Acculturation of Images in American and Chinese Poetry

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Abstract. The people who speak English and Chinese respectively live on the same planet for thousands of years. They share same feelings and perceptions toward the things about themselves and around them during the course of human evolution. Some Chinese theories attracted attention in Western world because they share common ground with certain traditional Chinese literary concepts. Poetry is the soul of literature. This thesis will discuss the backgrounds of acculturation of images in American and Chinese Poetry.

Keywords: Acculturation; Image; poetry.

1. Introduction

As an art form shared by different times, countries and nations, the charm of poetry can cross the huge gap of time and region. Poetry is on the basis of those same feelings which are called "common core" that they can exchange what they intend to express between languages. At the same time, it also reflects the diverse values of different times and nations. Happiness, anger and sadness can be perceived in both English and Chinese while a few animals, plants, colors, and numbers get their names with the same or similar cultural connotations of each language. Though the same thing in the world is named differently from the perspectives of sound and spelling because of different language families, the sameness of the image can be cherished by the people speaking both English and Chinese in some cases. And there is also common ground shared by Western reception aesthetics and traditional Chinese aesthetics, in that both emphasize the plurality of perspectives on aesthetic appreciation and the subjective understanding of the reader based on his or her personal experience. All in all, although there are great differences between ancient Chinese poetry and modern American poetry in terms of time and region, a comparison of the two from the perspective of the use of poetic images will find many similarities and differences worth pondering and the deeper values behind them.

2. Non-literary Backgrounds

The root of the acculturation lies tangled deep in the modern experience. Radical changes took place in the United States since the opening of the 20th century. "Causes in fields other than literature there doubtless were a confluence of psychological, philosophical, scientific, social economic, and political causes, analogues, and explanations." (quoted in Hu Quansheng, et al. 2003:2)

In the scientific field, a shift in scientific thinking about the universe arose from the late 19th century and the early 20th century affected people's mind. Scientists began to say "that science does not 'explain' the workings of the universe, it merely describes what happens in given conditions" (Bell 2000:11), which was further supported by Einstein's Theories of Relativity and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle.

These theories not only interested scientists but also novelists and poets. These discoveries and inventions, together with the new technology, signified that "the old religious world, the world of the Virgin, was over; new powers dominated modern existence'; they "affected all societies", driving "the modern world into entropy, the modern mind into chaos" (Bradbury 1984: 20-21)

3. Literary Backgrounds

There were two comprehensive poetic movements in the 20th century: Imagism (1910s) and San Francisco Renaissance (late 1950s--early 1960s). It was in these two movements that CCP was acculturated in MAP on a massive scale.

Imagism was a poetic movement in England and the U.S. from 1909 to 1917. In America, it started in Chicago in 1912 when Harriet Monroe launched Poetry. This event marked a poetic renaissance in the United States and the beginning of MAP in rebellion against the conventional Victorian poetry that was loaded with abstraction, windy rhetoric, and moralization. The movement, with Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell as its leading spokesmen, strove for a freedom in the selection of subject matter, clarity of images, exact unfilled language, and musical rhythm. The major contributions of imagism are their theories of imagery and promotion of free verse that have a lasting influence on American poetry in the 20#th century. Poets like T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and E.E. Cummings, recognizing strengths in imagist philosophies, made poems of the Imagist type.

Literature is the study of humanity. Different nations have the same physiological and psychological structure and possess similar aesthetic pursuit. The art of mankind is originated from primitive witchcraft. Poetry is connote with the origin of human beings. It happens frequently that poetry is the earliest literary form in the world literature. Acculturation of convergence in human culture, by and large, seems to have two trends: one is produced due to the fact that culture in different nations was cut off during the dawn of human civilization, the other is rated through cultural exchange and dissemination. The latter tendency of acculturation will be convergence between classical Chinese poetry and American Imagist poetry.

The concept “imagery” may suggest different meanings in literature, but despite their separation disparities, theorists generally agree that it is the representation of sense experience through language and plays an exceedingly important role in literary. In Chinese classical literary documents, the concept of “yixiang”(“意象” in Chinese, “imagery” in English) has been engaging adequate attention of theorists since the time of Confucius. The two characters “yi” (“意”, meaning “idea”) and “xiang” (“象”, “appearance, shape, image”) were originally used in The Book of Changes, in which is quoted Confucius’ statement that ‘the saint establishes image to fully express his ideas’(圣人立象以尽意). This quotation of Confucius, the first mentioned in literary works, nonetheless points out the close relationship between the subjective world and the objective world--that human mind forms the ideas by embodying them in the objects or specific image, though the present-day term may take on new meaning considerably different from the original one.

A more formal definition is given by J.A. Cuddon. He defines imagery as “a general term” that “covers the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind and any sensory or ex-sensory experience” and states that an “image” is the representation through language of sense experience.” These two definitions emphasize three indispensable aspects in the constitution of imagery in literary texts. One is “yan” (言: language, or more exactly, linguistic symbol), which is the carrier for images. The other two are “yi” (意) and “xiang” (象). According to Cuddon, imagery covers objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind and any sensory and ex-sensory experience. This list is comprehensive but a bit lengthy for us to grasp.

Classical Chinese poetic language is quite different from the English language because of its unique Chinese grammatical features. Compactness or condensation is nature of Chinese language. First, there were a number of words of single characters in Old Chinese such as “朋(friend)”, “战(war)” instead of “朋友”, “战争” (although there are more disyllabic words and currently more polysyllabic words in Modern Chinese). Second, since the Chinese written language is an ideographic language, word formation mainly depends on word meaning, and amalgamation is the major method to form a Chinese word, which means to put two or more characters so as to make the words precise in meaning. Third, different from the strict grammatical rules and principles of the English language, the general rule for sentence building in Chinese is illustrated by Liu Xie: “积字成句，积句成章” (A sentence is made by accumulating the words and a passage is made by accumulating the sentences.)

A Chinese sentence is not burdened with persons, cases, genders, moods, tenses, number, ect. Therefore, imageries can be put together without using any connecting words such as conjunctions, verbs, or particles. The grammatical uniqueness of the Chinese language enables ancient Chinese poets to create poems characteristic of economy and implicitness, which has laid foundation for yixiang(意象)and the construction of yijing(意境)

4. Ideogramic Method

Most of the experiments carried out by American poets on the Chinese character are generally based on a false impression of the structure of the Chinese character, that is, the Chinese character is the combination of images. Such an impression came first from Fenollosa whose manuscripts led to his preoccupation with the Chinese ideogram as a medium for poetry and invented the Ideogramic Method. This method has influenced many American poets. For example: "Split-up" was invented by Amy Lowell when she was appreciating Chinese calligraphy and paintings.

Moreover, it has to be stated clearly that literary "images" are other than "objects" or "phenomena" in the natural world. They are the carrier of "meaning" and "sentiment" in the literary text. In the development of Chinese poetry, the connotation of "image" has been redefined by many literati. Zhu Qi said, "An image is a certain object permeated with the subjective feeling of the poet" (Liu Yan, 1995), while Zhu Guangqian's description is more vivid: "An image is the shadow of a perceived object imprinted in one's heart" (Liu Yan, 1995).

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