

## **Corporeal Liberation – An interpretation of the themes elaborated in Li Zhanyang's *Sex***

by Lu Hong

Matters relating to 'sex' constitute a large proportion of the themes elaborated in works created by Li Zhanyang. With regard to the grasp of his works, one recognizes that these generally divide into two types: one type is based on everyday observation, 'sculpture scenes', in which many persons are figured, conveying the atmosphere of a market scene, e.g. in such representative works as *Night Scene in Chongqing*, *Lido*, *Nanshan Restaurant*. The other kind consists of reinterpretations of history or folktales, in which, by contrast, persons are few and the focal point is more concentrated; most prominent among this latter category are works such as *The Golden Lotus*, *Wu Song Killing his Elder Brother's Wife*, and *Temptation*. The eminently derisory and humorous style the artist employs in these two types of works boldly challenges traditional taboos. This style not only incarnates those persons in a corporeal form absent from traditional art, but also infuses them with the libido that plays such a main role in the creation of such works, and also offers enlightenment from a new angle, thus causing viewers to go and reflect anew on mind and body, something traditional artworks have decided difficulty in doing.

Due to Confucianist culture and 'leftist' political culture of more recent vintage, not only does this secular tradition simply draw an equal sign between 'libido' and 'savagery', but has also instituted many severe penal measures for sexual gratification, with the result that Chinese people have always seen sex as something rather dreadful than otherwise. Over a long period of time, this brought in its train issues of 'sexual repression' and 'physical repression'. Against the harmfulness of these, our culture simply responded by instituting a policy of avoidance of and silence on this issue since, from the standpoint of 'asceticism,' libido and carnality are sinful, and thus need forcible restraints. Based upon the statements of various Western theorists, this is likewise exactly the approach espoused by logicism (rationality) in the suppression of libido, and the result is that people cease to be people. As a modern person, one satisfies one's reasonable carnal requirements and resists the repressive force of logicism. After the advent of China's policy of reform and opening up, the substantial rise in material living standards and the relentless onslaught of pop culture increased the propagation and influence of Western values relating to 'sex' and 'the body' - as exemplified by, e.g. the Marquis de Sade's endorsements of 'carnal delights' and the detailed exposition of Freud's 'libido' and the profound analysis of the body as seen through Bourdieu's field of vision - and Chinese people's consciousness of 'sex' has thereby reached an unprecedented degree of liberation. Li Zhanyang's works also developed against this cultural backdrop and this factor manifests itself in his revelations of people's excessive resistance to 'historical sexual repression' and his depictions wherein they go overboard in trying to overcompensate for these earlier repressions. Another facet here is the phenomenon of the consumer society's urge for excess - a person becomes a mere object of desire, the body replaces the spirit, and thus Li Zhanyang also clearly casts into sharp relief the issues inherent in the entire society's current [deficient] system of values and the grievousness on these issues. In addition, he suggests that people also experience other people merely as a special vehicle for escaping from the realities of repression and hardship. With respect to 'reality' in his works, Li Zhanyang portrays so-called fact - actually the influence of a concrete idea and concept - as a choice, or rather a compromise outcome. For example, in *Wu Song Killing his Elder Brother's Wife*, Li Zhanyang alters the traditional details, by the act of having Wu Song kiss the tender bosom of Pan Jinlian just before he intends to kill her; thus he adumbrates the complexity of human nature.

In his artistic expression, in order to forcefully challenge traditional 'asceticism', Li Zhanyang deliberately presents carnality, stimulation, elegance, vulgarity and scantily-clad, as devices which further induce him to circumvent classical elegance, decorum, dignity, taste and related conventions. Moreover, by borrowing from techniques of Chinese folk art and Jeff Koons and that ilk of Western masters, through a process of integration and transformation, he is able to manipulate and form an individual and unique art *gestalt*. Therefore, in seeking to understand Li Zhanyang's art, one must indeed consider his concept and style as a unified whole.

It is said of Li Zhanyang, that his use of a method similar to comic ridicule, is not only compelled by considerations of pure form, but also from a need to express his ideas in a subjective manner within the framework of art, and thus represents the only means whereby the artist can truly properly deal with his subject matter.

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Translated by Ben Armour