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## A Comparative Study on Imagery in Chinese and English Poetry

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## **A Comparative Study on Imagery in Chinese and English Poetry**

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Imagery is the representation through language of sense of experience. While appealing directly to our sense through music and rhythm, poetry appeals to our sense indirectly through imagery, the representation to imagination through sense experience.<sup>1</sup> Though differed immensely in such aspects as cultural background, aesthetic features, poetic structure and linguistic characteristics, etc., Chinese poetry and English poetry have undoubtedly been a genre of imaginative creation by verbal art. Image denotes a verbal expression that evokes a mental picture or recalls a physical sensation.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, imagery is an inevitable and effective element in composition and appreciation of poetry, both in the Chinese and English languages. This essay attempts to comparatively explore the affinity and differences of imagery in traditional Chinese and English poetry.

### **1. Theoretical Viewpoints on Imagery in Verse**

Though western poetics and traditional Chinese poetics come from different cultural background and literary concepts, the noted impotent theorists, Western and ancient Chinese, have had similar views on the literary and aesthetic functions of imagery in poetry. In ancient China, on the one hand, Liu Xie (ca. 465 – ca. 520) held that “an original writer of a poet should create in imagery”<sup>3</sup> Wang Chang – ling (698 – 756) pointed that imagery is a combination of the subjective and the objective

(*The Modes of Poetry*). Hu Ying-lin (1551 – 1602) believed that “the essence of the classical poetry lies in the arrangement of imagery” (*Commentaries on Poetry*), etc. On the other hand, in the west, G. E. Lessing (1729 – 1781) said that imagery is the sensuous impression produced in poetry (*Laocoon*), Ezra Pound (1885 – 1973) defined imagery as “an intellectual and emotional complex” and emphasized to such an extent: “it is better to present one image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works.”<sup>4</sup> Rene Wellek (1903 – ) pointed out that “imagery is one component structure of a poem”<sup>5</sup> etc. In western poets, imagery is sometimes identified with metaphor or simile, etc. For instance, F. S. Brown defined imagery as “words or phrases denoting a sense – perceptible object, used to designate not that object but some other objects of thought belonging to a different order of being.”<sup>6</sup> Here differences as well as affinities in the significance and function of imagery in Chinese and western poetry could thus be seen from the above viewpoints, produced on different cultural background and from different historical periods. Since the 20th century has ever been regarded as a century of literary theories, many new schools and new concepts of poetics have appeared during this period. As a result of the new developments in this field, the theoretical exploration of imagery in eastern and western poetry has gone into a deeper and broader scope.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Basic Functions of Imagery in Verse

Since image is used to primarily evoke a mental picture or recall a physical sensation, imagery has similar basic functions in composing Chinese and English poems. This similarity is embodied in the following points:

1. To effectively convey the poet's emotion and thought, and help to establish poet's artistic style. For instance, Li Bai's elegant and unconstrained style is formed from such images as “vast sea, endless sky roc, sword, bright moon, yellow river, the immortal”, etc., while Robert Frost's fresh and unaffected style is produced by the images like “woods,

pasture, tuft of flowers, scythe, brook, birches, snowy evening", etc..

2. To make the abstract concepts concrete and sensuous. For instance, Li Yu's "Should I be asked how much my sorrow has increased, / Just see the overbrimming river flowing east." The abstract concept "sorrow" is turned sensuous in the image of "overbrimming river". Similar is "beauty" and "garment" in W. Wordsworth's "This city now doth like a garment wear / The beauty of morning";

3. To embody and reveal rich and profound content. In Yuan Zhen's "An Old Palace", a few images of "deserted bowers, red palace flowers and white-haired dame" have been deliberately arranged to imply the decline of the Tang Dynasty. In T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land", such images of common objects as "rock, no rain, sandy road, dead mountain mouth of carious teeth, dry sterile thunder without rain", etc., have been chosen to represent the depression of the then western society and the hollowness and hopelessness of the people survived from the disaster of World War I.

4. To create novel and original artistic figures and atmosphere. The images of "Falling Milky Way" and in Li Bai's "Its (cataract) torrent dashes down like three thousand feet from high / I wonder if it's Milky Way falls from the sky" and "twine compasses" in John Donne's "As stiff twine compasses are two; /... Thy firmness makes me circle just, / And makes me end where I begun" have generally been regarded as original and everlasting in poetic imagery.

### 3. Main Categories of Imagery in Verse

Since poetry is a genre of literary creation with imagery represented through language, which could generally apply in any poetic work, there are many affinities in classifying images in Chinese and English poetry into two major sorts and several subsequent groups.

A. Appealing to human senses. In poetry creation, poets use fresh images to appeal to various human senses in order to represent emotion and imagination. For instance, in Li He's "On Hearing Li Pin the Musi-

cian Playing on Kong Hou, the String Instrument” there are visual images (serene hills, gathering clouds), auditory (phoenix’s cry, weeping of lotus), olfactory (fragrant orchid), tactile (cold light, wet chilly dew-drops), kinesthetic (jump of old fish, dance of dragon), etc. Similarly, in R. Browning’s “Meeting at Night” there are visual images (gray sea, long black land), auditory (a voice less loud), olfactory (sea – scented beach), tactile (warm beach) and kinesthetic (the quick sharp scratch, two hearts beating), etc. . In addition to above images appealing respectively to one human sense, synaesthetic image integrates two or more such images and appeals simultaneously to several human senses: “The sound of bell is wet beyond the cloud” (Du Fu) and “I cannot see what flower s are at my feet, / Nor what soft incense hangs upon the bough, / But in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet”, (J. Keats); B. Based on poet’s intent. (1) descriptive: “From hill to hill no bird in flight, / From path to path no man in sight. / A straw – clock’d man in a boat, lo! / Fishing on river clad in snow.” (Liu Zongyuan), and “Spring goeth all in white, / Crowned with milk – white may; . . . / White butterflies in the air, / White daisies prank the ground;” (R. Bridges); (2) metaphorical: “The grief of separation is like a spring grass, / Growing each day you’re farther away ” (Xin Qiji) and “O my love’s like a red, red rose / That’s newly sprung in June” (R. Burns); (3) symbolic: “The tangerine grows south of the River, / Its leaves remain green in winter ” (Zhang Jiuling) and “O Rose, thou art sick, / The invisible worm. . . / Does thy life destroy” (W. Blake); (4) abstract: not very common in classical Chinese poetry: “Men have sorrow and joy, they part and meet again” (Su Shi), while common in English poetry: “And a voice less loud, through its joys and fears” (R. Browning); etc. .

#### 4. Image Organization in Verse

Though there is an unimaginably great variety of poetic works in the Chinese and English languages, and poetry creation, of much personality and diversity, seems to be unreasonable and mysterious, its process might

still be summed up as briefly as mere selection and organization of images. Based on its deliberate selection, image - organization is apparently another inevitable and effective stage in the whole process of poetry creation. Here are some basic forms of image - organization, which is related to the general classification of "simply imagery" and "compound imagery" by James J. Y. Liu<sup>8</sup> As Chinese and English poetry differ immensely in philosophical thinking, linguistic structure and aesthetic presentation, etc. such differences are embodied in image - organization.

1. Assemblage. Without link verbs, connectives or syntactic marks between the images, a condensed image - cluster could better provoke the readers' imagination. It is very common and effective in Chinese poetry: "The rooster's crow, a thatched cottage and the moon; / The footprints, a little bridge and frost" (Wen Tingyun), while it is not common in English poetry: "Cotton and the moon, / Warmth, earth, warmth, / The sky, the sun, the stars. / The magnolia - scented South" (L. Hughs)

2. Juxtaposition. The related images are organized in parallel structure, comparison or contrast, etc. . The clear syntactic structure and detailed description could effectively present poets' intent and produce a distinct mental picture. For instance, "Two golden orioles sing amid the willows green, / A row o white egrets fly into the blue sky" (Du Fu); "Farewell to the mountains cover'd with snow, / Farewell to the straths and green valley below" (R. Burns);

3. Derivation. Several subordinate images are derived from the key one, which could provide readers with a detailed as well as complete mental picture. For instance, "Ten thousand branches of tall tress begin to sprout, / They droop like fringes of a robe made of green jade" (He Zhizhang), here "willow trees" is the key image while the rest are subordinate ones; "There is a garden in her face / Where roses and white lilies grow" (T. Campion), in which "garden" is the key image while the rest are the subordinate ones;

4. Superposition. Ezra Pound coined this term to refer the linkage of a "tenor image" with a "vehicle image" without any connectives like

"to be, as, like", etc. . Praised as "true essence of imagism " by Ezra Pound, this ingenious device of image - organization is used to combine the metaphorical images to stimulate readers' imagination. For instance, "Her jade - white face with tears in lonely world, / Pear blossoms in spring rain with a spray imperaled" (Bai Juyi) and "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough." (Ezra Pound). The gap between "jade - white face" and "pear blossoms" could stimulate readers' imagination, and so does the gap between "faces" and "petals " in Pound's "In a Station of the Metro".

### 5. Difference of Imagery between Chinese and English Poetry

Basically, traditional Chinese poetry is featured by its lyricism<sup>9</sup> and the dominant imagery of the Chinese tradition is drawn from nature. So in Chinese poetry, image usually refers to a natural connection between an object, its perception and its representation, and thus closes the space between the poet and the World. With the space closed, the presence of the perceiver seems to dissolve with the object into the perception. It could be concluded that image in Chinese poetry is usually produced from the combination of an object and poet's emotion. On the other hand, image in English poetry, often regarded as "an imitation of an action", plays upon the space the poem makes between the poet and the world. The primary trope that constructs such a space is metaphor and allegory. Imagery in Chinese poetry could incite closer and more intimate connection between the perceiver and the object of perception than metaphor and allegory in traditional English poetry.<sup>10</sup> Take the moon image from Chinese and English poetry for example. In Li Bai's "I raise my cup to invite the moon who blends / Her light with my shadow and we're three friends" (Drinking Alone under the Moon ), this image closes the space between the poet and the object, and present a connection between the moon, its perception and presentation. In comparison with this, in T. Hardy's "Close up the casement, draw the blind. / Shut out that stealing moon. / She wears too much the guise she wore / Before our lutes were

strewn "(Shut Out That Moon), the moon image, with its metaphorical meaning, could hardly present an intimate connection of the poet and the world, so the space between the two is obvious.

With regard to aesthetic features, the traditional English poetry is characterized, in a general sense, by its directness, profundity and elaboration, exhibited in various changing images, whereas the traditional Chinese poetry is marked by its suggestiveness, subtlety and simplicity, presented in a few deliberately chosen fine images. Here is a pair of examples involving the same theme: the heroine's longing for her lover. On the one hand, there is no concrete descriptions on the lady's outer appearance and her inner emotion in Li Bai's "Longing on Marble Steps": "The marble steps with dew grow white. / It soaks her gauze socks late at night. / She lowers then the crystal screen. / And gazes at the moon, clear and serene." However, what readers could perceive and imagine from such fine images as "white dew, crystal screen lowered, clear and serene moon" etc., is obviously much more than what the detailed description could give. On the other hand, there are various sorts of images evolved in E. B. Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese No. 6": "Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand / Henceforward in the shadow. Nevermore / Alone upon the threshold of my door / Of individual life..." There are concrete images (sunshine, my hand, pulses that beat double, tears of two, etc.), abstract ones (my soul, individual life, doom, the sense, etc.), and figurative and symbolic images (thy shadow, the threshold of my door, the widest land, the wine must taste of its own grape, etc.) In such poems, the poet's intent is generally presented with detained descriptions through a great variety of changing images.

## 6. Mutual Influence via Imagery between Chinese and English Poetry

Western Imagist poets like Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, W. C. Williams and J. G. Fletcher, etc. were strongly influenced by classical Chinese poets like Li Bai, Wang Wei and Bai Juyi (and also influenced by Japanese Haiku). The fresh, distinct and condensed images of the Orien-



tal poetry provided a decisive stimulus to the establishment and development of the Anglo - American Imagist poetry, which broke the conventions of the romantic poetry and initiated the various schools of modernist poetry in the West. Such recurrent images in Chinese poetry as "moon, river, snow, pine, tree leaves, wind, rain, etc." are among the most influential for those Anglo - American poets, who adopted such images in their own creation, along with the devices (juxtaposition, superposition, etc.) of image organization in Chinese poetry. When paying his tribute to Chinese poetry, Ezra Pound praised it as "a treasury to which the next century look for as great a stimulus as the renaissance had from the Greeks."<sup>11</sup> The imagery of classical Chinese poetry has long exerted its influence upon English poetry in both general poetic concepts and specific devices of poetry composition.

On the other hand, the Chinese poets in / after "May 4th Movement" in 1919, like Hu Shi, Wen Yiduo, Zhu Xiang and Guo Moruo, obtained in their turn much of their inspiration and imagery directly from such Anglo - American poets as P.B. Shelley, J. Keats, A. Tennyson, H. W. Longfellow and W. Whitman, etc.. Though such Chinese scholar - poets had long had a sound foundation of traditional Chinese culture and literature, they still preferred to make their experiments and innovations with the inspiration and nourishment, largely via the imagery from English poetry. Apart from the Western poetic concepts and forms, they adopted, in their turn, such images as "star, sun, nightingale, Muse, arrow, etc." from English poetry for their own creation. It could be safely said that there would be no such a dramatic breaking of the conventions in China's long term poetic history without the influence from the imagery and concept of Western poetry in general and Anglo - American poetry in particular.

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