

Mutual absorption of qi □ symmetries of literature and painting

[Literature](#), [Poetry](#)



Although the stanza describes the bleak autumn in Jiangnan, it is not confined to this place but brings the readers to the stretching hills and rivers miles away veiled in cold air. The reed and the lonely boat, common views in the rural wilderness, together with the quaint flute sound and the moon convey a wild and ethereal spirit.

The Technique of “ Alternating between thick and faint ink” in Nantang Flower-and-bird Paintings and poetry-ci

Xu Xi also applied his unique techniques to bird paintings in which birds were slender and lithe, and were often silhouetted against the horizon where the sea seemed to meet the sky (Guo 2007, 34). Such scenes are also identified in Wang Bo’s essay “ A Tribute to King Teng’s Tower” which says of Xu Xi: “ The autumn water is merged with the boundless sky into one hue”. Xu Xi also made full use of his techniques in his renowned painting “ Spring Swallows Sporting amidst Flowers”. The silk-scroll painting (102×325cm) is now displayed at Kun Lun Tang Art Gallery. On the painting is a title written by a Qing painter named Da Zhongguang and a calligraphic inscription written by a famous collector named Zhang Yuan. In the inscription the collector recounts how he reluctantly exchanged Su Shi’s bamboo painting for this painting. He praises Xu Xi’s paintings of flowers for being superior to those by any other painters. He is also impressed by the fact that they have remained intact after hundreds of years.

In the painting two spring swallows twitter in pear blossoms and swirl among peonies, thus combining static charm with dynamic beauty. With the help of ink and pigments, the elegant peonies and the enchanting pear flowers lend

glamour to each other. Xu Xi ingeniously drew the outline of slender branches and various petals with thick ink, while faintly colouring the flowers and the leaves. As a result, he proves a vital depiction of a spring day.

Xuanhe Anthology of Paintings regarded Xu Xi's flower-and-bird paintings as excellent with untrammelled spirit (Nameless 2012, 191-2).

Xu Xi's paintings of bamboo have also been praised as superior in execution to other painters of this subject. His silk scroll painting " Snow Bamboo" (151. 1cm×99. 2 cm) , which is now held at Shanghai Museum, has been lauded as unique in its composition. The painting is of several bamboo stems standing tall and upright among stones after heavy snowfall. The bamboo joints, branches and leaves, painted with thick ink, are straight and sturdy. while the texture of the stones is achieved with faint colour. The deliberate blank space representing the white snow is crystalline and vivid.

Li Jing was arguably the first Nantang poet to have applied such technique to poetry-ci lyrics. In his " Tune: Silk-washing Stream", the line " Locked in my bower as before, how sad spring looks!" (Li and Li 1957, 5) presents a detailed description of the woman's gloomy countenance while another two lines " Blue birds bring no news from beyond the cloud: in vain. The lilac blossoms knot my sorrow in the rain" (Ibid) blur the background of this poetry-ci lyric. The blue birds, messengers for Xi Wang Mu (Queen Mother of the West), blend in with the azure sky and the purple and white lilac blossoms are shrouded in a light drizzle.

However, Li Yu's poetry-ci lyrics about court life reproduce similar aesthetic choices and preferences found in paintings of the period. For example, in "Tune: A Casket of Pearls" the girl "drips some drops of sandalwood stain on her lips" and "careless about her gauze sleeves soiled with crimson stain, she fills her cup with fragrant wine again", which echoes the artistic technique of colouring a painting with faint ink. And then "chewing bits of bastings red, she spits them out with a smile upon her master dear". Tang Guizhang thought that the poetry-ci lyric "portrays the beauty's clothes and countenance in great detail so that she turns to life" (Tang 1981, 30). Also in "Tune: Everlasting Longing" Li Yu applied the painting technique to the description of a handmaiden: "Her cloudlike hair / With jade hairpin / In dress so fair / Of gauze so thin / Lightly she knits her brows dark green" (Li and Li 1957, 64). The handmaiden's hair and jade hairpin are salient while her clothes are light and thin. Kuang Zhouyi (1960, 112) in his Poetic Remarks in the Warm Breeze regarded Li Yu's "Tune: Song of the Washerwoman" as a masterpiece because of its "description of a chaste lovesick woman with laconic diction".

What's more, in "Tune: Spring in Jade Pavilion", Li Yu had employed images of "evening dress" and "skin bright as snow" to describe the palace maids' gorgeous visages, which embodied the regal detachment as well as the ethereal spirit. Though Li Yu had savoured an extravagant imperial life, he did not embellish it in this poetry-ci lyric. Instead, he ended the lyric with the lines "Don't light on my returning way a candle red! I'd like to see the hoofs reflect moonlight they tread" (Li and Li 1957, 64). The combination of clear

moonlight and silvery clop renders the lyric melodious and fluent, which is analogous to the quaint and ethereal spirit in Nantang flower-and-bird paintings.

Flower-and-bird Paintings in the West Sichuan and Huajian Poetry-ci

The Qi of Luxury in Flower-and-bird Paintings in the West Sichuan and Huajian Poetry-ci

Huang Quan's painting style which can be considered as the Qi of riches and honour was in sharp contrast to his contemporary Xu Xi. Huang Quan, whose courtesy name was Yong Shu, became a court painter at the age of 17.

Having gone through the Qianshu Dynasty, Houshu Dynasty and the Song Dynasty, he was promoted to the vice surveillance commissioner and enjoyed his twilight years in the palace. As a palace dweller, he was very familiar with royal treasures and hence able to portray fantastic plants and exotic animals such as peach hawks and falcons, snow-white pheasants and rabbits, golden pigeons, peacocks, turtles and cranes (Guo 2007, 34). These objects were extremely rare and inaccessible to ordinary painters. Huang Quan witnessing the extraordinary things added natural regal splendour to his own paintings.

Huang Quan was less interested in creating bright and gorgeous pictures, than in achieving painterly elegance and integrity. He learned from famous painters like Diao Guangyin, Teng Changyou and Sun Wei, and while digesting the gaudy style and the grotesque style, he created his own painting style (Nameless 2012, 173). Thus, in contrast to the Nantang

paintings featuring wild and ethereal scenes by alternating between thick and faint ink, Huang Quan's paintings were characteristic of his novel technique called "thin strokes with bright colours". This is a painting technique which requires painters to employ extremely thin ink strokes, drawn with faint ink, to draw the outline of the scene, almost leaving no stains and then to colour it with bright pigments. Paintings created in this way are bright and dynamic. The cranes painted by Huang Quan were so vivid that they seemed to be alive.

The silk scroll "The Sketch of Rare Animals" (41.5cm x 70cm), housed in the Palace Museum, is the only extant painting by Huang Quan. With exquisite strokes and gorgeous colours, it not only embodies regal splendour, but also depicts various vivid lively birds and insects. Sichuan was also a stronghold of poetry-ci lyrics. Due to abundant natural resources and success in battles in the Five Dynasties, people in the court in Sichuan were often hedonistic. In the preface for Feng Yansi's poetry-ci anthology *Warm Spring*, Chen Shixiu wrote: When Feng Yansi was free in Nanjing, he often invites friends to his banquet where they composed new lyrics to a given tune of poetry-ci. Then the singers would sing to the music of stringed and woodwind instruments to amuse the guests. Day by day, the lyrics culminated in an anthology. The flowery diction, chic rhythm and profound ideas in the poetry-ci lyrics manifested Feng's prodigious talent (Chen 1992, 149).

In addition to the compliment on Feng Yansi's poetry-ci lyrics, Chen Shixiu also pointed out that poetry-ci lyrics worked to amuse guests. The essence of poetry-ci creations in the Five Dynasties was a representation of

extravagance and hedonism. The poems were often depictions of gifted scholars and pretty girls. These poetry-ci lyrics displayed mundane things in the form of palace-style poetry. He representative of poetry-ci lyrics at that time was Huajian poetry-ci, which was popular in ancient Sichuan. In *Among the Flowers: the Hua-chien Chi* edited by Zhao Chongzuo, Wen Tingyun topped the list of poetry-ci creations with 66 pieces and Wei Zhuang followed him with 48. Other works were written by He Ning, Niu Xiji as well as many others.

Huajian poetry-ci and Huang's paintings have the following similar features: women usually dwell in "jade pavilions", "phoenix pavilions" and "pond pavilions", decorated with ornate bead, crystal and emerald curtains as well as rare bedding such as exquisite satin quilts and glass pillows. What's more, the plants and animals in Huajian poetry-ci always involved peonies and mandarin ducks.

The technique of "thin strokes with bright colors" in Flower-and-bird Paintings in the West Sichuan and Huajian Poetry-ci

The poetry-ci poets in the west Sichuan also enjoyed painting. As "the founder of Huajian poetry-ci", Wen Tingyun found pleasure in painting and derived much poetic inspiration from it. According to Sun Guangxian's *Titbits of North Dream*, "Wu Xing and Shen Hui were Wen Tingyun's nephews. They heard that Wen was good at all kinds of instruments and composed several melodies. He also liked painting and often stopped midway to write lyrics" (Sun 1981, 137).

In view of Wen's passion for painting, it is understandable that he added painterly features to his poetry-ci lyrics. For example, in one of his poetry-ci lyrics to the tune of Buddhist Dancers, Wen commences by describing a girl's beautiful hairpin before moving, with the use of the word "ripple," to a description of a pond of turquoise spring water. The line "The crab-apples above the pond blossom after the rain" depicts a pond dotted with crimson flowers, a manifestation of Wen's ingenious use of colours. The second stanza "The girl covers her smile with silk sleeves. The boy leaves for the Pass of Jade without any news" (Zhao 1981) gives a detailed description of a tender and lovesick woman, reflecting the painting technique of "faint strokes". The verb "cover" conveys restrained love, touching and profound.

The Huajian poetry-ci poets, Wen and Wei were proficient in writing graceful and polished sentences and with bright adjectives such as gold, emerald and scarlet. Similar to Huang Quan's paintings combining brightness and solemnity, Huajian poetry-ci lyrics were not reduced to a gaudy style but were loaded with quaint elegance. In one poetry-ci lyric to the tune of Buddhist Dancers, Wen Tingyu begins with a description of the exquisite hairpins with a pattern of purple mandarin ducks. Then his focus switches to the outside willows and drizzle. The line "the grass on the Jiangnan shore" brings readers to the remote riverbank and adds to the poetry-ci lyric a sentiment of sadness. However, another line "the mirror and flowers does not know my sorrow" (Zhou 1996, 4) makes the poetry-ci lyric hopeful by using beautiful images.

As a result, the whole poetry-ci lyric really has pathetic sentiments but not to the mawkish extreme. Some critic commented that “ Wen Tingyun’s poetry-ci lyrics, removed from anger and intimidation, are a perfect combination of boldness and tenderness” (Li 1986, 13). Tang Xianzu also said that some lines in the poetry-ci lyric mentioned above are as picturesque as any painterly scenes. The integration of mournful emotion with florid diction was commonly seen in Huajian poetry-ci lyrics.

Unlike Wen Tingyun, the poet Wei Zhuang, another exponent of Huajian poetry-ci, preferred plain language. He entered ancient Sichuan in A. D. 901 and lived there for more than 10 years. He often employed “ lotuses at dawn and willows in the breeze” as the images in his works. In his most renowned poetry-ci lyric to the tune of Buddhist Dancers, the lines “ Clear the water compares to sky / Heeding the rain on boat leisurely lie” describe the Jiangnan water more charming than the azure sky. However, in the gaily-painted boat, the writer of poetry-ci fell into a deep sleep in the pitter-patter of rain. The last line “ Ne’er return home as prime, or the heart bears the ruining time” elevates the poetry-ci lyric powerfully expresses the pain of helplessness and gloominess.

Conclusion

In the system of Chinese ancient literature, poetry is usually the expression of subjective emotion; poetry-ci often focuses on the external environment. Yet as we have seen, poetry-ci also has important features in common with painting in the image’s expression. Nantang poetry-ci and Huajian poetry-ci, popular in ancient Jiangnan and Sichuan respectively, play an important role

during the period of the Five Dynasties (907-960). I have argued that the formation of the two poetry-ci styles is closely related to the different local painting styles. The flower-and-bird paintings and poetry-ci created in the Five Dynasties, two seemingly irrelevant genres, actually interact with each other.

Drawing into Poetry-ci provides an important means for better appreciating Chinese Ancient Literature. The creations of paintings and poetry-ci in the Five Dynasties are a quintessential “ mutual absorption of Qi”. The flower-and-bird painters in Jiangnan represented by Xu Xi portray wild and ethereal scenes, which echo the elegant and delicate diction of Nantang poetry-ci. And their counterparts in Sichuan represented by Huang Quan are known for flamboyant paintings, which are analogous with the flowery language of Huajian poetry-ci. The example indicates that the “ Qi Theory” on literary and artistic creations is a mutually absorptive “ ecological whole” and provides more profound insights into theories about classical Chinese literary creations.