An Intertextual Perspective of the Cultural Images in Chinese Tang Poetry and American Imagist Poetry

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Abstract. To probe into the relationship between the cultural images in Chinese Tang Poetry and those in American Imagist Poetry, this paper initially works out a definition of the cultural images, and then refers to Julia Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality, holding that even though Chinese Tang Poetry and American Imagist Poetry are two distinctive poetic systems, the cultural images within the two systems do share certain striking poetic qualities and are essentially intertextual. Apart from the discussion about the possibility of fulfilling intertextual thoughts into the analysis, the paper points out that the cultural images are the quintessence of Chinese and American history and they serve as the mediators of transforming the corresponding Chinese and American traditions. Obviously, intertextuality offers a unique perspective to examine the two different national cultural images. And frankly, the study is just under way.

Introduction

It is universally acknowledged that any nation of the world possesses its own unique culture. In terms of the culture of the nation, the cultural images are undoubtedly not avoided. However, what are cultural images? Cultural images are those cultural symbols or signs formed gradually in human history, accumulated with ethnic meanings, and functioning among the particular cultural groups. Fundamentally, cultural images may arouse certain aesthetic feelings or cultivate a sense of national identity, thus having the essential representations of the historical heritage and producing the ethnic intelligence in a civilized world.

In Chinese culture, Tang Poetry is a marvelous being shaped in Chinese Tang Dynasty (618-907). While in Tang Poetry, the cultural images are transparently characteristic, which exist to highlight the grace, glory and beauty of Chinese wisdom and thoughts in that particular period. Among other national cultures, American culture is a typical representative. And in American culture, American Imagist Poetry makes itself the direct evidence of the Imagist Movement (1914-1917), which is a unique phenomenon to witness the particularity of American ethnic knowledge and signify the elegance, morale and honor of American nation[1]. Of course, in both cultural systems, there are a variety of cultural images dotted and decorated between the lines of the individual poetic text. Hence, similarities can be traced in the cultural images of Chinese Tang Poetry and those of American Imagist Poetry. Meanwhile, intertextuality is a good theoretical perspective to examine the relationship between Chinese and American cultural images produced in their poetic traditions.

The Possibility of Fulfilling the Theory of Intertextuality into the Analysis of the Cultural Images in Chinese Tang Poetry and American Imagist Poetry

Intertextuality is a term known in the academic world nowadays, which was originally coined by French literary theorist Julia Kristeva (1941- ) in her “Word, Dialogue and Novel” (1966) and “The Bounded Text” (1966-1967). According to Kristeva, “the notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double,” therefore “the word as minimal textual unit” objectively relates “structural models to cultural (historical) environment”[2]. Obviously, Kristeva intends to make people “understand texts not as self-contained systems but as differential
and historical, as traces and tracings of otherness”[2]. So based on Kristeva, when we study poetry, we should not take the specific poetic element as a self-contained system of a culture, but involve it in a flexible atmosphere as a textual being. Meanwhile, we have to acquire the following truths:

In the first place, poetry as a part of national culture can be taken as a text and the cultural images within are intertextual. Cultural images are not isolated beings; they are the traces of human culture and the records of human experiences. As for Chinese Tang Poetry, the cultural images within are the miniatures of Chinese style of approaching Chinese society and the reflections of Chinese way of understanding Chinese world. Comparatively, as for American Imagist Poetry, the cultural images within are the condensed media of American mode of realizing American ideals and the crystals of American speculations of the universe [1]. Either the cultural images in Chinese Tang Poetry or those in American Imagist Poetry are, to some extent, the texts that share the basic qualities of human experiences, i.e., they are intertextual in essence.

In the second place, poetry as a result of human intelligence can be viewed as a thought-provoking vehicle and the cultural images within are referential and interactive. Kristeva points out that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” [2]. The remarks are reasonable and meaningful. Reading between the lines, we realize that any text including poetry is not stable or confined; instead, any text is the source of other texts. A text is a “mosaic” of other textual “quotations” whereas a text is the “absorbed” and “transformed” one that has influence upon other text(s). In this sense, both Chinese Tang Poetry and American Imagist Poetry are not the enclosed texts. They make dialogues with the synchronous as well as diachronic traditions. Naturally, the cultural images within are those referring to historical elements and undertaking interactions with contextual factors. So to speak, the cultural images of Chinese Tang Poetry and those of American Imagist Poetry are intertextually associated, and they make their identities as the “referential and interactive” cultural sources in a global environment [1].

An Intertextual Examination of the Cultural Images in Chinese Tang Poetry and American Imagist Poetry

The Cultural Images as the Heritages of Absorbing Chinese and American Historical Nutrition

The cultural images are not the immediate objects that people yield strong emotions or intricate feelings. Usually, the beings like legends, stories, allusions, elegies, metaphors, proverbs, folks, sayings, or even customs will be the historical stimulus or fundamental origins to mold what we call “cultural images”. As a matter of fact, the cultural images of a nation are the texts diverse in content and style. The beings like a man, a name, a place, a word, a flower, and so on and so forth will be the various forms of the cultural images in a nation. Besides, all cultural images are the consequences of history, in other words, the cultural images are made in history, of history and by history. Any cultural image cannot exist without the very participation of history.

In Chinese Tang Dynasty, a large number of Tang Poets would like to make use of the cultural images in their writings. Those who earned great reputation in Tang Poetry include Lu Zhaolin (636?-695), Luo Binwang (640?-684), Wang Bo (650?-676?), Yang Jiong (650-692), Wang Wei (701-761), Meng Haoran (689?-740), Li Bai (701-762), Du Fu (712-770), Gao Shi (706-765), Ceng Sen (715-770), Liu Zongyuan (773-819), Meng Jiao (712-770), Han Yu (768-824), Bai Juyi (772-846), Li He (790-816), Li Yi (748-827), Liu Yuxi (772-842), Jia Dao (779-843), Zhang Ji (712?-779?), Wei Yingwu (737-792), Yuan Zhen (779-831), Zhang Gu (785?-849?), Wei Shulun (732-789), Gu Kuang (725?-814?), Li Shangyin (812?-858?), etc[3]. Definitely, it is these Tang Poets who made Tang Poetry glorious in Chinese history. Nonetheless, we have to declare that Chinese Tang Poetry is the heritage of Chinese historical figures extending from the time of their compiling The Book of Songs (11 B.C.-6 B.C.) to that of making bold experiments in Sui Dynasty (581-618). The cultural images in Chinese
Tang Poetry are closely attached to the former historical events, languages, customs, recordings, folks or even household articles. Specifically, the cultural images, with the “communications” of people and their languages, customs and their knowledge, constitute “an endless net” of “historical images” [4], which functions potentially as a cultural force upon human world. In Chinese history, cultural images are developed enormously and comprehensively. For instance, the willows culturally relate to people’s departure, separation or bidding farewell; the plum of blossom, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum stand for four cherished and respectable qualities among people; the moon symbolizes people’s homesickness, sorrows or gloominess; the beacon fire associates wars, battles or disputes between people; the palace signifies the imperial mystery, people’s confinement or loneliness; the tears reveal people’s painfulness, unhappy experiences or helplessness… Based on these cultural signifiers, when Du Fu wrote “The beacon fire has gone higher, / Words from household are worth their weight in gold” in his “Looking Out in Spring”, we will not feel surprised for his hatred of “the beacon fire” and understand why “words from household” are that unusual; when Zhang Gu wrote “when Zhang Gu wrote
resonate with her
attitude towards
husband best, Yet you send me two pearls still,/ I hang them within my red silk vest,/ So grateful I
for his hatred of
Chinese Tang Poetry are basically intertextual and they echo with the cultural symbols in the past.

In the early 20th century of America, American Imagist Movement made Imagist Poetry strikingly outstanding both in America and European countries. Of course, the Movement also made the cultural images of the Imagist Poetry brilliant and impressive. Thanks to such Imagists as Ezra Pound (1885-1972), H.D. (Hilda Doolittle, 1886-1961), Amy Lowell (1874-1925), John Gould Fletcher (1886-1950), Richard Aldington (1892-1962), F. S. Flint (1885-1960), David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930), etc., American Poetry Renaissance was activated [5]. What’s more, the avant-garde personages, taking Harriet Monroe (1860-1936), Vachel Lindsay (1879-1931), Witter Bynner (1881-1968), Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), Carl Sandburg (1878-1967), Maxwell Bodenheim (1893-1954), William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), etc. as instances, also make contributions to the development of American Imagism[1]. While writing the Imagist poetry, the Imagists intend to follow their poetic credo to highlight what they emphasize and desire to express. Essentially, we have to admit that all the cultural images appearing in Imagist Poetry were/are cultivated and maintained in American history, so to speak, they are not taking shape instantly. Obviously, without American history, without splendid American cultural images. Besides, American history provides the platform for American cultural images to give free play, thus American cultural images are historically formed. There are a lot of American cultural images making their voices. For instance, the petals concern the beauty of people’s faces; the pointed pines imply force, life, or belief; the fog means something mysterious and hazy; the sea or ocean symbolizes vastness, deepness, or greatness; the color “red” relates to flaunt, impulse, or passion; the olive stands for peace, hope, or loftiness; the leaves of grass are the substitutes of common people who have indomitable vitality…Based on these cultural signifiers, when Ezra Pound wrote “The apparition of these faces in the crowd:/ Petals on a wet, black bough” in his “In a Station of the Metro”, we will find it superb to connect “these faces” with “petals on a...bough”; when H.D. wrote “Whirl up, sea-/ whirl your pointed pines,/ splash pour great pines/ on our rocks,/ hurl your green over us,/ cover us with your pools of fir” in her “Oread”, we feel deeply impressed about the hardness, restraint and clarity of the cultural images like “sea”, “pointed pines”, “rocks”, “pools of fir”, etc.; when John Gould Fletcher wrote “Flickering of incessant rain/ On flashing pavements;/ Sudden scurry of umbrellas;/ Bending recurved blossoms of the storm” in his
“Irradiations”, we are amazed to read the cultural images like “incessant rain”, “flashing pavements”, “scurry of umbrellas”, “blossoms of the storm”, etc.; when Carl Sandburg wrote “The fog comes/ on little cat feet/ it sits looking/ over harbor and city/ and then moves on” in his “Fog”, we realize how talented the poet is to associate the cultural images like “the fog”, “little cat”, “harbor” and “city” together and make the images integrated; when William Carlos Williams wrote “so much depends/ upon / a red wheel/ barrow / glazed with rain/ water / beside the white/ chickens” in his “The Red Wheelbarrow”, we begin to understand the magic power of the cultural images between “red”, “wheel/barrow”, “rain/water”, “white/ chickens” and the “collected” images beyond the lines…In short, the cultural images in American Imagist Poetry are those produced in American history or inherited from the Old World, which are the historical quintessence of American nation as well as European world[5]. Besides, the cultural images in American Imagist Poetry are undoubtedly intertextual as they grow from one root.

The Cultural Images as the Mediators of Transforming Chinese and American Traditions

As the mediators of transforming Chinese and American traditions, the cultural images in Chinese Tang Poetry and those in American Imagist Poetry have some obvious intertextual qualities in a synchronic sense.

To start with, both take the “direct treatment of the ‘thing’, whether subjective or objective” while sharing the subjective and objective sides of the image [6]. In Chinese Tang Poetry, the cultural images are not superficially the objects we have in mind, instead, they are the combined ones with the external physical connotations and the internal metaphysical meanings. Frequently, the images are imbued with Tang Poets’ figurative, associative, or even moral references. In this way, the cultural images in Chinese Tang Poetry are endowed with omnibus features on the subjective and objective sides at the same time. For instance, when describing the music and charm of Chinese Pipa, Bai Juyi wrote “The thick strings loud thrummed like the petering rain,/ The fine strings softly tinkled in a murmure stain./ When mingling loud and soft notes were together played,/ You heard large and small pearls cascade on the plate of jade” in his “Song of a Pipa Player”, the sound of the Pipa is culturally no longer the sound of a musical instrument while it has been input the feelings and emotions of the person who played the Pipa. Likewise, the cultural images in American Imagist Poetry are also imbedded with American Imagists’ personal knowledge, informative descriptions, artistic innovations, psychological reflections, customary explanations, ethnical judgments, etc. In other words, the cultural images are those with the objective characteristics and the subjective significance. For instance, when Amy Lowell wrote “There is no dust or clatter/ In the courtyard before my house./ My private rooms are quiet,/ And calm with the leisure of moon-light through an open door”, she made “the courtyard”, “my private rooms”, “the moon-light” and “an open door” no longer the simple things we see, instead, she made them the ones full of human emotions. They are actually intertextual in the either objective or subjective meaning [7].

Both “use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation” and emphasize the conciseness and clarity of the expressions in poetic creation [6]. On the one hand, it is well-noted that Chinese Tang Poets dislike the careless and sloppy writing style when demonstrating their thoughts. As for them, concentrating on cultural images and making the cultural images strikingly portrayed is definitely an art and a way to show individual talents. Usually, the five-character or seven-character quatrains are required to display poets’ most spectacular ideas, thus every word should be carefully chosen and filtered. When Wang Zhizhan wrote “The sun beyond the mountain glows,/ The Yellow River seawards flows./ You can enjoy a grander sight./ By climbing to a greater height” in his “On the Stork Tower”, we have to recognize his ability of simplifying the language and sparking his idea artfully. American Imagist Poets, on the other hand, try to adopt the powerful words or the best expressions to reveal their inner thoughts. It is the Imagist Poets who revolutionized the Victorian obsolete style and attempted to establish the most communicative descriptions. Hence, employing the striking images and the economical words to highlight the images become the priorities to follow. When Thomas Hardy wrote “Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock./ ‘Now they are all on their
knees,’ / An elder said as we sat in a flock/ By the embers in hearthside ease…” in his “The Oxen”, we have to sing high praise for his talented art of adopting simplified words while harvesting impressive cultural images.

Both concern much about the rhythm between the lines, and “as regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome” [6]. To immortalize the cultural images in Chinese Tang Poetry, Tang Poets were good at using the musical elements and rhythmical devices in their poetry. It is said that rhythm functions as a way to communicate the natural world with human world and it is a valuable medium to stimulate poets’ buried inspirations [4]. The cultural images are achieved through the harmonious cooperation of the rhythms. Generally, Tang Poets prefer the end rhymes. In Du Mu’s “Moored on River Qinhuai”, we read “…sha,/ …jia./…/ …hua”; In Liu Yuxi’s “Bamboo Branch Song”, we read “…ping, /…sheng. /…/ …qing”; In Zhang Ji’s “Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night”, we read “…tian, /…mian./…/ …chuan”; In Yuan Zhen’s “On Hearing Bai Juyi Degraded to Riverside Town”, we read “…chuang, / …jiang /…/ …chuang”; etc. Meanwhile, the rhythm and “the musical phrase” in American Imagist Poetry are also observed. By contrast, American Imagist Poets like using not only the end rhyme but also alliteration. Take Ezra Pound and his The Cantos as an example. In Canto VI, Pound wrote “That he may free her,/ who sheds such light in the air”, “Winter and Summer I sing of her grace,/ As the rose is fair, so fair is her face”; In Canto XLIX, Pound wrote “Autumn moon; hills rise about lakes/ against sunset/ Evening is like a curtain of cloud,/ a blur above ripples”, “sun up; work/ sundown; to rest”, etc. Obviously, to make the cultural images unique and impressive, both Chinese Tang Poetry and American Imagist Poetry are intertextually relying on rhythm and musical devices [7].

Summary

To sum up, the cultural images in Chinese Tang Poetry are the objective beings worth studying. In essence, those images are the brilliant creations of Chinese great minds and the reflections of Chinese traditional culture. Meanwhile, the cultural images in American Imagist Poetry are the particular existences as well, which are full of charm and dignity. Basically, the cultural images in Chinese Tang Poetry and those in American Imagist Poetry have similarities in certain aspects and share certain valuable features and poetic qualities. Especially when relating to Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality, we can realize that the cultural images are the heritages or results of absorbing Chinese and American historical nutrition whereas the cultural images in both China and America serve as the mediators of transforming Chinese and American traditions. Of course, the intertextual relationship between the cultural images in Chinese Tang Poetry and those in American Imagist Poetry is a recognized theme that requires us to speculate and consider more deeply and comprehensively since intertextuality provides us a unique perspective to probe into the two distinctive national cultures. But fundamentally, the study is just under way.

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