

# *Analyze Symbolic Imagery from the Perspective of Cross-cultural Literary Studies*

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**Abstract:** Symbolic imagery is an important element of cross-cultural literary studies and plays an important role in cross-cultural literary studies. Symbolic imagery is often related to the emotion and theme of the work, and there are significant cultural differences, if not fully understood, it will lead to the loss of the original image and the lack of cultural connotation. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the cross-cultural literary research of symbolic imagery, and grasp its commonality in the literary and artistic theories of Chinese and Western personalities. Imagery is defined differently in China and the West, but it is an element. The understanding of imagery can be divided into: "extension" and "connotation", which can be understood from the shared context or the special context, which is of great significance to our cross-cultural literature research.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural imagery, literary studies, symbolic imagery.

## 1. Introduction

Symbolic imagery, called "image" in Chinese, refers to an artistic image created by the unique emotional activity of the creative subject, not limited to the surface content, usually combined with the cultural background and specific time, space or context to reflect the deep special meaning and literary meaning, in English, the image and the artistic conception it creates can be comprehensively corresponding to "tension" or "symbolic imagery". With the increasing frequency of cultural exchanges around the world, dealing with complex cross-cultural communication activities has become a problem that needs to be solved in the field of literature today. As an important element of cross-cultural literary research, symbolic imagery can determine the artistic conception and aesthetic experience of literary works, and carry the deep feelings of authors, which plays an important role in literary research. However, there are often significant cultural differences in symbolic imagery. If not fully understood, it will lead to the loss of the original image and the lack of cultural connotation. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the cross-cultural literary research of symbolic imagery and grasp its commonality in the literary and artistic theories of Chinese and Western personalities.

## 2. Symbolic Imagery

### 2.1. Definition of Symbolic Imagery in Eastern and Western Cultural Contexts

#### 2.1.1. Symbolic Imagery in China

Symbolic imagery, known as "image" in Chinese, refers to an artistic image created by the unique emotional activity of the creative subject, which is not limited to surface content but is usually combined with cultural background and specific time, space or context to reflect deep special meaning and literary meaning. Wang Guowei, a famous Chinese literary critic, summed up imagery as "all scenery and words are love words".

The production of imagery can be traced back to *the Book of Songs*, the first collection of poetry in ancient China. The works in the Book of Songs often use the writing techniques of "comparison" and "xing", and then "comparison" and "xing" have also become traditional expressions in Chinese poetry. Zhu Xi of the Song Dynasty more accurately explained the basic characteristics of "comparison and xing" as a means of expression: "The one who compares with the other thing compares this thing"; "Those who are excited, preface other things to cause the words to be sung." Generally speaking, the analogy is a metaphor, a metaphor for a person or thing to make its characteristics more distinct and prominent. Some poems use comparisons in individual places, while others use comparisons for the entire image, just like the poetry of later generations; "Xing" means to rise, and it is to use other things as the beginning of the poem to arouse the content to be sung. Some "xing" has the dual role of origin and metaphor, so the word "bixing" is often used together later, specifically to refer to the poem which is not limited to the image itself depicted, but also has the meaning of sustenance. With the continuous development of ancient Chinese poetry, these scenes used for "comparison" and "xing" have gradually been called imagery, and there is also a saying for xingxiang.

#### 2.1.2. Western Symbolic Imagery

Symbolism comes from the Western concept of poetics and is an important expression of poetry writing, and Stefaunne · Mallarmé, the leader of the France symbolist movement in the 80s of the 19th century, pointed out that symbolism is "suggestion" and "hidden language". In English, imagery and the mood it creates can be synthetically corresponded to "tension", which is defined by Alan ·, the author of tension theory: "By the meaning of poetry I mean its tension, that is, the organic whole of all the outreach and inward sourcing that we can find in the poem." The use of tension has gradually developed from poetry to literary space, and then to art space. Literary tension was subsequently introduced to China, where it was further researched and developed.

Another similar term is 'symbolic imagery'. Richard Howells uses the painting *The Arolfini Wedding Portrait* as an example in *Visual Culture* to provide an explanation. He believes that the scene in the painting is not just a simple family scene, but a coexistence of reality and symbolism: "because many of what may appear to be ordinary house-hold objects also have an emblematic significance. This is achieved through a technique known as 'disguised symbolism' in which everyday things can have a double life by having both a realistic and symbolic existence." [1]

#### 2.1.3. Summary

Symbolism and metaphor are poetic art techniques with different names and the same substance, so symbolic imagery can also be regarded as one. Due to the different cultural backgrounds and environments of China and the West, and the ambiguity and broadness of the term "symbolic imagery" itself, there are subtle differences in the definition of "symbolic imagery". Although there

are many definitions of "symbolic imagery", looking at its commonality, the author believes that it can be summarized as: "In addition to the superficial meaning, there are also images with deep meanings according to the context, background and other factors", and readers often focus on the deep meaning of such images.

## 2.2. The Cultural Connotation of Symbolic Imagery

Imagery can determine the artistic conception and aesthetic experience of literary works, carry the deep feelings of the author, and express them in an indirect form. Their connotations often need to be deeply understood in combination with specific cultural backgrounds, historical contexts, and personal experiences.

The ancient Chinese poet Xin Qiji's poem named *Ruihexian· Fumei*: "Geese frost and cold penetrate the curtain. The moon is protected by light clouds, and the tender ice is still thin. The stream box was combed and swept. It's difficult to learn makeup with fragrance and powder. Jade muscles are thin and thin, with a heavier weight and dragon silk lining. Leaning against the east wind, with a smile, I look forward to the flowers falling shyly"

Loneliness. Where is my home? Garden after snow, waterside pavilion. In the Old Testament of Yaochi, who is more relied upon by Linhong? Pink butterflies, searching for peaches and willows, blooming all over the southern branches without realizing it. Leaving only the plum blossoms in the dusk, lonely and melancholic. "The poet skillfully uses rhetorical devices such as metaphor, personification, contrast, and contrast to inject deep sympathy and sympathy into the description of this plum blossom love. The plum blossoms were discarded in the garden pavilion to the head of the brook in the wilderness. She once had an Old Testament with the Heavenly Yaochi, but now no one has preached it; Even Pink Butterfly only cares about looking for peaches and willows, but she disdains her. The lyricist shows that the plum blossom uses the stream water as a mirror to comb the makeup. In the moonlight, she danced like a fairy in silk. The three sentences of "leaning on the east wind" creatively use the words and sentences of "The Book of Poetry· Wei Feng · Shuoren" and Song Yu's "Deng's Disciple Lustful Fu" to vividly draw the expression and attitude of the plum blossoms and autumn waves flowing and smiling, which can be described as "turning beauty into flattery." Charm is beauty in motion". The rhyme is then launched in the sad scene of plum blossoms in the cold dusk. There is not a word in the whole article about politics and life. However, the reader naturally thinks of the author's loneliness and pain of being snubbed by the Southern Song Dynasty court, being attacked and impeached by the ruling lords and factions, and having no way to serve the country and being difficult to find a soulmate, and feels that the plum blossom is a symbol of his self. The author successfully portrayed the plum blossom, a symbolic image of sexual spirit and affection, thus showing a symbolic spiritual realm that wants to be resentful and deep and deep, which tugs at the heartstrings of the reader. [2]

The famous Taiwan poet Yu Guangzhong's masterpiece *Homesickness*, the four stanzas of the poem respectively imagine homesickness as "stamps", "ship tickets", "graves", and "straits", reflecting the poet's imagination between this object and the related object. These images are closely related to the central business of "nostalgia". And according to the "childhood", "when I grew up", "later", "and now" the growth process of the life of the progression, with "me" and "mother", "bride", "mainland" against each other, so that the image management is profound. The ingenuity of the imagery management also makes this poem a masterpiece in the history of Chinese new poetry. [3]

Towers are a common image in Western literature and art. From sacred texts to secular literature, the Tower of Babel, a symbol of chaos and sin, to the German romantic poet Arnott who lets his long hair fly in the air in a medieval tower on the shores of Lake Constance· and the Dost-Hoschoff William ·Butler· Yeats's most important collection of poems in his later years, *The Tower*. The Tower contains many metaphors around time and life, such as: time is money, childhood is a container,

young people are dogs, old age is a burden, sleep when you die, and so on. [4] This series of imagery enriches the expression of the work and deepens its connotation.

In William · Black's *The Shepherd*, Black cleverly uses the classic metaphorical imagery of "shepherd" and "lamb": "How sweet, this sweet shepherd!" From morning till night he wandered about; He will follow his flock all day long, and his mouth will be full of praise. For he hearkeneth the tender call of the Lamb, and hears the tender response of the ewe; He was always alert, and the sheep were quiet, knowing that their master was nearby. The "flock" in the poem symbolizes all human beings, and the shepherd is always alert, listening to the immature call of the lamb; In the face of the flock, the shepherd's mouth is "full of praise"; Whether it is a lamb or a ewe, in the eyes of the shepherd, it is an innocent and pure life. This reflects Blake's simple but unusually deep understanding of "equality of all beings", which was particularly valuable in the United Kingdom, when racial discrimination was still prevalent in the 18th century, and expressed his deep sympathy and humanistic concern for the poor, ethnic minorities and marginalized people who were at the bottom of society, living in hardship, vulnerable and excluded from society. [5]

### 3. "Symbolic Imagery" in the Field of Cross-Cultural Literature Studies

The understanding of imagery can be divided into: "extension" and "connotation". Extension is the external representation of the image, that is, the object itself that is directly accessed. Connotation is the deep meaning of the object that is related to the characteristics, history, culture and other factors. In the study of literature, the understanding of imagery needs to combine its "extension" and "connotation", with the context as the auxiliary, and comprehensively analyze it to achieve accuracy. In contrast, the cultural differences of symbolic imagery are mainly reflected in its "connotation" part.

Different cultural backgrounds will produce images with different cultural connotations. For example, the same image of the "owl" has a very different meaning in different cultural environments. In China, it is often considered an unlucky bird, but it is seen as a symbol of wisdom in the West. Then, when the word "owl" appears in the text, you can consider judging the emotional color or theme contained in it according to the source. Therefore, in cross-cultural literary exchange activities, if we cannot properly correspond to the cultural connotation of symbolic imagery, grasp its positive and negative attributes, and grasp its emotional degree, the phenomenon of misreading or over-interpretation will occur.

### 4. The Practice of Symbolic Imagery in Cross-cultural Studies

Take *Farewell to Cambridge* as an example. *Farewell to Kangqiao* is a poem by the modern Chinese poet Xu Zhimo, in which the poet depicts a flowing picture, constituting a wonderful artistic conception everywhere, and expressing emotions in detail.

This essay suggests people analyze the construction of symbolic images in specific cultural contexts, that is, symbolic images only produce a specific meaning in a certain cultural context. For example: "The river banks golden willows, Like brides in a setting sun; Beautiful shadows in bright waves, Waving in my heart. ". The willow tree in the sentence is a symbolic image in a specific cultural context. In the pronunciation of Chinese characters, "Liu"(willows) sounds like "Liu"(stay), and during the Tang and Song dynasties, the tradition of folding willows to bid farewell became popular. So Chinese poets often use the willow as a symbolic image when parting to express their reluctance to part. It is necessary to enter the context of ancient Chinese culture to appreciate that the selected scenery here secretly expressing the author's reluctance to part.

This essay also suggests people analyze the construction of symbolic images in the context of shared culture. Symbolic images in the context of shared culture do not require specific cultural context support and can be accepted by audiences in various cultural contexts. For example, "The

summer insights are also quiet for me, Cambridge night is silent." Analyze the usage of the word "silence" in everyday life. It can be seen that silence is triggered by a certain atmosphere or emotion in a certain situation. Silence has a sad, heavy color, with a dull and low context. So, even without words that express emotions directly, we can still know that the poets are unhappy.

## 5. Current Research Status

As far as the current research in the field of literature is concerned, the number of research papers on symbolic imagery is not insufficient, and the topics can be divided into two main categories.

The first category is mostly the study of the imagery in the works of a certain author or a series of works or the study of a certain image. For example, *The Ferry · View of the · World: An Exploration of the Film Imagery of Mikhail · Karatov's Poems*, *The Literary Presentation of Shuofang Imagery and the Sense of Community of the Chinese Nation in Ancient Poetry*; *The Connotation Accumulation and Cultural Significance of the Image of "Heqing" in Classical Poetry*, etc.

A type of research on the connection and differences between different cultures, that is, the research on imagery across cultures, is relatively lacking. The representative works of this category include Zhang Jian and Hu Lian, *The Writing and Dissemination of Chinese Classical Imagery from the Perspective of Cultural Comparison*, *Cultural Differences and Transmission in Literary Translation*, etc [6]. The study of symbolic imagery within a culture is common and easy to analyze. However, the current situation of cultural exchange is flourishing, and the study of symbolic imagery between different cultures must be addressed.

In addition, the research scope of imagery is mainly concentrated on literary works such as poems and articles and in the field of architecture such as garden planning, to broaden the horizon and keep pace with the times, you will find that many modern movies and TV dramas as works of art also contain many images that can be studied. For example, the clock that often appears in *Lust and Caution*, and the "footless bird" highlighted in *The True Story of A Fei*, Due to the late appearance of film and television dramas, their related research is not as in-depth and extensive as the research in the main fields.

## 6. Future Development Trends

In terms of writing, imagery is an important concept in ancient Chinese literature. Liu Xie of the Southern Dynasty proposed in *Wenxin Diaolong*: "Make the mystery master, find the rhythm and ink; the master, peep image and transport. This is the first art of the article, the big end of the plan". In other words, the construction and expression of imagery is one of the criteria for literature and poetry. Imagery can anchor abstract subjective emotions onto concrete objective objects, making them tangible artistic images that vividly express emotions and enrich the imagery and meaning of works. In terms of reading, in literary works, symbolic imagery is often more used in poetry and prose, and these literary genres have the characteristics of ambiguous and difficult themes, and the auxiliary role of symbolic imagery is particularly important. Without an understanding and analysis of the symbolic imagery that exists in it, it is natural that the central idea cannot be accurately understood. Translation is an integral part of cross-cultural communication between writing and reading. As a process of cross-cultural language transmission, translation needs to pay more attention to the understanding and expression of imagery while language conversion. When translating cultural images, translators should first find the common ground of Chinese and Western cultures and carry out effective communication. As a cultural disseminator, the translator should construct the cross-cultural image emotion and help the translation readers to produce the same cognition and value orientation. Secondly, the translator should pay attention to the overall effect of image translation and dissemination. Cross-cultural communication activities aim to realize the transmission of deep



meaning between the original text and the translation. Because the translator is in the second level of communicative context, the translation of cultural images is often restricted by language and cultural differences. The information correlation between the translation and the original text is weakened by the translation, and the translator should prevent this weakening.[7]

In summary, symbolic imagery will receive more and more attention in the future research of cross-cultural literature.

## 7. Conclusion

The original meaning of the word cross-culture does not refer to the simple encounter of different cultures but to the interaction of different cultures meeting at different levels. Therefore, the real situation of cross-cultural communication is the significance reorganization of the subjects of different cultures when they meet, which is a kind of inter-subjectivity behavior, and the subjectivity of culture is often reflected in various historical, literary and ideological texts. The formation of cultural questioning characteristics is due to the fusion of horizons formed from their own specific horizons. One culture and another culture meet and establish a meaning association with it, and what kind of meaning reorganization will occur in this association is the result of the interaction of the two horizons.[8]

Symbolic imagery is a very important element in literature and art, which helps to shape the scene and the author's expression of emotions, and its role is particularly obvious in some cross-cultural literary studies. Paying attention to the role of symbolic imagery, noticing the cultural differences in symbolic imagery, and better understanding of imagery will help us better grasp the work. This paper analyzes the cross-cultural definition of imagery, the cultural connotation of imagery, research and practice, and the current research review, and comprehensively summarizes the significance of imagery to works and its importance in cross-cultural literary studies, hoping to be helpful for subsequent research.

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