

Mutual Absorption of Qi: Symmetries of Literature and Painting in Chinese Ancient Culture

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ABSTRACT

“Qi” is considered the foundation of classical Chinese literary creations. Both Eastern and Western scholars from varied perspectives regard the “Qi Theory” as a creator-oriented theory on literary and artistic creations, in which a creator not only connects creations with creation processes but also links macrocosm with micro-inner world, thus forming a self-centred small cosmos in the intertwined time and space. This small universe is mutually absorptive. When different creators work on different literary or artistic genres, the mutual absorption of “Qi” occurs, and the outcomes will bear similar “Qi” but distinct “forms”. The creations of paintings and poetry-ci in the Five Dynasties are a quintessential “mutual absorption of Qi”, indicating 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.

Keywords: Qi, Drawing, Chinese, poetry-ci, appreciation

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Qi” is considered the foundation of classical Chinese literary creations. It was Cao Pi that first brought the concept of “Qi” into the literary and artistic creations. He claimed that one’s essential “Qi” would render his articles either pure or turbid. The so-called “Qi” originally referred to a writer’s talent. However, when transposed into the field of literary and artistic creations, “Qi” takes on different meanings such as artistic forms, authors’ personality and works’ vitality. One of the representative assumptions about “Qi” in the Chinese academia is that “Qi” embodies a harmonious relation between “Tian, Ren and Wen (cosmos, creators and creations)”, in which the “Wen” denotes a chronological cultural whole involving the formation of literary or artistic creations, the spirit of creators and the status of creation processes (Zhang 1994, 11-6). The Western academia also gives explanations for the mystical oriental concept, regarding it as an author’s unique artistic inspiration (Ronald Miao 1972, 1027) or his writing style. To sum up, “Qi” is a cultural entity against the background of space, comprised of macrocosm, creators’ energy and creations’ vitality (Gu 2012, 65-72).

Both Eastern and Western scholars from varied perspectives regard the “Qi Theory” as a creator-oriented theory on literary and artistic creations, in which a creator not only connects creations with creation processes but also links macrocosm with micro-inner world, thus forming a self-centred small cosmos in the intertwined time and space. This small universe is mutually absorptive. When different creators work on different literary or artistic genres, the mutual absorption of “Qi” occurs, and the outcomes will bear similar “Qi” but distinct “forms”.

Ancient men of letters in China noticed some similarities between paintings and poetry-ci. For example, Su Shi, a literary giant in the Song Dynasty, says, “Poetry and paintings have the same essence, either ingenious or exquisite” (Shen 1962, 280-1). Another scholar in the late Qing Dynasty named Shen Zengzhi also points out in *Hairi Tower Reading Notes* that “poets and painters share similar sentiments when creating images or pictures”. Chen Yunji in his article “Han Yu’s ‘South Mountain Poem’ and Esoteric Buddhism Mandala Paintings” (Chen 2002, 150-64) suggests that the popularity of Esoteric Buddhism paintings in the middle Tang Dynasty exerts a great influence on the grotesque style of Han Yu’s poem, thus

providing an early argument for the “integration of painterly images into poetry”.

Most modern scholars hold that poetry-ci has more influence on paintings in the relationship between the two. For example, Jao Tsung-I has argued for the relationship between paintings and poetry-ci. In the article “Poetry-ci and Paintings—a Study on Art’s Transposition”, he identifies patterns combining poetry-ci and paintings from the Song Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty. His argument emphasizes the influence of poetry-ci on paintings and focuses on such practices as integrating poetry-ci images into paintings, inscribing poetry-ci on paintings and mapping poetry-ci onto paintings (Jao 1993). In “Poetry-ci and Paintings of the Five Dynasties and the Northern Song Dynasty”, Peng Guozhong not only elaborates upon the influence of poetry-ci lyrics in the Five Dynasties and the Northern Song Dynasty on paintings, but also makes the case that poets have borrowed some skills from painting techniques such as “Dian Ran (adding details to a painting)” and “Zhuo Se (colouring a painting)” to describe characters, scenes and emotions (Peng 2008, 133 -40). Although this article recognizes the multifaceted influence of paintings on poetry-ci’s development, it mainly targets the Tang Dynasty and the Northern Song Dynasty, and fails to mention the Five Dynasties when poetry-ci and paintings had closer relation.

In fact, the coexistence of paintings and poetry-ci in the Chinese cultural system and their mutual absorption and influence through “Qi” are manifestations of the integrated and vigorous Chinese cultural ecology. The paintings and poetry-ci creations in the Five Dynasties were highly characteristic of this mutual absorption of “Qi”. The painting styles in the Five Dynasties were an important milestone in the history of Chinese painting, among which “Xu and Huang’s different painting styles” enjoyed a long-lasting reputation. The “Xu” means Xu Xi, whose painting was popular in the Jiangnan region during the period of the Five Dynasties and advocated unrestrained spirit, while the latter “Huang” means Huang Quan, who was popular in ancient Sichuan and features bright tints. Such distinction correspond to the different artistic styles.

Apart from paintings, the poetry-ci lyrics in the Five Dynasties also had great literary fame and informed the creations of poetry and poetry-ci in Tang and Song Dynasties. Nantang poetry-ci

and Huajian poetry-ci also had a difference similar to that between Xu and Huang’s painting styles.

Whether the paintings and poetry-ci lyrics in the Five Dynasties bore resemblances and what their interaction reflected in terms of Qi in the Chinese culture to be explored in the paper.

NANTANG FLOWER-AND-BIRD PAINTINGS AND POETRY-CI

The Qi of Wild and Ethereal in Nantang Flower-and-bird Paintings and poetry-ci

In our discussion of painting and poetry-ci in the Five Dynasties, I shall first discuss Xu Xi. According to the records in *Xuanhe Anthology of Paintings* of Song dynasty, Xu Xi created 249 paintings. He was a member of a noble family, and approximately 40% of these paintings are of bright flowers such as peonies, cherries and roses. The choice of blooming flowers as a subject matter conveyed the imperial idea that good fortune itself bloomed like flowers. Instead of directly painting flowers in ink as most people do, Xu Xi first sketched branches, leaves and buds, and only then coloured them (Nameless, 2012: 191). Through such techniques, his paintings appeared vivid with minimal pigments. Hence Guo has described the Qi of his style as “wild and ethereal” (Guo, 2007: 33)

While Nantang poets, often moonlighting as painters, were connoisseurs of paintings, the Nantang royal family, famous for their poetic achievements, were also given to paintings. Such tradition dates back to the Emperor Li Sheng. According to Lu You’s “Chen Jue” from the *Book of the Nantang Dynasty*, “The Emperor Li Sheng provided men of letters with a special house equipped with an immense number of books, paintings and instruments. In his spare time he often talked with them about previous and current events” (Lu 1986, 37). Li Jing, the successor to the Emperor Li Sheng, was also respectful of scholars and built a pavilion in front of the Lushan Waterfall so as to enjoy a tranquil life. Chen Pengnian’s *Anecdotes in Jiangnan* recorded that “The Emperors Li Jing and Li Yu were both good at writing and liked collecting curios. There were numerous scrolls of calligraphy and painting especially those written by Zhong Yao and Wang Xizhi” (Chen 2004, 5140). The Emperor Li Yu was also a renowned art collector whose collection included “Rural Mountains and Rivers in Spring and Summer”江乡春夏景山水,

“Picking Melon in a Mountain Trip” 山行摘瓜图 and other valuable works. Both Li Sheng and Li Yu had a liking for Xu Xi’s paintings. According to *Xuanhe Anthology of Paintings*, Li Yu stored Xu Xi’s paintings in the treasury and often appreciated them in isolation (Nameless 2012, 191). Xu Xi’s painting style and techniques permeated the spiritual world of Nantang royal family.

Some members of the Nantang royal family were also distinguished painters. Li Yu, hailed as “the King of poetry-ci”, was an extremely talented painter. His original calligraphy technique “golden sword” are said to have rendered the strokes of the Chinese characters “as vigorous as the hardy pines and bamboo”. While none are now extant, his paintings were also reputed to be extraordinary, ranging over mountains and rivers, people, flowers and birds and fish and insects (Nameless, 2012, 186).

Nantang poetry-ci and Nantang flower-and-bird paintings have the following common characters: One example is Li Yu’s poem “A Fisherman’s Song” inscribed on the painting “An Old Angler by the Spring River”:

White-crested waves aspire to a skyful snow;
Spring displays silent peach and plum trees in a row.
A fishing rod,
A pot of wine,
Who in this world can boast of happier life than mine?
The dripping oar, the vernal wind, a leaf like boat,
A light fishhook, a silken thread of fishing line,
An isle in flowers,
A bowl of wine,
Upon the endless waves with full freedom I float (Li &Li, 1957: 56).

(Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

At the beginning the poem presents a grand scene. The first line “White-crested waves aspire to a skyful snow” describes the furious billows buffeting the shore, while the second line “Spring displays silent peach and plum trees in a row” depicts falling petals drifting in the air. However, the poet then switches his attention to the boat, the pot of wine and the fishing rod, adding a sense of rural charm to the poem.

Another example is an excerpt from Li Yu’s poetry-ci “Gazing on the South”:

My idle dream goes far;
In autumn clear the southern countries are.
For miles and miles a stretch of hills in chilly hue,
Amid the reed is moored a lonely boat in view.
In moonlit tower a flute is played for you
(Li &Li, 1957: 32).

(Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

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).



Figure1. Xu Xi, the painting of "Spring Swallows Sporting amidst Flowers" (part).

Photograph: Lu, Jiangheng (2006) *Enjoying the Calligraphy Works and Paintings in Kunluntang Art Gallery*. Beijing: Rongbao Zhai House Publishing, p.10.

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.



Figure2. Xu Xi, the painting of "Snow Bamboo" (part).

Photograph: Xie, Zhiliu. 2008. *The Appreciation of Painting and Calligraphy*. Tianjin: Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House, p.145.

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×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.

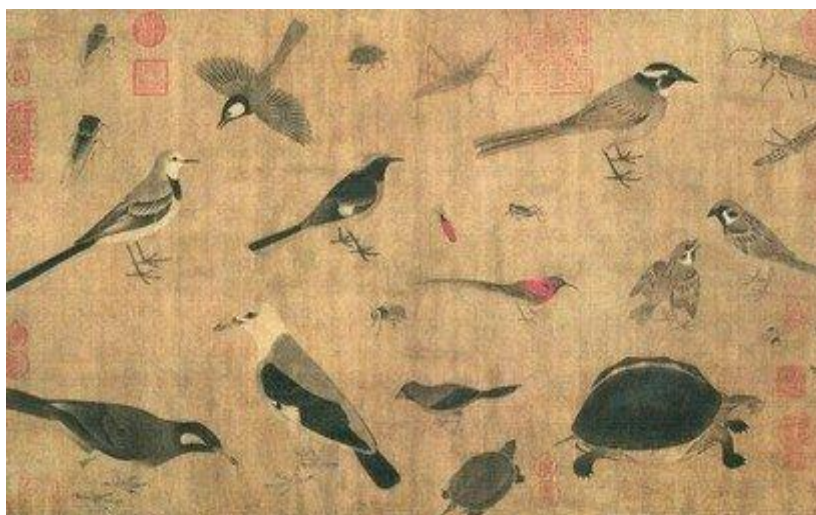


Figure3. Huang Quan, the painting of “The Sketch of Rare Animals” (part).

Photograph: The Palace Museum .2008. *The Palace Museum on Painting and Calligraphy*. Beijing: the Forbidden City Publishing House, p.38.

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 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 ruing 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.

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