example, might the core of *The Song of Everlasting*

Sorrow lie in revealing "the complexity of human nature and the predicament of fate" — Xuanzong is at once an incompetent ruler and a deeply loving man, and both the splendor of a golden age and personal love are ultimately dissolved in the inconstancy of history? Encourage students to form well-reasoned, well-grounded personal views and to write short essays.

Confronted with so outstanding and so complex a masterpiece, secondary school teachers and students can cultivate and refine themselves precisely through inquiry-based learning [16]. The plurality of the work's themes can foster pluralistic thinking; faced with authoritative interpretations, students can read the text closely, question the commentary, cultivate their own critical thinking, and thereby construct a personalized reading of their own; the stature of the work can lift students' inquiry above piecemeal observation and, in the process of collision and correction, extend their thinking and deepen their thought; and the work's brilliant writing can lead students to wander like butterflies through flowers in a sea of imagination, savoring, awakening to insight, and drawing nourishment — thus ensuring that inquiry-based learning has a valid angle, real substance, and genuine elevation, being both efficient and effective.

4. Conclusion

The theme of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* may itself be an "appeal structure" that summons generation after generation of readers to fill it with their own understanding and their own lived experience. In secondary school Chinese teaching, we need not be in a hurry to shut this door to multiple interpretations on our students. On the contrary, we should cherish the space of controversy that this classic text contains, and by guiding students to weigh the reasonableness and the shortcomings of the "love theory," the "allegory theory," the "sentimental theory," and other positions, let them experience the pleasure of inquiry amid the collision of ideas and raise the quality of their thinking in the process of coming to understand complexity. This is not merely teaching a poem; it is, through a poem, cultivating students' powers of thought, judgment, and tolerance in the face of a complex world. Only when the living water of academic research flows into the secondary school classroom can the goal of "forming the person" in Chinese language education be truly realized.

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