

On the Key Elements of Constructing English and Chinese Poetry

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Abstract

As for the key elements that construct English and Chinese poetry, there arise many controversies. Just because of the lack of definite standards, in the creation of modern poetry, everyone acts as he pleases, which leads to readers' getting farther and farther away from poetry. Either modern English poetry or modern Chinese poetry should possess extremely strong musicality and original and proper image, be inspired by inspiration, be able to communicate with readers and concentrate on the themes of truthfulness, benevolence and beauty, so that poetry, as a peculiar literary form, can reflect its own features and value.

Key words: Modern English and Chinese poetry; Constructing; Key elements

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1. INTRODUCTION

There are various literary criticism theories today, such as New Criticism, Formalism, Mythology and Prototype Criticism, Reader's Response Criticism, Postcolonialism, Deconstructionism, Cultural Poetics, Ecological Criticism, and so on. They are diverse and overwhelming, often leaving people feeling at a loss. The theories of poetic creation have been constantly changing since Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle proposed their respective viewpoint. But both English poetry and Chinese poetry should first be

able to communicate with readers, while paying attention to rhythm, being rich in novel and appropriate imagery, being born from inspiration, and being able to lead the world towards sublimity.

The study of poetry cannot be separated from the popular aesthetic view of traditional culture and the traditional cognition of poetry, and should not overlook the potential poetic elements in the collective unconscious. If poetic creation is detached from the excellent cultural traditions and aesthetic habits of our own nation, it will be like water without a source or tree without roots. At present, due to the increasing deviation of English and Chinese modern poetry from the excellent tradition of poetry and the aesthetic views rooted in traditional culture, and the lack of a unified standard on how to construct modern poetry, the academic issue of the common elements in the construction of English and Chinese modern poetry has become a valuable and meaningful topic at present.

2. THE COMMON ELEMENTS OF CONSTRUCTING MODERN ENGLISH AND CHINESE POETRY

2.1 Extremely Strong Musicality

If a song is not rhymed at all, it is difficult to give people the beauty of rhythm and the flavor of the song, and a poem should also pay attention to rhythm. Mr. Ji Xianlin says in *Reflections on Life*, "Pure poetry advocates abandoning rhyme, while I advocate that poetry must have rhyme, otherwise it can be called any name, but it does not need to be called poetry." (Ji, 2008, p.163)

The word "song" contained in the Chinese word "poetry" reflects the characteristic of poetic rhythm, which means that poetry has strong musicality.

Prof. Wang Baotong writes in his paper "*On the*

Rhythm and Translation of English and Chinese Poetry”: “Chinese poetry has strong musicality, which is mainly manifested in the four-tone variation, rhythm, and rhyme. English poetry also has strong musicality, which is mainly manifested in rhythm and rhyme.” “In Chinese poetry, rhyme is native. In the history of world poetry, rhyme has gradually spread from the east to the west. According to some experts’ research, rhyme is likely to have originated from ancient China. As China is the hometown of rhyme, traditional Chinese poetry emphasizes rhyme and regards learning sound and rhyme as the ‘first step in learning poetry’, cultivating the adaptability and sensitivity of the Han nationality to the tradition of rhyme.” (Wang, 1993, pp.33-38)

The traditional classical poetry of the Han nationality attaches great importance to tone variation, rhythm, and rhyme, making poetry an important art form that people enjoy due to its strong musicality. In history, the poems of famous poets have often been composed and sung by people. Following a general rhythm and occasionally changing according to the needs of content and emotions is the main characteristic of English poetry. The special combination of stressed and unstressed syllables in English poetry is called a foot. To determine the rhythm of an English poem, it depends on how many feet there are in most lines, and which feet are the main ones. The most common types of feet in traditional English poetry include iambic, trochee, anapaest, dactyl, amphibrach, and spondee. Traditional English poetry also exhibits strong musicality due to its emphasis on rhythm and rhyme. Precisely because poetry has strong musicality, it can inspire emotions and resonate with many people.

Just as the free verse in modern English poetry is not limited by early feet, modern Chinese poetry is no longer limited by the tonality and rhyme in classical poetry. However, due to the excessive freedom of modern Chinese and English poetry, there is a lack of musicality as an element in the characteristics of poetry.

Xie Xianghong points out in his article “*Four Misunderstandings in the Construction of New Poetry Style*” that musicality is the weakest link in new poetry, and the reason for this crisis is the four major misconceptions in the construction of new poetry style: 1. New poetry rejects musicality. For a long time, there has been a lack of clear understanding of the stylistic characteristics of new poetry. Some writers deny musicality as one of the essential features of new poetry style. And some writers even exclude musicality from new poetry. Some writers believe that new poetry should possess complete freedom. The birth of new poetry coincided with the non-rhythmic trend in the world poetry world, and the pioneers of new poetry were eager to break through the tradition of rhythm, resulting in inadequate development in the musicality of new poetry. 2. New poetry belittles external musicality; 3. Rhythm

is an instrument of punishment; 4. New poetry becomes disconnected from Chinese poetic tradition. (Xie, 1991, pp.104-107)

Poems that are truly loved and praised by readers can not only communicate with readers, but also possess strong musicality. Shakespeare’s sonnets, which are cherished by readers from all over the world, are highly musical works. Robert Frost, a four-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize and known as the Poet Laureate in American literature, became one of the most popular poets of the 20th century for writing many rhythmically beautiful poems. For example, his poem “*The Road Not Taken*” possesses not only a profound meaning, but also a beautiful melody, which has been widely praised by people. However, due to the lack of musicality as a poetic element, modern English and Chinese poetry not only lacks the artistic conception it deliberately creates, but also leads to poetry, an art form that was originally popular among the public, becoming increasingly distant from the public.

2.2 Novel and Appropriate Imagery

Complex and subtle emotions can only be understood but cannot be expressed. Similarly, complex and profound thoughts cannot be directly expressed with speech. Direct expression not only fails to express the original and profound meaning, but also makes a poem lose its poetic flavour. At this point, the role of imagery becomes prominent. Projecting emotions onto specific external things and using empathy to highlight them can not only convey subtle emotions and profound thoughts but also add poetic flavour to a poem, which makes reading meaningful and makes readers comprehend their essence.

What is imagery? Imagery is the concrete image that is embedded in the chest, formed by the fusion of the emotional image of the object and one’s own mental state. This term was originally a philosophical concept, and was first used in artistic creation by Liu Xie of China’s Southern Liang Dynasty in his book *Craving a Dragon at the Core of Literature*. He points out that “a craftsman with unique vision can wield an axe in the way he wants.” (Liu, 2009, p.81) Liu Xie’s statement indicates that when conceptualizing, external objects and images must be combined with interest and emotion to form aesthetic images.

Without imagery, a poem will become plain and straightforward. Metonymy, empathy and metaphor all involve imagery. If there is no imagery in a poem and if emphasis is only attached to rhyme, the poem will inevitably lack poetic flavor and space for imagination; But if the imagery in a poem is not appropriate, the poem will inevitably be a failure and cannot be considered a good one. When mentioning what kind of language poets possess, the famous British poet Shelley says in “*A Defence of Poetry*”: “Their language is vitally

metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things...and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse.” (Compilation Committee of Translation Series of Classical Literary Theory, 1961, p.69)

As a treasure of traditional Chinese poetry, Tang poetry can achieve a fusion of emotions and scenes. It integrates profound truths and deep emotions into seemingly simple but actually poetic lines with profound meaning and endless aftertaste. For example, in “*Spring Dawn*”, the famous poet Meng Haoran in China’s Tang Dynasty writes:

Feeling not when cometh th’ peep of spring dawn,
Everywhere birds’ songs I hear in my slumber.
Through the sounds of wind and rain all th’ night long,
Know I not how many th’ flowers fall in number.

By using the imagery of fallen flowers, we express our feelings of cherishing spring and hope to retain it. The author cannot bear to see the scene of flowers falling all over the ground under the wind and rain. He hopes that spring light can stay in the world. When he hears the sound of wind and rain, he thinks of the devastation it will cause to beautiful things, and feels sad about the easy loss of youth. If “*Spring Dawn*” does not have imagery, it will be equivalent to just a blank description of the scenery, and there will be no room for profound meaning and dissemination.

Many famous British and American poets often use unique imagery in their poems to vividly depict things, convey fresh and profound insights, and expand the space for imagination and poetic flavour. For example, the poetry of the famous American poet Emily Dickinson has its own unique imagery. According to my research, the imagery of Emily Dickinson’s poetry has four main characteristics: 1) using concrete imagery to replace abstract description; 2) using plain imagery to express profound thoughts; 3) using concrete imagery and abstract thinking to complement each other; 4) using parallel imagery to enhance the presentation of abstract things. The famous British poet Lawrence is also very skilled at conveying his abstract and profound ideas through fresh, concrete, and clear imagery. In some of his popular poems, the imageries of birds, beasts, and flowers are used to express his views on the world and his life ideals. For example, in his poem “*The Mosquito Knows*”, the imagery of mosquitoes is used to satirize the greedy bourgeoisie who extract the blood and sweat of others:

The mosquito knows full well, small as he is
he’s a beast of prey.
But after all
he only takes his bellyful,
he doesn’t put my blood in the bank. (Lawrence, 1994, p.382)

Therefore, in the creation of modern English and Chinese poetry, the use of novel and appropriate imagery is one of the factors that measure the success or failure of a poem. If imagery cannot be applied in a novel and appropriate way, it will inevitably be difficult to create an artistic conception, which can be felt and understood, but difficult to articulate in words.

2.3 Inspiration

It is not easy to write a good poem, and inspiration is also a very important part. It can even be said that poetry written without inspiration will lack spirituality and cannot be considered as good poetry. So Plato greatly emphasizes inspiration, believing that when the poet enters the state of writing poetry, he is not actually writing himself, but has become a messenger of the gods. He writes, “For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and then the mind is no longer in him.” (Bressler, 2007, P.18) Plato systematically proposes a highly mysterious theory of inspiration in his *Ion* for the first time.

Zhu Guangqian’s interpretation of Plato’s theory of inspiration in “*History of Western Aesthetics*” is as follows: “There are two different interpretations of what is called inspiration. The first interpretation is that gods attach themselves to poets or artists, causing them to be in a state of madness, inputting inspiration into them, and secretly manipulating them to create. This explanation is first proposed in the earliest dialogue ‘*Ion*’.” “The second explanation for inspiration is the memories brought by the immortal soul from a previous life. This explanation is proposed from *The Phaedrus*.” (Zhu, 2009, p.94) According to Plato, a poet’s inspiration comes from two channels. One of them is the madness and possession from the Muses. “It takes hold of a delicate, virgin soul and stirs it into a frenzy for composing lyric and other kinds of poetry, and so educates future generations by glorifying the countless deeds of the past. But anyone who approaches the doors of poetic composition without the Muses’ madness, in the conviction that skill alone will make him a competent poet, is cheated of his goal.” (Plato, 1959, p.111) The other is also a kind of madness. This kind of madness “is the kind which occurs when someone sees beauty here on earth and is reminded of true beauty.” (Plato, 1959, p.117) From this, it can be seen that if one wants to be an inspirational poet who can write excellent works, his soul must be “delicate and virgin”, kind and pure. Only this kind of people can have inspiration when creating poetry and can capture true beauty in their hearts. Although there are still different opinions and controversies about what inspiration is, as well as the sources and functions of inspiration, those outstanding poets recognized by the world in history, such as Wang Wei in China’s Tang Dynasty, Tagore in India and Shakespeare in England, are indeed pure and

kind-hearted, possessing a soul that Plato regards as “delicate and virgin”. They contribute to this world many outstanding works with the theme of truth, goodness, and beauty.

The role of inspiration cannot be ignored. Xu Zhimo once said that he couldn't even write one or two poems a year without inspiration, and he could write quickly when he had inspiration. Even before Plato talked about inspiration, his teacher Socrates (469 BC-399 BC) had talked about it in *Apology* by Plato. Socrates says, “not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration.” (Teaching and Research Office of Foreign Philosophy History, Department of Philosophy, Peking University, 1957, p.147)

Poetry cannot be created solely based on the wisdom gained in the world, and what is written without inspiration will not have poetic flavor and the power to move others. The generation of inspiration also requires conditions. It requires a poet to have a pure heart, upright character, sincerity, kindness, a compassionate sentiment towards the world, and poetic knowledge. In this case, at a certain moment, the poet might suddenly burst out of his heart, as a result of his thoughts and observations, some poetic words or sentences, then these poetic words or sentences are further brewed and dissolved, and then make them pass through a rhythmic sieve. Through this series of processes, a fresh and refined poem quietly emerges, and what drives this series of processes can be said to be inspiration.

When talking about the relationship between inspiration and poetic creation, Shelley says, “when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet.” (1961, p.78) Therefore, what is not written out of inspiration is just a pile of rhetoric.

2.4 Poetry Should Be Able to Communicate with Readers

Poetry creators should consider the reader's acceptance level when creating, and avoid writing the poems which are hard to understand. If a poem cannot communicate with readers, it will lose the necessity of existence. And some modern Chinese and foreign poets often write things that are obscure, and the meanings of what they write cannot even be explained by themselves. Actually, in the poetry written before T. S. Eliot, including all the poems of famous poets such as the British literary giant Shakespeare and the famous American female poet Emily Dickinson, who is regarded as a model of modernism, are all understandable to readers.

Besides the excellence in theme, paying attention to rhythm and being understandable to readers are the most basic two points. Imagery is an essential means to enhance poetic flavor, lingering charm, beauty, and imagination.

The creation of poetry has standards. A poetry learner should aim to write poetry that is understandable, rhythmic, thought-provoking, and enlightening, while adding poetic flavor to his poetry with novel and unique imagery.

Some people intentionally make poetry incomprehensible, as if “incomprehension” has become a necessary condition for poetic creation. Perhaps these people have been somewhat influenced by Eliot.

T. S. Eliot won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948 and established his position as the greatest English poet and writer through the compilation and publication of *the Four Quartets*. In his paper “*The Metaphysical Poets*”, Eliot says: “It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.” (Eliot, 1994, pp.24-25) He believes that readers need to allow images to enter their memory one after another, without questioning the validity of each image at that time, so that the overall effect will ultimately occur.

Eliot's words mean that in order to achieve a good and overall appreciation effect, readers can temporarily not explore whether the series of images used in the poem are appropriate and reasonable when appreciating it. Readers can freely combine them in their minds to obtain a good appreciation of the poem. But this does not mean that the importance of precise imagery can be ignored in poetic creation. Improper use of imagery can lead to readers misunderstanding the original meaning of poetry. How can the appreciation made by readers under misunderstanding be valuable and effective? In the current circles of poetry, writing obscure poems with inappropriate imagery has become a fashion.

The increasing obscurity of poetry is not an inevitable result of the diversity and complexity of cultural systems. Culture can have its diversity and complexity, but poetry can still have its own independent writing and evaluation standards. Its primary criterion should still be that it can be understood or basically understood by readers. If this is not achieved, poetry as a literary form will lose its meaning of existence. Therefore, the perplexity of poetic works is a defect, not an inevitable result, nor a standard for poetic creation. Regarding the literary theories of western masters, it is necessary to distinguish between falsehood and truth in criticism, rather than blindly copying them. It is improper for one to imitate and write obscure and incomprehensible things just because a certain western famous writer has ever written such things.

In fact, although Eliot says that there is no need to question the rationality of every image, he is very precise in choosing the “objective correlation” to express emotions in his “*The Wasteland*” and “*The Four Quartets*,” rather than using images indiscriminately. Therefore, as a poetry learner, one should not blindly follow the teachings of others. One should not simply follow what a famous poet has said like a deity, forgetting the true nature of poetry and the poet’s mission.

2.5 Poetry Should Praise Truth, Goodness, and Beauty

A truly vibrant poem is one that inspires the soul and praises truth, goodness, and beauty. “Poetry thus makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world.” (1961, p.79) The ultimate purpose of poetry must and should be to explore the ultimate truth and help people get closer to the truth, which is what the founder of Neo-Platonism, Plotinus (205-270), refers to as “the One”. As Shelley writes, “Poetry is indeed something divine...What were virtue, love, patriotism, friendship---what were the scenery of this beautiful universe which we inhabit; what were our consolations on this side of the grave---and what were our aspirations beyond it, if poetry did not ascend to bring light and fire from those eternal regions where the owl-winged faculty of calculation dare not ever soar?” (1961, p.78)

The poems that leave a deep impression on Western readers are often those that emphasize rhythm and profound meaning, and have enlightening and educational effects. For example, Shakespeare’s sonnets are famous for their theme of praising truth, goodness, and beauty. Emily Dickinson’s poem “I Died for Beauty” praises truth and beauty, and the poem “*If I Can Stop One Heart from Breaking*” by her praises goodness. Such poems not only provide people with aesthetic enjoyment in rhythm, but also cultivate their sentiments, providing spiritual comfort and sublimation.

Shakespeare expresses the true meaning of his poetic theme in his 105th sonnet:

Therefore my verse, to constancy confined,
One thing expressing, leaves out difference.
‘Fair, kind, and true’ is all my argument,
‘Fair, kind, and true’ varying to other words,
And in this change is my invention spent,
Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords.
Fair, kind, and true have often lived alone,
Which three till now never kept seat in one. (Shakespeare, 2008,
P.210)

Precisely because Shakespeare’s poetry truly praises the virtues of truth and goodness in humanity, as well as the beauty derived from these virtues, his poetry has been widely circulated, enduring and loved by people from all over the world, becoming pearls in the treasure trove of world literature.

Emily Dickinson writes in her poem *If I Can Stop One Heart from Breaking*:

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain. (Dickinson, 2005, p.6).

This little poem not only reflects the author’s kindness, but also contains praise for goodness. Moreover, this poem has been widely circulated due to its emphasis on rhythmic and catchy reading.

In another representative poem of hers titled “*I Died for Beauty*”, Emily Dickinson praises truth and beauty:

I died for beauty, but was scarce
Adjusted in the tomb,
When one who died for truth, was lain
In an adjoining room.
He questioned softly why I failed?
“For beauty,” I replied.
“And I for truth, -- the two are one;
We brethren are,” he said.
And so, as kinsmen met a night,
We talked between the rooms,
Until the moss had reached our lips,
And covered up our names. (Dickinson, 2005, p.180)

The contemplation and display of truth and beauty reflect the artistic views of the famous British Romantic poet John Keats. He puts forward the famous statement “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” (Hu, 2008, p.259) in his famous poem “*Ode on a Greek Urn*”.

And the famous British poet Percy Bysshe Shelley also highly praises truth, goodness, and beauty. In his *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley writes, “Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds.” (1961, p.78) “And to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word, the good which exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression.” (1961, p.69) “A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own.” (1961, p.72)

The highest unity of truth, goodness, and beauty is what Plotinus (205-270) refers to as “the One”. According to Plotinus’s Neo-Platonism, the One transcends all beings and is the source of all existents. Poetry with the theme of praising the truth, goodness, and beauty of the world will surely possess the power to elevate morality. As Shelley writes, “Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb.” (1961, p.72)

3. CONCLUSION

The academic issue of the construction elements of poetry is a valuable and meaningful topic in current literary criticism. The construction of a successful poem requires strong musicality, novel and appropriate imagery, the poet's inspiration, being able to communicate with readers, and the theme of praising truth, goodness, and beauty. Both English and Chinese poetry cannot be constructed without these important elements, otherwise what is written can't be called poetry.

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