On the Similarities and Differences of IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry and Image in American Imagist Poetry

Ying-jie GUO
School of Foreign Languages, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi’an 710062, China
*Corresponding author

Keywords: IMAGE, Image, Chinese Tang Poetry, American Imagist Poetry.

Abstract. To examine the similarities and differences between IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry and image in American Imagist Poetry, the thesis employs a comparative study and points out that both of them emphasize the inheritance and essence of the traditional ideas, acquire the inspirations and creations from the natural world, focus upon the representation of man’s inner feelings and unusual considerations, etc. Meanwhile, IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry and image in American Imagist Poetry are the results of different philosophical beliefs, ethnic cultures as well as national consciousnesses since they were cultivated in quite different social environments and historical backgrounds. To sum up, IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry and image in American Imagist Poetry intertextually exist and they are worth comprehensive study.

Introduction

Image, according to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2004), means “the general opinion that most people have of a person, organization, product, etc”, “a picture that you have in your mind, especially about what someone or something is like or the way they look like”, “a phrase or a word that describes something in a poetic way”, etc[1] while in Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (2009), it is termed as “the impression that a person, an organization or a product, etc. gives to the public”, “a mental picture that you have of what sb/sth is like or looks like”, “a word or phrase used with a different meaning from its normal one, in order to describe sb/sth in a way that produces a strong picture in the mind”, etc[2]. From the definitions above, we can find that image concerns “opinion”, “picture”, “impression” or “a word or a phrase” with poetic functions.

In American Imagist Poetry, image is recognized as a significant word and it associates closely with Ezra Pound (1885-1972). Pound is thought to be the most enthusiastic imagist to popularize image in American modern literary history. In 1912, Pound used “imagiste” (the initial form of “imagist”) primitively in his Ripostes to describe the poetic style of T.E. Hulme (1883-1917), an English poet at that time. In March 1913, F.S. Flint (1885-1960) published his famous article “Imagisme” (the initial form of “imagism”) in Poetry and made imagism(e) known as a special literary term. After composing “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste”, Pound edited Des Imagistes in July 1914 and had the Imagist Movement developed in its full swing. The imagists, whom Pound concerned publicly, include at the very start seven poets: Four are American and three are English. Specifically, they are Pound, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle, 1886-1961), Amy Lowell (1874-1925), John Gould Fletcher (1886-1950), Richard Aldington (1892-1962), David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930) and F.S. Flint. Thanks to Pound and his colleagues, image, along with imagism(e) and the Imagist Movement, is increasingly appreciated in world literature.

While in China, Chinese ancient literati had already created IMAGE in Chinese literary history, which looks superficially very similar to image in the Imagist Movement. Fundamentally, they are not the same thing. IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry and image in American Imagist Poetry do share a lot of similarities as well as differences. Hence, it seems fairly essential to have a comparative study about them.
Background of Creating IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry

Speaking of IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry, we have to confess that it did not sprout immediately in Chinese Tang Dynasty. Honestly, it experienced a long and sustaining journey. Tracing back to Chinese history, we may find that the original expression of IMAGE was read as two parts: IM-(yi in Chinese pinyin) and -AGE (xiang in Chinese pinyin). IM- and -AGE as two separate words appeared in Chinese Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States Period (770 B.C.-221B.C.), and were considered as Confucius’s creation in Xici(The Great Treatise, Section I) of Zhouyi(Book of Changes), i.e., “the Master said, ‘The written characters are not fully exponent of speech, and speech is not the full expression of IM-(yi)’… ‘The sages made their -AGE(xiang) to set forth fully their IM-; appointed the diagrams to show fully the truth and falsehood of things…”[3]. Here, IM- refers to one’s ideas while -AGE implies the corresponding emblematic symbols. Zhuang Zi (369 B.C.-286 B.C.?), an ancient Chinese philosopher, ever stated the relationship between IM- and -AGE, i.e., “the reason why speakers emphasize IM- is that they obtain IM- while digesting -AGE”. Wang Bi (226-249), a metaphysician in Chinese Three Kingdom Period(220-265), classified the association between IM-, -AGE and speech, i.e., “-AGE is a representation of IM- while speech is a demonstration of IM-. The best way to show IM- is through -AGE whereas the vivid way to show -AGE is through speech.” The first Chinese critic to combine IM- and AGE- together as a set literary term, i.e., IMAGE, is Liu Xie(465?-520), who earned his reputation in Southern Dynasties (420-589). Liu Xie claimed in his Wen Xin Diao Long(The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons) that “Only those who have unique insight into IMAGE will make perfect work”. So to speak, writing with the appropriate participation of IM- and -AGE is a significant channel to steer the flow of thoughts…However, a distinguished interpretation of IMAGE came out and was recognized in Tang Dynasty. Wang Changling (698-756), one of the typical Tang Poets of this period, declared remarkably and forcefully in his Poetry Style that “Poetry is characterized with three distinctive features or styles, and one is to produce ideas. A poet may run into the occasion of pondering deeply and exhausting his brain to get ideas, yet obtaining nothing. Until taking it easy and adjusting the mental state, the poet would unexpectedly harvest IMAGE and his brilliant ideas are correspondingly produced.”[4] Transparently, in Tang Poetry, IMAGE relates intimately to the wisdom of man and the very existence of nature. To some extent, IMAGE is an integrated being of blending the inner human spirit and the outside natural world, so IMAGE means that man and nature are ONE and they are basically united and indispensable.

Background of Creating image in American Imagist Poetry

Mentioning image in American Imagist Poetry, we refer to Ezra Pound critically because Pound is the one who made image accepted as a significant term in western world. Nevertheless, we have to bear in mind that before Pound, there were many other poets and writers who had done contributions to establishing the meaning of image in American poetry and made image finally recognized in American Imagist Poetry. Specifically, Philip Freneau(1752-1832), father of American poetry, had already created the images like “the wild honey suckle”, “the Indian burying ground”, “a Caty-did”, etc in post-Revolutionary period; William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878), the first American poet to gain serious attention in European countries, had already worked out the images like “Thanatopsis”, “a waterfowl”, “Old Ocean”, etc in the early 1820s; Edgar Allan Poe(1809-1849), a forerunner of American grotesque stories, had already highlighted the images like “Helen”, “the raven”, “Annabel Lee”, etc in 1830s; Ralph Waldo Emerson(1803-1882), father of American Transcendentalism, had already produced the images like “the iron string”, “Nature”, “the Universal Being”, etc in 1840s. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow(1807-1882), the most beloved poet of his time, had already molded the images like “Life”, “the slave’s dream”, “a boy’s will”, etc in 1860s; Walt Whitman(1819-1892), initiator of American free verse, had already impressed the readers with the images like “the leaves of
grass”, “drums”, “captain”, etc in 1890s; Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), a mysterious but talented woman poet, had already written the images like “the drunken bee”, “Beauty”, “Death”, etc.[5]…Hence, T.E. Hulme concluded that “image” must enable one “to dwell and linger upon a point of excitement, to achieve the impossible and convert a point into a line” while Pound labeled “image” in his own way and announced that “image” is a marvelous being “which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”. Comparatively, Pound is believed to have a more appropriate understanding of image. Besides, Pound made his famous “image criteria” known to the world: “(1)Direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective; (2)To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation; (3)As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.”[6] So from Pound, image in American Imagist Poetry is well-accepted.

Similarities of IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry and image in American Imagist Poetry

Both Emphasize the Inheritance and Essence of the Traditional Ideas

In the first place, either IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry or image in American Imagist Poetry emphasizes the inheritance and essence of the traditional ideas because they are the results of their individual traditions. The IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry is much affected by the common sense of the former ancient people and their provoking thoughts while the image in American Imagist Poetry is greatly influenced by the universal knowledge of the historical personages and their shining ideas. For instance, when we feel amazed at He Zhizhang (659?-744?)’s “The Willow Tree”, we initially have the transcendental idea of the willow’s slenderness, slim leaves, numerous branches, etc; When we sing high praise for Wang Zhihuan(688-742)’s “Out of the Great Wall”, we firstly maintain inside a vivid picture of the Great Wall--surrounded by yellow sand, reaching the cloud, amid the mountains, etc; When we consider much about Wang Changlin (698-756)’s “On the Frontier”, we must have our traditional impression of the Frontier that concerns the mountain passes, guardsmen, Flying General, etc[7]…Meanwhile, when we read H.D.’s “Oread”, we must have already made our own judgment of the image of Oread, the sea, the pointed pines, etc; When we refer to Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro”, we undoubtedly have had our own idea of the apparition of the faces, the crowd, the petals, the bough, etc; When we relate to Hulme’s “Autumn”, we certainly have made our opinion of the Autumn night, the ruddy moon, the wistful stars, etc[8]…Briefly, traditional ideas are the sources of not only Chinese Tang Poets but also American Imagist Poets to create striking images.

Both Acquire the Inspirations and Creations from the Natural World

In the second place, IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry and image in American Imagist Poetry concern nature and regard nature as an important vehicle to acquire inspirations. To create wonderful IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry, Tang Poets tried to learn from nature and parody nature one way or another. For instance, Wang Wei(699-761) involved himself in nature and integrated himself with nature, thus singing in “The Bamboo Hut”: “Sitting among bamboos alone,/ I play my lute and croon carefree”; Liu Changqing(726?-786?) found nature spectacular and unusual while “seeking shelter in Lotus Hill on a snowy night”, thus writing “At sunset hills side village still seems far,/ Cold and deserted the thatched cottages are”; Wei Yingwu(737-792) obtained his unique taste of nature “on the West Stream of Chuzhou ”and revealed to his readers “Alone I like the riverside where green grass grows,/ And golden orioles sing amid the leafy trees”[7]…Meanwhile, to make impressive images in American Imagist Poetry, American Imagists also walked closer to nature and imitated nature in their unusual way. For instance, Fletcher composed The Book of Nature and Visions of the Evening in 1913, claiming that nature is a sophisticated book to read and a rare thing to speculate about; Vachel Lindsay(1879-1931), after publishing “Chinese Nightingale” in 1915, realizing that two urgent jobs be done: One is to learn from Chinese poetry, the other is to learn from nature; Amy Lowell (1874-1925), besides doing her utmost to sustain the influence of Imagist Poetry after Pound “retired”, tried to make her effort to create unusual images through observing nature, and the poems in her
“Chinoiseries” are good examples[8]…Obviously, both Chinese Tang Poets and American Imagist Poets consider much about the value of nature in their poetic writing.

Both Focus upon the Representation of Man’s Inner Feelings and Unusual Considerations

In the third place, IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry and image in American Imagist Poetry are essentially the representations of Chinese Tang Poets’ and American Imagists’ inner feelings and unusual considerations of their life and social experiences. Generally, words are the symbols of thoughts. On the one hand, IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry represents Tang Poets’ particular feelings or inward emotions. For instance, Li Bai(701-762) made wine a striking image in his “Invitation to Wine” and take wine as a vehicle to cheer people up and go away from worries: “I only want to get drunk and never to wake./ How many great men were forgotten through the ages?” Du Fu(712-770) made the pressgang an unusual image in “The Pressgang at Stone Moat Village” and inquired with uneasy feelings, “What is the pressgang coming for?/…/ How angry is the sergeant’s shout!/ How bitter is the woman’s cry!” Bai Juyi(772-846) made the charcoal seller a unique image and portrayed his life in “The Old Charcoal Seller”: “What does the old man fear?/ He cuts the wood in southern hill and fires his ware./ His face is grimed with smoke and streaked with ash and dust”[7]…On the other hand, image in American Imagist Poetry demonstrates Imagists’ inner thoughts and speculations. For instance, Flint created the wonderful image of the swan in his “A Swan Song” and filled himself with admiration and happiness, singing “Swan…swan, a pure soul”; Pound, besides the creation of the image of “lady’s hours” and “winter’s wound” in “A Virginal”, also produced the unusual images of “measurless seas and stars”, “Iamblichus light”, “the barb of time”, etc in his epic The Cantos; D.H. Lawrence(1885-1930) created the unique image of a snake in his “Snake”: “In the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob tree/ I came down the steps with my pitcher/ And must wait, must stand and wait”[5,8]…In general, both IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry and image in American Imagist Poetry focus on the representation of the poets’ personal emotions and reflections of their life and experiences.

Differences of IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry and Image in American Imagist Poetry

Different Philosophical Beliefs Result in Different Styles of Images

IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry and image in American Imagist Poetry have totally different philosophical beliefs as their references. IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry is primarily based on Chinese Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Chan or other oriental philosophical principles while image in American Imagist Poetry is basically related to Christianity, Catholicism, Puritanism, Transcendentalism, Individualism or other American and European philosophical doctrines. As we all know, different philosophical beliefs will generate different thoughts, different thoughts will afterwards produce different styles, and different styles will evolve different referential ideas. Thus, it is undoubtedly natural that IMAGE and image, as two different beings recognized respectively in Chinese Tang Poetry and American Imagist Poetry, have fairly distinctive connotations and denotations in many aspects[5].

Different Cultural Backgrounds Lead to Different Contents of Images

We all observe such a fact that IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry and image in American Imagist Poetry have strikingly different cultural backgrounds. Quant à IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry, Chinese culture is fundamentally a basis and source to have particular poetic meanings among Tang Poets while as for image in American Imagist Poetry, American and European cultures act as the origins and roots to yield special meanings among American Imagists. What’s more, Chinese Tang Dynasty and the historical events happening between 618 and 907 provide the unique cultural background for the contents of IMAGE of Tang Poetry whereas American Modernism and the Imagist Movement going on between 1914 and 1917 set the particular cultural backgrounds for the contents of image in American Imagist Poetry[7,8]. Of course, Chinese culture of eighty-nine years in ancient Tang
Dynasty is quite different from American culture of about four years in diversified modern time, which surely guarantees the different contents of images in the two unique cultures.

**Different National Consciousnesses Produce Different Characteristics of Images**

Chinese nation and American nation belong to two different ethnic groups. Because of the unique ethnic concerns, Chinese nation and American nation have developed very different national consciousnesses. The consciousnesses substantially take effects and result in different characteristics of national images. One point is that IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry acts as the evidence of Chinese national consciousness, which coexists with Chinese people’s distinct national identities and qualities. By contrast, image in American Imagist Poetry comes out as the witness of American national consciousness, which functions with American people’s striking national features and tastes. Basically, the psychological sides of both Chinese people and American people are the very reason why different characteristics of images come into being. Also, men poets and women poets will play unique roles in either Chinese national environment or American national world[6,8].

**Summary**

To conclude, IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry and image in American Imagist Poetry are essentially two systematic beings or existences. Through a comparative study, we notice that IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry and image in American Imagist Poetry do share similarities with each other: Apart from emphasizing the inheritance and essence of the traditional ideas, both acquire the inspirations and creations from the natural world, focus upon the representation of man’s inner feelings and unusual considerations, etc. Meanwhile, the differences between IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry and image in American Imagist Poetry are obviously seen: Cultivated in quite different social environments and historical backgrounds, IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry takes its former thousands of ancient years as the sources while image in American Imagist Poetry makes its former centuries of enterprising years as the roots. Additionally, they are the results of different philosophical beliefs, ethnic cultures as well as national consciousnesses. Briefly, IMAGE in Chinese Tang Poetry and image in American Imagist Poetry intertextually exist and are worth careful study and examination.

**Acknowledgement**

This research was financially supported by Shaanxi Social Science Fund (2014J11) and Ministry of Education of China (GPA105004, 10YJA752031).

**References**