A Comparative Study of Classical Chinese and English Love Poetry

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Abstract. Love is a perpetual theme in the realm of literature. Both Chinese and English poets have left with us numerous priceless legacies. Due to disparate cultural backgrounds, classical Chinese love poems and English ones have a world of differences. In this paper, the author aims to compare the differences in the classical love poetry between China and England from the perspective of content, writing style and art of expression.

Introduction

Mark Overby says that love is much like a wild rose, beautiful and calm, but willing to draw blood in its defense. There are a lot more inspirational quotations on love. As God created human beings he also created a partner of the opposite gender, which makes love possible. Love can be seen, can be heard, can be touched, can be smelt and can be felt in any time and any place. We are always immersed in sweetness when love comes and break our heart when love goes like a puff of wind. We will be in a state of ecstasy for the ultimate hard-earned union of prince and princesses and become tearful for a melancholy love story. We sometimes wonder at the power of love and are willing to make sacrifices for the sake of it. Love is an eternal theme in realm of literature. There is no theme in the world that has gained such great attention as the theme of love. It is like a magnet, sending off tremendous power. Poets’ passion for love has never been exhausted. Poets at both home and abroad have left with us numerous literary treasures. Whatever the form, style and tone, the ultimate purpose of their poems is the same: to express with letters their love, admiration for their lovers, their melancholy because of the loss of love. There are common themes in both Chinese and English classical poems, but at the same time there exists a world of difference because of disparate cultural backgrounds. The present paper aims to explore the general differences between classical Chinese love poems and English poems.

Differences in Content

Ancient Chinese love poems are mostly memories and reflections on the love life after marriage. There are few poems about love life before marriage. That is closely connected with the Chinese federal society where the dividing line between men and women was very clear. Traditionally, single men and women didn’t have the freedom to choose their own spouses according to personal preference. Mostly, matches were arranged by go-betweens according to the wishes of the parents. It was most likely that the two couldn’t meet each other until their wedding day. In Chinese classic al poems, separation and reunion, lament, marriage misfortune and loyalty to love have always been topic of concern for ancient Chinese poets.

Chinese poet in Tang Dynasty Li Shangyin’s Poem A Note on a Rainy Night to a Friend in the North is a typical example of love poems on separation. “You ask me when I am coming. I do not know. / I dream of your mountains and autumn pools brimming all night with the rain. / Oh, when shall we be trimming wicks again, together in your western window? / When shall I be hearing your voice again, all night in the rain?”[1] The poet does not directly say that he misses his wife who is thousands miles away. Instead, he imagines his wife asking about the date of his return. At the same time, he replies to his wife with unexpected date of return and expresses his helplessness for their
long-term separation. The poet presents us with the imageries: “mountains”; “autumn pools,” “night” and “rain.” In the mountain where his wife lives, the autumn pools brim with the night autumn rain. Through these scene descriptions, we can feel the poet’s sense of loneliness and his endless yearning for his beloved in a sleepless night. He imagines a heart-warming picture in which they are “trimming wicks again” at home and talking side by side “all night in the rain.” The two lovers are thousands of miles apart, but they are still emotionally connected.

The aspiration of perpetual love between the two is frequently expressed in classical Chinese love poems. Take a Chinese love poem Oh, by Heaven for example. Created in the Han Dynasty in ancient China, this poem presents the heroine’s loyalty to love. “And my love to thee will last forever— / Till mountains crumble, / Rivers go dry, / Thunder roars in winter, / Snow falls in summer, / And the earth mingles with the sky. / Not till then will my love die”[2]. In Chinese people’s eyes, faithfulness in marriage is of great importance and couples long to live a ripe old age in conjugal bliss.

Good wishes sometimes always fail to come true. It is hard for couples to reach old age together. In Chinese literary realm, there are a large number of elegies, a sad poem often about someone who has died. However, elegies only consist of a very small percentage in classical English poems. There is a sense of agony, pity and melancholy in most classical love poems of this kind. A Dream of My Deceased Wife—To the tune of Riverside Town is a case in point. In Chinese literature, it can be included into the category of Ci, a type of classical Chinese poetry originating in the Tang Dynasty and fully developed in the Song Dynasty. In the poem, the well-known poet in the Song Dynasty Su Shi missed his deceased wife every day and night and he dreamed of her because of his endless yearning for her. “Your death ten years ago yawns like an abyss over my life, / All the time, your image constantly comes to my mind / Since your tomb is one thousand miles away left behind. / We recognized each other not, even if we meet one day, / For my face is dust-ladden, and my hair grows grey. / Last night in dream I come back to our home town, / By the small window you make up and dress your gown. / Wordless, we face each other with tears streaming down. / Oh, thinking of your pine-covered grave the moon shines upon, / I know, each year my heart-broken sorrows shall never be gone!”[2] Compared with the predecessors, Su Shi’s elegy for his deceased wife is unique in its art performance. He cannot forget his beloved even ten years after her death. He makes a "dream" in which he reunites with his wife, which is absolutely impossible in real life. Dream is only a reflection of his longing for his deceased wife. This poem depicts a lonely, sorrowful and helpless widower whose love for wife is extremely deep.

Different from classical Chinese poems, English poets tend to depict love life before marriage with letters, such as admiration and yearning for their beloved as well as their melancholy because of the loss of love. When a man helplessly falls in love with a woman, he cannot wait to tell her openly. Westerners consider that love is of paramount importance in their life. In the poem Maid of Athens written by George Gordon Byron, the author describes a beautiful girl who has unconfined tresses, soft cheeks, zone-encircled waist and wild eyes. “Maid of Athens, ere we part, / Give, oh, give back my heart! / Give, oh, give back my heart! / Or, since that has left my breast, / Keep it now, and take the rest! / Hear my vow before I go, / Hear my vow before I go, / My life, I love you! / By those tresses unconfined, / Wood by each Aegean wind; / By those lids whose jetty fringe / Kiss thy soft cheeks' blooming tinge; / By those wild eyes like the roe, / My life, I love you!...”[3]. Every single word in the poem indicates the poet’s great passion for the beautiful girl, and he also directly yells out his love from the bottom of heart: “my life, I love you.”

The carpe diem is a common theme in English love poems. Take for example To His Coy Mistress written by Andrew Marvell. This piece is a carpe diem “seduction poem,” in which the narrator is talking a lady into surrendering her virginity. “Time’s winged chariot hurrying near,” so they don’t have the luxury of time. What is left to them to do is to live fully during the brief span allotted them. “Now therefore, while the youthful hue/sits on thy skin like morning dew, / And while thy willing soul transpires / At every pore with instant fires,/Now let us sport us while we may”[4]. “Transpires” means perspires. The sweat of passion is as precious and fleeting as morning dew. To "sport" is to make love. Evidently, these lines have sexual implications. “Let us roll all our strength and all our sweetness up into one ball, /And tear our pleasures with rough strife thorough the iron gates of life.”
Obviously, these lines also have sexual implications which serve to show the passion of love. Sex is a taboo in ancient China. In daily conversation people always evade this topic, not to mention in literary works. Pornographic books were strictly forbidden, for it would corrupt public morals. Consequently, in classical Chinese poems there is no room for such sexual implications as those described in *To His Coy Mistress*. Subtleness of love prevails in Chinese love poems. The depiction of a loving stare, a meaningful smile and even the surroundings can express the love that will not die even when the sea dries, the rocks melts and the sand runs.

**Differences in Writing Style**

Chinese and English love poems have distinctive writing style. Westerners tend to stress clarity and directness, however, Chinese tend to soften the effects of what they say by saying it in roundabout and indirect way. Chinese love poems are generally subtle and indirect. In ancient Chinese love poems, one can hardly see any trace of the word “love.” One can only feel the existence of it through the atmosphere the poet created, the imageries, the symbols of love the poet intentionally mentioned or the recall of the sweet scene of love. Chinese people greatly value subtleness in which they find the beauty of life. In this poem entitled, *A Note on a Rainy Night to a Friend in the North* mentioned above, there is not a single word such as “love,” “sorrow,” “sleepless” and “miss,” be we can taste the poet’s deep love, sorrow, sleeplessness, helplessness and yearning in every single word. In addition to love poems, poems concerning friendship and parental love are all in accordance with this rule. Readers are required to have sensitive feelings and sharp eyes so as to unveil the petals little by little. The glamour of poems lies in the process of discovering deep feelings through subtleness.

In traditional Chinese society, great importance has been attached to success in career or official circles. Influenced by traditional values, few men would consider that love is paramountly important. Life is steeped in filial piety, success in career and lots of responsibilities, and love is only one part of their life. Love is a kind of spice served to drive away terror, trouble and tension and functions as the drive for marriage for the purpose of the continuation of a family. One who devotes much of his time to love pursuing and cannot free himself from the loss of love is always scolded as a failure of life. Ancient Chinese people wouldn't pursue love as passionately as the westerners, which offers another reason for the subtleness in the Chinese love poems.

Whereas, English love poems are generally more direct and passionate. Westerners are more open, so they tend to express their feelings with more directness. The word “love” is frequently employed in English poems. The word “love” is repeated seven times in *A Red, Red Rose* written by Robert Burns. Every stanza of *Maid of Athens* written by George Gordon Byron ends by “I love you.” In the eyes of the westerners, the frequent employment of the word love is aimed at voicing the enthusiasm of the poet. They tend to use a direct way of expression instead of a subtle one. In the poem *Maid of Athens*, the poet desperately expressed his longing to “kiss thy soft cheeks' blooming tinge” and “taste that lip.” His considers his beloved “my life.” The entire poem is full of expressions of love and passion, and the poet expressed his deep love for his lover openly and directly. The character of the people is always reflected in literary works. Westerners are characterized by directness. Their directness is a reflection of their confidence and highly valued individualism. Their world is a society in which every individual is encouraged to show his or her own ambitions and feelings. So when a man helplessly falls in love with a woman, he can not wait to tell her. Westerners consider that love is of paramount importance in their life. Sappho lost his life for love. Byron suffered for love and Samuel immersed himself in a state of torture when he lost his love.

**Differences in Art of Expression**

The differences in art of expression between Chinese and English love poems are also obvious. Chinese poets always take advantage of sceneries or imageries to express one's emotion. However, western counterparts generally make use of realistic methods to depict some detailed information, such as a lady ’s cheek, lip, eyes, hair, voice, smile and etc.
The poem *Writing in the Village South of the Capital* written by Cui Hu in the Tang Dynasty is consisted of only four stanzas. After the imperial examination, Cui Hu once meets a beautiful girl by chance in a small village in Changan, the capital of China in the Tang Dynasty. The poem goes like this: “A whole year ago to the gate I did pace. / With blooming peaches shining upon her face. / Now the smiling face which I saw and miss has gone nowhere. / The peaches are still coming into bloom in spring breeze here”[5]. The peach blossoms in the spring breeze are extremely beautiful and the "human face" makes peach blossoms extraordinarily red, which implicitly highlights the beauty of the girl who is more beautiful under the bright peach blossoms. The two imageries “peach blossoms” and glamorous “human face” show the hidden joy and excitement of the two lovers when they meet for the first time [6]. In the last two stanzas, the season of spring blossoms returns and the gateway beside the peach trees remains unchanged. However, the “smiling face” has gone nowhere. The blooming peaches in spring breeze could evoke the poet’s beautiful memories of the past. The familiar scenery but intricate mood intensify the poet’s loneliness and melancholy. God made them meet each other, but he doesn't give them the future.

In western poems, girls’ eyes, lips, hair, cheeks and breast are usually the objects of depiction. The poet’s obsession with the girl is rightly expressed through the girl’s highlighted glamour. In the above-mentioned poem *Maid of Athens*, the poet vividly describes the girl’s appearance: “those tresses unconfined,” “those lids whose jetty fringe,” “thy soft cheeks’ blooming tinge,” “wild eyes like the roe,” “zone-encircled waist.” Through realistic methods, the beautiful girl’s image is vividly presented, which forms a clear contrast with the art of expression in the poem *Writing in the Village South of the Capital* written by Cui Hu. It is common to see English love poems of this kind. Westerners had far more freedom in terms of the choice of their life companions. They were provided with numerous opportunities to meet the opposite sex in different social activities. They dated their lovers and tried to know more about their sweethearts. So the involvement of the description of appearance is possible and very common in classical English love poems.

**Conclusion**

Romantic love is an ineffable feeling of intense attraction between lovers. The subject of love has inspired poets, writers, those lucky in love as well as those who have been passed over by Cupid. The methods of showing this inward feelings in disparate cultures are totally different. Through the comparative study, we have a birds’ eye view of the general differences between classical Chinese love poems and English ones. And what’s more, the underlining reasons for these disparities are explored, which will facilitate cultural understanding and foster cultural exchange in return.

**References**