

# Image, Impressionism and Imagism: Dialogue between Chinese and Western Poetics on Image

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## ABSTRACT

Image is the intermediary between language and emotion. Image is a very important poetic category in both Chinese and Western literary theories. The categories of “aspirations and emotion”, “imagery” and “artistic conception” in Chinese literary theory and the Impressionism and Imagism in Western literary theory are all for expressing and understanding the natural or supernatural image. There are similarities and connection between the concept of image in Chinese poetics and that of Western poetics, as well as obvious differences. Furthermore, the image views of Chinese and Western poetics also have the relations of communication, dialogue and mutual influence. Image is a bridge that forms the dialogue between Chinese and Western poetics and connects Eastern and Western cultures.

**Keywords:** *image; Impressionism; Imagism; Chinese and Western poetics*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the system of poetry text formed by wording, image and meaning, image plays a pivotal role in connecting the whole system, and it is the core of poetry works. In the process of poetry creation, the poet's aspirations and emotions are transformed into image or imagery, from which come out “images beyond the image”. Image is also in the middle of the chain of poetic activities. Therefore, if aspirations and emotions are the origin of poetry, image is the substance of poetry, for it also constitutes the aesthetic substance of poetry art.<sup>[1]</sup> Without image, it is impossible to grasp the inner taste and aesthetic implication of poetry. Because image plays such an important role in literary creation, both ancient and modern literary theories in China and the West have been discussing it. The traditional poetics of the Chinese nation focuses on aspirations and emotions, artistic conception, strength of character, resonance beyond tone, lingering charm, Ganxing (inspirational appreciation), pneuma, energy, vigor, etc. We can hardly find counterparts of these concepts in Western literary theory, but image is the common thing. To study the association between Chinese and Western poetics on image is conducive to making full sense of the unique charm of Chinese and Western literature and art, and it is also of great significance to connect Chinese and Western culture.

## 2. IMAGE IN CHINESE POETICS

The original Chinese name of “Yixiang (image)” is “Xiang (appearance)”. At first, the meaning of “Xiang” referred to a specific animal, namely elephant. Then, it was also widely used to refer to the appearance of all kinds of objects, including virtual pictures or images. The association of image with the function of ideographic expression originated from the divinatory symbols in *The Book of Changes*. Divinatory symbols were applied as a tool to express the meaning, which was regarded to be the will of Heaven. It was difficult to use ordinary language to express the profound and subtle nature of the will of Heaven. Only by using real or virtual images, supported by the techniques of analogies and symbols, can it be understood and conveyed. Later, the meaning of divinatory symbols was extended to refer to the images of Chinese poetics, and the principle of “abstracting images from viewing” and “creating images to convey meaning” in *The Book of Changes* remained unchanged, but the images in poetry were no longer the images of divinatory symbols or abstract symbols, but concrete and perceptible images. Thus, the image was perceptual and concrete, a simulation and reflection of real things, which had led it to artistic image. The image created to convey meaning was not simply the reflection of objective things or to describe appearance, but also to pursue those implied meanings. In this way, the visual symbolism of

the art and the ideological content of the works were united. The theory of “creating images to convey meanings” from *The Book of Changes* laid a foundation for the image views in the history of ancient Chinese literary theory.

Later on, the concept of image in Chinese poetics had gone through the following development paths. First, the “differentiation and analysis between speech and meaning” originated from Chuang Tzu reached a climax by Wei-Jin metaphysics in the Wei and Jin dynasties, and then image was proposed to fix the gap between speech and meaning. Afterwards, Buddhism’s focus on understanding and comprehension promoted the integration of subject and object with the “object-mind-image” mode. Subsequently, the concept of Qujing (conceptualizing an aesthetic feeling) furthered the use of image in pragmatics.<sup>[2]</sup> In comparison, Yixiang (image) focuses on the author’s expression of meaning by observing objects; Yijing (aesthetic conception) stresses on readers’ sense of artistic images; and Qujing (conceptualizing an aesthetic feeling) lays particular emphasis on the subject’s conscious search and selection of related objects.

In brief, the image in Chinese poetry is the allegorical image, that is to say, the objective image used to express subjective feelings and thoughts. In the tradition of Chinese poetics, “poetry expressing aspirations” and “poetry springing from emotions” are both foundational poetics propositions. Chinese poetry uses language to express aspirations and emotions, and image is often the intermediary between language and emotion. The artistic image that can be described to carry aspirations and emotions in poetry is imagery. “The silkworm keeping on making silk until death; the candle keeping on tear-dropping until being ash” is imagery; “cocks crow, small inn and the moon; footprints, boards of bridge and the frost” is also imagery. Confused by “ideas not being able to match actual things and words not being able to fully express ideas”,<sup>[3]</sup> ancient Chinese literary theory sought for symbolic capacity beyond semantics and syntax. The so-called “imagery” can also be said to be the specific image from life or the impression that people can perceive. One of the outstanding characteristics of ancient Chinese literature creation is that it does not advocate purely objective description of landscapes, but emphasizes the author’s subjective perception and embodiment of them. This point has something in common with literary Impressionism in Western poetics.

### 3. LITERARY IMPRESSIONISM

Literary Impressionism originated from the Impressionism school of painting which rose in France from 1860s to 1990s. The impressionists expressed their ideas mainly through their works, and they produced a number of classical works that are still familiar to us today, such as Manet’s *Lunch on the Grass* and Monet’s

*Impression, Sunrise*. The impressionists tried to capture the changing light and color; and they fully represented the instantaneous visual impression of individuals. Literary Impressionism also advocated expressing intuitions of various senses on sound, color, shape and taste of the external world, and strived to capture vague and fleeting sensory impressions. The concept of literary Impressionism was proposed by Ford Madox Ford, and this idea of artistic creation involved the works of Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, Ford Madox Ford and other important Western modernist writers. Conrad is known as “the pioneer of British and American literary Impressionism”<sup>[4]</sup>, and Ford is honored as “the father of literary Impressionism”<sup>[5]</sup>.

The real world presented by impressionist writers is the impression that an individual sees or feels in an instant of time. Impressionists argue that realistic novels are not natural, not real, because such a novel is an account of the “corrected chronicle”, which puts the direct experience into a kind of narrative process with clear structure, and turns the time, place, and unorganized events into orderly, chronological description. Literary Impressionism aims to change this kind of unreal narrative. Impressionist writers do not think that human beings experience life in such an orderly way, so they present confused, fragmented, yet natural experiences. They focus more on the psychological process of reminiscence, believing that writing should use the perspectives of characters’ consciousness to tell the story, and present accurate impressions of the perceived experience with carefully chosen details.

Achronological narrative is perhaps best represented in the works of Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford. Ford argued that a novel “is not a sort of rounded, annotated record of a set of circumstance.... It is the impression, not the corrected chronicle”;<sup>[6]</sup> “we saw that life did not narrate, but made impressions on our brains. We in turn, if we wished to produce on you an effect of life, must not narrate but render impressions”.<sup>[7]</sup>

Impressionist painters emphasize their subjective feelings by thinking about visual conditions, while literary Impressionists extend the media of perception. It is thus evident that impression is also a kind of image perceived by the subject. The difference between Impressionism and Realism on this point is that Impressionism sees culture as only one of many facets of a person’s experience.<sup>[8]</sup> The juxtaposition of scenes and events is also an important writing technique of Impressionism, the purpose of which is to depict vividly the impression of the character without explanation or comment, and to develop the character in a subtle way. This idea had a profound influence on Ezra Pound’s Imagism.

#### 4. IMAGISM

Imagism refers to the theoretical principles and practice of a group of poets who launched a movement in poetry between 1912 and 1917. The movement was a reaction against the Romantic and Victorian era, which stressed sentimental language, idealism and an interest in the supernatural. In contrast, Imagism focused on simple and precise language, which provided accurate representations of a poem's central subject. In the spring of 1912, Ezra Pound discovered the poems of Hilda Doolittle and Richard Aldington were special and described them as Imagists, thus officially launching the Imagist movement.

The poetry that dominated the Anglo-American poetry of that period was long and rambling, full of the sense of preaching and sentimental moans. Imagism emphasized poets' capture and creation of images, requiring them to objectively present personal instant feelings. It advocated concise, clear, hard and fresh poetry, creating new rhythms and writing free poems in plain and clear language.<sup>[9]</sup> Imagist poetry merely shows images without making any comments, moral preaching or explicit guidance of value orientation. Instead, Imagist poetry condenses all the meanings of the poem into images and only uses pictures to arouse readers' perception of the images. The juxtaposition of images is merely the arrangement of nouns, whereas achieving a far greater effect than any other technique. It is not difficult to find that the techniques of "image capture" and "juxtaposition of images" of Imagism are very similar to "impression perception" and "juxtaposition of scenes and events" of literary Impressionism. That is because Ford Madox Ford's Impressionism had the greatest influence on Pound's Imagism in the process of forming the artistic principles of Imagism.

Pound learned about Impressionism from Ford. It can even be said that the Imagist movement is mainly a development tendency of Impressionism.<sup>[10]</sup> Pound once said that Mr. Ford was the only person he was willing to discuss poetry with in London<sup>[11]</sup>, and that "we would not be far wrong in calling Mr. Ford the best lyricist in England"<sup>[12]</sup>. Ford's poem "Finchley Road," about emerging from the underground at that London station, barely describes the train or the scene, but it sets up a contrast between an oppressive, overcast urban modernity and a nostalgic fantasy of a romantic past. Pound's celebrated "In a Station of the Metro" works by a comparable juxtaposition, except that where Ford contrasts irreconcilabilities, Pound offers a metaphorical timeless orientalsounding equivalent to his vision of haunting faces in the station. They are both concerned with perceptions, but of psychological states rather than visual appearances. Pound condenses Ford's more discursive, conventional stanzaic form down to a haiku-like pair of lines.<sup>[13]</sup>

For Pound, Impressionism was simply an attempt to record or transcribe perceptions, and he thought art, especially poetry, should do more. Pound believed that a shortcoming of Impressionism was that there was no proper medium, and no impression that could record the momentary sense of insight that a work of art could and must convey. Pound considered that Ford's Impressionism was too objective, and the ideal creative technique in his eyes was one that could naturally and perfectly unify the objective world with the subjective world. It was this form of expression that he used in Imagism: the presentation of images through clear, accurate descriptions, thus connecting objective descriptions with subjective feelings.

Imagist poetry uses details that evoke our visual, auditory, olfactory, taste, and tactile responses, which can evoke our memories, stimulate our emotions, and trigger our responses. This is identical to Ford's perception of impression. The difference between Imagism and Impressionism lies in that Impressionism focuses on how to present the author's perception of the world, while Imagism emphasizes the complex and indescribable subjective feelings contained in images; impression is true in subjective sense, while image is sometimes illusory, and it has rich connotation of new concepts produced by the superposition and combination of images.

#### 5. DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHINESE AND WESTERN POETICS ON IMAGE

Imagism poetry also has a deep connection with ancient Chinese poetry. Pound became interested in Chinese poetry when he read *A History of Chinese Literature* (Herbert A. Giles, 1901) in September 1913. With a poet's sensibility, he was aware of the unique flavor of Chinese poetry, even if what he read was "second-hand". Pound also chose four ancient Chinese poems which were translated into English by Giles, and translated them with adaptation, which could be said to be image poems created by Pound based on the theme of these four poems and the principle of Imagism. In October, Pound came across Ernest Fenollosa's notes on Chinese poetry, and compiled them into a collection of translated Chinese poems called *Cathay*. Thus, T.S. Eliot called Pound "the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time"<sup>[14]</sup>. Pound also noted that the poetry of the Imagists was in some ways strikingly similar to the Chinese poetry translated by Fenollosa, and that the imagery contained in ancient Chinese poetry coincided with his Imagist principles. For example, in Chinese, "human face" and "peach blossom" had formed a classic image due to the famous Chinese poem line "a comely face and peach blooms together did glow" (translated into English by Xu Yuanhong) written by Cui Hu in the Tang dynasty. Pound's poem "In a Station of the Metro" has the

similar image: “The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough.”

This poem is similar to classical Chinese poetry, achieving profound aesthetic conception with a good image. The Chinese character “Ying (shadow or apparition)”, which presents a phantom feeling, implies a transient feeling of intense shock. “The apparition of these faces” gives the reader not a single association, but multiple hints. The juxtaposition of the two concepts of the flowering tree and the nameless face in the city creates an image of visual beauty and richness, which leads the reader to discover a ghostly beauty and a sense of amazing discovery caused by this particular scene. The two concepts described in the poem are clearly visible, but their combination presents an image that cannot be described in a picture.

Although ancient Chinese poetry did not directly promote Pound to launch Imagism movement, it might indirectly affect Pound’s poetic theory and poetry writing.<sup>[15]</sup> Moreover, there are many similarities between Imagism and ancient Chinese poetry. First of all, the principles of “direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective” and “to use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation”<sup>[16]</sup> resemble the styles of Chinese classical poetry which is characterized by conciseness and rich meaning. Secondly, Imagist poetry is as intuitive as Chinese poetry. In ancient Chinese poetics, even abstract thoughts are expressed through concrete images, such as “antelopes hanging their horns from trees at night” as a metaphor for superlative poetic art, showing no trace of effort. Pound especially criticized the Western tradition of “abstraction” and highly appreciated the concretization of ancient Chinese poetry. Thirdly, Imagist poetry and Chinese classical poetry have the same characteristics of image juxtaposition. Imagist poets regard the juxtaposition of images as the most expressive aspect of Chinese characters and classical Chinese poems. For example, the juxtaposition of images in Ma Zhiyuan’s “Tune: Sunny Sand Autumn Thoughts” and the juxtaposition of “faces” and “petals” in Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” both leave a lot of uncertain imagination space for readers. Finally, association is used as an intermediary to link objects and images. Chinese poets often attach subjective feelings to objective things, but they rarely state their feelings or thoughts directly. Imagists agree to this characteristic of Chinese classical poetry, and in their works, they do not simply copy nature, but permeate subjective emotions. From the aesthetic point of view, the meaning in the image is the aesthetic experience of the aesthetic subject to objective things, and the image is the aesthetic object. Meaning plus image is the product of active reflection of the aesthetic subject to the aesthetic object, and is the organic unity of aesthetic consciousness of the subject and aesthetic characteristics of the object.

Because of the tradition of expressing aspirations,

Chinese poetics always regards image as the entity of poetry life. Without this entity, there is no poetry. This is the reason why both ancient and modern poetics at home and abroad should pay attention to image and consider it as the core category of poetry aesthetics. However, due to the differences in origin and development history, the concept and connotation of image of Chinese and Western poetics are not identical. Chinese poetics do not regard grasping the image of external things as the purpose of cognition, but emphasizes the integration and inherent relations between heaven, earth, and man. This is different from the Western concept of imitation. The image in Western poetics is generated on the basis of the imitation of existence, paying more attention to the rational understanding of external existence through accurate and realistic representation of objects. Therefore, the image of Western poetics is always with strong rational thinking and metaphysical elements.

Ancient Chinese literary theory tends to convey the overall characteristics of creating and appreciating works by means of figurative discourse. The image in Western poetics is far from the ideographic image in Chinese poetics, as it refers to presentation, in psychology, of the remains of perceived impressions (presentation of memory) or processed products (presentation of imagination) in one’s consciousness. Western aesthetic and art theories often ascribe aesthetic image to the product of imagination activities. The word “imagination” is derived from “image”, but is often limited to perceptual knowledge, which is also different from Chinese traditional image thinking based on the idea of “interaction between the mind and the subject matter”.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Imagist poetry rose, advocating that poetry should focus on presenting “image” instead of indulging in emotional catharsis. Pound defined the “image” as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”<sup>[17]</sup>, which then is a little closer to the idea of ideographic imagery in Chinese poetry. However, Imagists especially emphasize the instant feeling and direct presentation, and this tends to stay in the stage of intuitive impression, of which the implied meaning is inevitably thin and narrow, unlike the rich and colorful images in ancient Chinese poems. Moreover, the image concept of Chinese poetics has a cultural inheritance process, and the image view has always been one of the core categories of Chinese poetics. Relatively speaking, the Western image concept is scattered in various schools of literary theory.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Image is the core connotation of literary and artistic creation and evaluation, whether in the categories of Yixiang, Yijing, Qujing in ancient Chinese poetry, or in Symbolism, Impressionism and Imagism in Western literary theory. Western image view is not limited to

Imagism, and litterateurs and critics in each period have formed their own views on image, including Mimesis, medieval Christ theological imagery, Intuitionism, Symbolism and Impressionism. Image is an important point of intersection between Chinese and Western poetics, because human nature and deep emotions are common in spite of different cultures, times and regions.

Imagism accepted the techniques of concretization and juxtaposition in ancient Chinese poetry, and in turn it influenced modern Chinese poetry through its style of breaking away from the shackles of metrical forms. Imagism also accepted the writing techniques of color sense, internal perspective and juxtaposition from Impressionism, which also exerted an influence on Chinese literary criticism in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In a word, image can be said to be a bridge between Eastern and Western culture. Although differences in ways of thinking, cultural tradition and philosophical background resulted in differences in the process of image generation, image acquisition and image acceptance between Chinese and Western poetics, the image views of Chinese and Western poetics are no longer the divergences of “inspirational appreciation” and “nature imitation” or the dichotomy of “fusion of feelings with the natural setting” and “separation between feelings and the natural setting”, and they influence each other and gradually become interconnected and integrated.

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