

Entry for College Essay Prizes

Name: Chenchen (Julio) Song

Status: 1st year PhD in Linguistics

Essay title: Scenery depiction in Classical Chinese poetry: Strategies, effects, and motivation

Essay subject: Literature

Composing time: April 2016

***Declaration:** I have received advice from my tutor Dr. Deborah Bowman on the eligibility of my topic.
This work has not been and will not be submitted in any University examination.*

Scenery depiction in Classical Chinese poetry: Strategies, effects, and motivation

Natural scenery depiction is a significant part of poetry. On one hand, it is more vivid and often easier to arouse readers' empathy. On the other hand, it can bring special aesthetic effects to the poem. Indeed, nature is said to be the source of all beauty and the model of all arts (Zong Baihua, 1897--1986, modern aesthetician and poet). This is especially true in Classical Chinese poetry. As James Liu (1926--1986) concludes in *Essentials of Chinese literary art* (1979, p.4): "the relation between human life and nature is of central importance in [Classical] Chinese poetry, as it is in Chinese philosophy. Most Chinese poets view human life as a part of nature."

Against this background, it is both interesting and worthwhile to gain an insight into the scenery depictions in Classical Chinese poetry. In the following, I will first present two representative strategies of scenery depiction and their respective effects (sections 1-2), and then discuss their linguistic and cultural motivation (section 3).

1. *Yì-xiàng*: reserved symbols of situational emotions

Chinese has a long history of poetry, probably since the earliest time of written records. The oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry is *Classic of Poetry (Shī-Jīng)*, which encompasses 305 poetic works composed during 11th--7th centuries BC. In this article, I use "Classical Chinese poetry" as a cover term for poems written in the Classical Chinese language before the end of Qing Dynasty (1912), because after that time Classical Chinese was gradually replaced by Vernacular Chinese in literary composition (*Modern Chinese*, Huang and Liao 2007).

When it comes to scenery depiction, a most noticeable feature of Classical Chinese poetry is that there are numerous natural scenes reserved as symbols of specific sentiments. Instead of expressing emotions directly, poets tend to use these symbols and let readers figure out the emotional content by themselves. These are known as *yì-xiàng* ("meaning-image"), similar to symbolic imageries widely used in world poetry (e.g. in English poetry, *skylark* is often a symbol of freedom and joy).

A typical example of symbolic imagery in Classical Chinese poetry is *Autumn Thoughts (Qiū-Sī)* by Ma Zhiyuan (1250--1324), which, though consisting of only twenty-eight characters, involves as many as ten imageries. Crucially, its first twenty-two characters are simply stacked scenes in the form of noun phrases, as in (1).

- (1) *Rotten vine old tree evening crow;
Small bridge flowing stream cottage;
Ancient road west wind lean horse;
Westward declining sun.*

(adapted from Xu Yuanchong's translation)

Such large-scale imagery stacking without grammatical connection (not even commas between the noun phrases) is presumably a special characteristic of Classical Chinese poetry. Although we can also find stacked imageries in poems of other languages, the complete absence of grammatical and punctuation marking is not usual. For example, the following excerpt from the American poet Ezra Pound's (1885--1972) *The Cantos* also involves stacked imageries, but there are still grammatical elements such as articles (*a, the*), prepositions (*from, in, under*), and copular verbs (*was, are*), as well as semicolons and commas marking the boundary of each imagery.

- (2) *Rain; empty river; a voyage. /Fire from frozen cloud, heavy rain in the twilight. /Under the cabin roof was one lantern. /The reeds are heavy; bent. (Canto 47)*

Canto's dependence on grammatical marking and *Autumn Thoughts*' lack thereof is essentially a difference in language typology, which will be discussed in Section 3. Now let's take a closer look at (1). So readers have to convert the stacked imageries into coherent interpretation, which is aided by the shared knowledge of imagery inventory in Chinese poetry and culture. For example, *evening crow* usually equals "chilly and dreary", *ancient road* "lonely and deserted", and *west wind* "bleak" or "farewell". These are all well-established imageries, reappearing again and again through the centuries. Take *ancient road* for example, it also shows up in Li Po's (701--762) *Sobs from A Bamboo Flute* (*Xiāo-Shēng-Yè*) (3a), Bai Juyi's (772--846) *Grass on the Ancient Plain* (*Fù-Dé-Gǔ-Yuán-Cǎo-Sòng-Biē*) (3b), Liu Yong's (984--1053) *Adventure of a Youth* (*Shào-Nián-Yóu*) (3c), etc. More recently, it has been reused in modern song lyrics as well (3d-e).

- (3) a. *On the capital's **ancient road** there is no noise or dirt of wheels.* (my translation=MT)
 b. *Distant verdure overruns the **ancient road**.* (adapted from Sun Dayu's translation)
 c. *On the capital's **ancient road** horses walk slowly.* (MT)
 d. *Outside the farewell pavilion, beside the **ancient road**.* (Li Shutong, 1884--1942; MT)
 e. *The **ancient road** outside the fence, I led you walking through.* (Jay Chou, 1979--; MT)

Albeit semantically transparent (i.e. non-idiomatic), the phrase "ancient road" (*gǔ-dào*) has been correlated with the special situational emotions of loneliness, desertedness, and sadness. And this effect cannot be achieved by synonyms like "old road" and "ancient path". Thus we can conclude that the imageries of Classical Chinese poetry are linguistically reserved and aesthetically unique. A list of five other typical imageries is given below.

Table 1 Typical imageries in Classical Chinese poetry

| Imagery | Emotion | Example |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Full, bright moon | Homesickness | <i>Looking up, I find the moon bright; bowing, in homesickness I'm drowned.</i> (Li Po; Xu Yuanchong's translation) |
| Quarter moon | Incompleteness, loneliness | <i>I can't stand it that after our farewell, the waning moon is just like a hook.</i> (Tang Qiu, 880--907; MT) |
| Rapidly flowing water | Endless sorrow | <i>How much sorrow can one have? Just like a Yang-Tse River of spring water flowing to the east.</i> (Li Yu, 937--978; MT) |
| Thick, wild grass | Desolation after prosperity | <i>Around the Zhuque Bridge it's full of wild grass and flowers.</i> (Li Shangyin, 813--858; MT) |
| Willow | Grief of parting | <i>Tonight where do I wake up from drunken sleep? On the bank of willow, with the morning wind and a waning moon.</i> (Liu Yong; MT) |

The metaphorical motivation behind such correlation is generally obvious, though in some cases certain knowledge about the Chinese language and culture is needed. For instance, *willow* equals "grief of parting" because its Chinese name *liǔ* sounds like another character *liú*, which means "stay". For this reason, in ancient times when someone leaves for far-away places, their families or friends would give them a willow branch as an expression of parting sadness.

2. "Painting-in-poetry": when scenery speaks more than words

The special effect of scenery depiction in Classical Chinese poetry is not only reflected in the stable use of imageries, but also in vivid on-spot depiction. This is usually accompanied by the choice use of words, a classical example of which is the following couplet in Wang Wei's (701--761) *On Mission to the Frontier* (*Shǐ-Zhì-Sài-Shàng*):

- (4) *In boundless desert a lonely smoke rises **straight**;
 over endless river the sun sinks **round**.*

(adapted from Xu Yuanchong's translation)

In these two lines the much praised words are “straight” (*zhí*) and “round” (*yuán*). As Xiangling in *A Dream of Red Mansions* (by Cao Xueqin, 1715--1763) comments:

- (5) “Of course the sun’s round, but how can smoke be straight? The first description seems illogical, the second trite. But when you close the book and think, the scene rises before your eyes, and you realize it would be impossible to choose any better words.”

(Chapter 48; Yang and Dai’s translation)

Wang Wei’s poems are mostly like this, featuring vivid scenery depictions. This might have to do with the fact that he was also a skillful painter. As another prestigious poet Su Shi (1037--1101) remarks: “in Mojie’s [Wang Wei’s other name] poetry there’s painting; in Mojie’s painting there’s poetry.” (*Prefaces and Postscripts of Dongpo*, Volume 5) More examples are given in (6).

- (6) a. *In the rain the grass color is so green that one can dye with it; on the water the peach flowers are so red as if they were going to burn.* (My Villa in the Wangchuan Valley; MT)
 b. *The wind keeps in mouth the sound of pines; the flowers face their reflections in the pond.* (A Letter from the Wooden Land to My Youngest Brother; MT)
 c. *The city by the riverside floats on the water; the huge waves move the far-away sky.* (Watching the Han River; MT)
 d. *The bright moon shines through the pines; the clear spring flows on the stones.* (An Autumn Dusk at my Wangchuan Villa; MT)

In each of the examples in (6) there is a pair of carefully chosen antithetical characters, whose aesthetic effects resemble that of “straight” and “round” in (4). To be specific, “dye” (*rǎn*) and “burn” (*rán*) in (6a) turn the static picture into a dynamic scene; “keep in mouth” (*hán*) and “face” (*duì*) in (6b) give the wind and the flowers human characteristics, letting them act out the poet’s loneliness. While (6a-b) still assume more metaphorical sense, (6c-d) exactly fit into Xiangling’s comment, i.e. the poet’s choice of word seems trite, but it is impossible to find any better alternative. In (6c), with the help of “float” (*fú*) and “move” (*dòng*), the boundary between the river, the city, and the sky is blurred as if they all move with the turbulent waves. In (6d), the adpositions “through” (*jiān*) and “on” (*shàng*) turn the landscape into three-dimensional, with the pine forest and the spring each occupying a layer of the poetic space.

Wang Wei does not explicitly express his emotions, but we as readers can attach to his feelings, as if we were standing next to him, viewing the scenes through his eyes. Note that different from Ma Zhiyuan’s stacked noun phrases in (1), Wang Wei seldom uses ready-made imageries, but would rather depict the scenery from scratch. It is hard to say which strategy is better, but they do both have their advantages. Imageries are conventionalized symbols shared by poets and readers from many different dynasties and thus effective in quickly and precisely arousing the target emotions in readers’ minds. By contrast, on-spot depictions require readers to reconstruct the scenarios, which is less quick and probably also less accurate, but the scenes are only shared by the poet and the reader, i.e. there is more space for individualization. We can use the following diagram to compare the two different strategies of scenery depiction.



Figure 1 Two genres of scenery depiction in Classical Chinese poetry

As such, we can probably say that Ma Zhiyuan and Wang Wei represent two extremes on a continuum, while most other poets fall somewhere in between. Indeed, poems that combine the two strategies are not uncommon. For instance, the following excerpt is from Zhang Ruoxu's (7th--8th centuries) long poem *The Moon over the River on a Spring Night* (*Chūn-Jiāng-Huā-Yuè-Yè*), which is praised by the distinguished modern poet Wen Yiduo (1899--1946) as "the poem of poems, the peak above peaks".

- (7) 1 *In spring the river rises as high as the sea,*
 2 *and with the river's tide uprises the bright moon.*
 3 *It follows the rolling waves for thousands of miles;*
 4 *where the river flows, there overflows moonlight.*
 ...
 5 *She sees the moon, but her husband is out of sight;*
 6 *She would follow the moonbeams to shine on his face.*
 7 *But swan geese can't fly out of moonlight,*
 8 *Nor can fishes leap out of their place.*
 9 *He dreamed of flowers falling o'er the pool last night;*
 10 *Alas! Spring has half gone, but he can't homeward go...*

(adapted from Xu Yuanchong's translation)

In the above excerpt, lines 1-4 are an on-spot depiction of the scenery from the poet's point of view. "As high as the sea" and "with the river's tide uprises" (*lián-hǎi-píng* vs. *gòng-cháo-shēng*, literally "connect-sea-even" vs. "with-tide-rise") (1-2) are carefully chosen antithetical phrases vividly painting the view, while the following two lines (3-4) further add to the dynamicity of the scene.

In the next lines, however, we see a group of conventionalized imageries coming into play. In lines 5-10, there are four symbolic imageries, i.e. (*bright, full*) *moon* for "missing and longing", *swan geese* and *fishes* for "messengers", and *flowers falling* for "transience of life". Among others, "swan geese" and "fishes" are symbols of messengers in traditional Chinese culture because they can fly across the sky and swim across the ocean.

Combining the advantages of on-spot depiction and symbolic imageries, this poem successfully marries realistic faithfulness and romantic imagination.

3. Conclusion: linguistic and cultural motivation of scenery depiction

We have seen two types of scenery depiction in Classical Chinese poetry. Symbolic imagery uses conventionalized "meaning-image" to evoke shared situational emotion, while on-spot depiction uses faithful vivid description to construct an individualized connection between the author and the reader. In terms of genre, the former is more romantic, while the latter is more realistic. Although there are extreme cases, most poems actually involve a combination of the two strategies. So what is the motivation behind scenery depiction in Classical Chinese poetry? Why is it preferred over other means of presentation?

This is first and foremost a linguistic issue. Classical Chinese is a highly compact isolating language, with little to no morphological marking (such as inflection). It is this characteristic that makes it possible for imageries to be directly stacked in bare forms. Besides, the lack of overt morphology also facilitates cross-categorical conversion, e.g. noun-to-verb and verb-to-noun. This gives poets more flexibility and creative space in word choosing, which is important for on-spot depiction.

On a higher linguistic level, composing-rule-oriented considerations also drive poets to use scenery depiction. Classical Chinese poetry has a strict set of composing rules, which specify line and character numbers, rhymes, semantic relations, etc. For example, the Jueju style (literally “cut-off lines”) requires that the poem must have four lines, each line with exactly five or seven characters (but not both in the same poem), and that it must have elegant atmosphere and profound thoughts. Thus, poets need to make full use of each and every character, a result of which is highly condensed symbolic language. As Charles Egan (2007: 199) points out: “brevity...encouraged the projection of meaning beyond the literal text by the reliance on symbolic poetic language and the development of artful structural techniques... the general tendency was to merge themes of the natural world with those of personal states of mind.” Hence the predominance of scenery depiction.

Second, there is also cultural motivation behind the scenery depiction in Classical Chinese poetry. In traditional Chinese culture, implicitness and tacit understanding is appreciated over explicitness and direct expression. Since the main purpose of poetry is to express thoughts, feelings, or wishes, scenery depiction is automatically implicit and indirect, and is bound to be equipped with dual functions. Thus, Wang Guowei (1877--1927) concludes that in Classical Chinese poetry, “all words of scenery depiction are words of emotion”.

In a word, motivated by cultural implicitness, required by composing succinctness, and facilitated by linguistic flexibility, scenery depiction is a most important vehicle of Classical Chinese poetry. With its fundamental ideology inherited from traditional Chinese philosophy, its aesthetic impact still lives on today, in the various art forms descending from classical poetry (e.g. lyrics).

References

- [1] Egan, Charles (2007). Recent-Style Shi Poetry. In Cai, Zongqi (ed.), *How to Read Chinese Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 199–225.
- [2] Huang, Borong and Xudong Liao (2007). *Modern Chinese*. Beijing: Higher Education Press.
- [3] Liu, James (1979). *Essentials of Chinese literary art*. Massachusetts: Duxbury Press.
- [4] Xu, Yuanchong (2013). *English Translations of 1000 Classical Chinese Poems*. Beijing: Dolphin Books.