

The “Shengsheng” Aesthetics of The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry by Ssu-k'ung T'u

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Abstract:

Chinese culture embodies a profound reverence for “Sheng”. “Shengsheng” (生生) means to generate new life constantly. It represents a distinctive and objective reality specific to China, diverging significantly from Western thought patterns. The “Shengsheng” Aesthetics is prominently depicted in The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry (二十四诗品) by Ssu-k'ung T'u 司空图 (837-908). The collection showcases numerous vivid and rhythmic images that enhance the vibrant poetry atmosphere. Furthermore, The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry, a poetry criticism rooted in the art of poetic form, generates a seamless stream of auditory and rhythmic patterns, giving rise to the illusion of vitality.

Keywords:

Ssu-k'ung T'u, The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry, “Shengsheng” Aesthetics

1. Introduction

The term “shengsheng” is mentioned previously in Yi Zhuan 易传 (Classic of Changes), specifically in the statement: Yi (changes) takes the way of heaven and earth as its principle and makes things move, progress, change and develop with no end. What is above is the meaning of Yi. (生生之谓易) [1] “Shengsheng” Aesthetics refers to a classic Chinese aesthetic philosophy that showcases the distinctive beauty of life's creation and the underlying principles of yin and yang in the Eastern environment. Ssu-k'ung T'u's classic delves into enigmatic poetry styles and the artistic conception by using tangible items, which possess boundless creativity and extensive room for contemplation. This paper aims to explore the origins of Chinese traditional culture as depicted in The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry. We will analyze three key aspects: the rhythmic imageries of life portrayed in the poems, the poetic space created by imageries with dynamic life rhythms, and the unique rhythmic flow of the loop structure found in the poems. Through this analysis, we seek to elucidate the deeper meanings conveyed beyond mere words and images in The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry. To gain a more profound comprehension of the attributes of The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry, such as “Meaning transcending

words” (言外之意), “Image surpassing image” (象外之象), “Scene exceeding scene” (景外之景).

2. Imageries with Full Sense of Rhythm and Vigor

Zong Baihua 宗白华 (1897-1986) argues that the cyclical nature of seasons, the reproductive processes of all living beings, and the growth and transformation of everything in the world demonstrate the orderly and harmonious patterns that govern the creation of life on Earth [2]. Each entity, whether in heaven or on earth, follows its own distinct rules. The four seasons perpetually progress, and all things are born in an eternal cycle. The rhythmic flowing rule is a natural occurrence caused by the earth's rotation and revolution. It also holds deep insights into life, values, and the universe, suggesting the perpetual energy and eternal beauty of creation.

Ssu-k'ung Tu's *The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry* showcases several vivid and rhythmic imageries of life, effectively conveying the dynamic essence of all living beings and the boundless inner vigor encapsulated in the rhythm of existence. The *Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry* illustrates the sequential progression of time, which in turn materializes as a cycle of repetition and infinite duration. The poem “Decorous and Dignified” (典雅) includes “Jade Pot Buys Spring” (玉壶买春). The poem “Lucid and Wondrous” (清奇) showcases “Autumn as the Air” (如气之秋) and “Clear Snow Fills the Bamboo” (晴雪满竹). [3] They exemplify the seasonal transition and imply a consistent pattern throughout *The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry* with regards to the changing seasons. The sequence of artworks, ranging from “Wind and Sun on the Waterfront” (风日水滨) in “Delicate-fresh and Rich-Lush” (纤秾) to “Sunset and Clear Air” (落日气清), and to “Moonlight on the Night Islet” (夜渚月明) in “Firm and Self-Possessed” (沉著), portrays the transition from daytime to evening to a moonlit night.

Furthermore, *The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry* also portrays imageries that undergo dynamic transformations, exhibiting immense and limitless characteristics, such as “Hai” (sea), “Tian” (sky), “Feng” (wind), “Shui” (water) and others. These images are constantly in motion, following the rhythm of life. One particular image that stands out is the “Feng” (wind), which appears a total of 13 times. For instance, phrases such as “the sea breeze resembles a cerulean cloud, and the moon shines brightly during the night” (海风碧云,夜渚月明), “The moon ascends in the eastern direction, while the wind emanates from that same direction” (月出东斗,好风相从), “The sky is replete with undulating patterns, and the sea stretches out boundlessly” (天风浪浪,海山苍苍), and so on. The use of “Feng” (wind) as an imagery has a long history, dating back to Zhuang Zi 庄子 (369 BC-286 BC). The *Adjustment of Controversies* (齐物论) by Zhuangzi says, When the breath of the Great Mass (of nature) comes strongly, it is called Wind. [4] He integrates the concept of “Feng” (wind) into his philosophical framework. The imagery of “Feng” (wind) contains the basic law of generation of all things in the universe: “Everything changes from nothing to something and then back to nothing, week after week.” [5] The “Feng” (wind) in *The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry* also contains the meaning of “birth”, from static to movement to static, from nothing to something to nothing, from harmony to discord to harmony.

The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry contains numerous rhythmic imageries of life, interconnected based on the yin and yang structural pattern, and governed by a specific established law. By imitating the laws of nature, a connection is established

between poetry and nature, and the boundlessness of nature bestows upon poetry the quality of “Shengsheng”.

3. The Poetic Space with Vibrant and Dynamic Life Rhythms

The artistic conception is the poetic space in which reality and fiction are mutually exclusive and alive with the rhythm of life. Zong Baihua mentioned in *The Birth of Chinese Artistic Context* that artistic conception is the rhythm of life and rhythmic life [6]. The space of artistic conception is vast and boundless, which makes people have infinite meanings but is difficult to grasp and explain. The artistic conception contains the real world, which is in front of you, and the virtual world, which is outside of your words. The imaginary realm is expressed through the real realm, and the real realm is processed under the unity of the imaginary realm, thus forming the real and imaginary realities and the vast and boundless realm of meaning. The artistic conception is the unity of Visual representation and vitality, the combination of emotion and reason, the coordination of reality and emptiness, which is not only born in the accident but also embedded in the image. The creation of the imaginary realm must be carried out by the real realm and implemented in the concrete depiction of the real realm.

The *Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry* encompasses many poetic artistic styles and aesthetic moods. It describes twenty-four styles, but not only twenty-four artistic conception. For example, there are three artistic conceptions in the “Decorous and Dignified” (典雅), such as spring, summer, and autumn. It is a recognized fact in the academic world that *The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry* are highly skilled in creating artistic conception, but artistic conception are difficult to describe and therefore need to be expressed through some realities. Ssu-k'ung T'u's analyses and interpretations of the theory of artistic conception do not use direct concepts but rather the description of specific images to achieve the creation of realm, giving rise to endless space for imagination. This coincides with Ssu-k'ung T'u's aesthetic principles of “not using a single word but getting the full flavor of the poem” (不着一字,尽得风流) and “transcending the image and getting its ring” (超以象外,得其环中). The *Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry* uses metaphors and associations to portray a series of character images, events and objects. Through these images or groups of images, it expresses deeper emotions and interests that are difficult to express and realizes the expression of mood from concrete to abstract, from real to imaginary.

It is through the depiction of concrete natural objects that it conveys an ungraspable poetic space. For example, “Delicate-fresh and Rich-Lush” (纤秾) depicts flowing water, deep valleys, lush peach trees, soft winds, green willows, and crisp birdsong, which creates a vibrant spring scene and gives people a deep understanding of the meaning of flora. In “Melancholy and Depression” (悲慨), the two lines “The wind whipped up the waves and the trees were destroyed” (大风卷水,林木为摧) and “Helplessly watching the falling leaves, listening to the residual raindrops grey moss” (萧萧落叶,漏雨苍苔) depict a picture of the depression after the storm. Through this kind of depiction of image and situation, one can understand what sadness is without a theoretical explanation. This is achieved through the concrete images' deep connection with nature and the evocative portrayal of their images. The intricacies of the world can only be comprehended but not effectively communicated.

The utilization of a substantial quantity of imageries and the construction of significance facilitated the formation of realms, which can be perceived as the expansion of meaning between the having and not expanding. The concept of imagery

in traditional Chinese art can be viewed as an extension of the fundamental aesthetic categories. It is closely associated with the concept of “Shengsheng”, which reflects the harmonious relationship between the intended meaning and the surrounding environment, as well as the interconnectedness of the spiritual and human realms. It possesses the ability to evoke an image that goes beyond the literal representation, creating an unexpected sense of rhythm.

4. The Poems' Rhythm of Looping Flow

The distinguishing feature of The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry is its composition as a poem, comprising twenty-four quatrains with rhyming patterns. The quatrains possess a musical quality characterized by a pronounced rhythm and a profound portrayal of life's emotions. Each distinct rhythm within them exists in a state of opposition, resulting in a composition that reflects the essence of life. Similarly, The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry exhibits a continuous and boundless rhythmic flow. Simultaneously, rhythm and imagery are both intangible, and the intervention of sound and rhyme greatly aids in the formation and amplification of the mood.

Ssu-k'ung T'u meticulously employed sound and rhyme strategies in The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry, resulting in a vibrant and dynamic rhythmic quality that exudes boundless fluidity. For instance, in “Energy-Absolute” (雄浑), the words of “Chong” 充 (Full), “Xiong” 雄 (Grand), “Kong” 空 (Empty), “Feng” 风 (Wind), “Zhong” 中 (Middle), “Qun” 群 (Group) rhyme with “ng”. In “Limpid and Calm” (冲淡), the words of “Wei” 微 (Slight), “Fei” 飞 (Fly), “Yi” 衣 (Clothes) and “Wei” 违 (Violation) rhyme with “i”. The proper arrangement of the metric feet makes the syllables of the same rhyme repeated in the corresponding positions, thus forming a kind of rhythmic beauty with a loop of repetitions. In addition, the last of The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry, “Flowing Movement” (流动) uses perceptible and unified sounds such as “Zhu” 珠 (Bead), “Yu” 愚 (Fool), “Shu” 枢 (Pivot), “Fu” 符 (Symbol), “Wu” 无 (Empty), and “Hu” 乎 (A modal word) as intermediaries in the pursuit of acoustic harmony and unity in order to reach a realm of flow that can be perceived but not conveyed in words. The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry utilizes rhythmic rhyme to convey complex emotions and ideas that are challenging to express directly. This unique feature of the language employed in the poems allows for a more effective transmission of the intended literary mood and style.

The formal musicality of The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry complements its “Sheng” character. According to Hegel, music is the transformation of a definite sensuous material from a static state of juxtaposition to a state of motion. [7] This movement is similar to the constant flow of a river, and the resulting tremor is both the tremor of sound and the tremor of the mind. Music, singing, and even words are all linear and temporal concepts, and the replacement of the old with the new sign achieves fluidity in this poetic form. The continuous dialectical negation adds aesthetics of “Shengsheng” to it.

5. Conclusions

The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry is a summary of the various aesthetic styles of poetry during the glorious age of Tang Dynasty, and the twenty-four poetic styles it depicts reveal the creation of poetic moods from different perspectives. The form of discussing poetry is a “living” structure, in which poems can be used to evaluate other

poems. And as poems, they can be evaluated by other poems. In addition, in the process of exploring mood, Ssu-k'ung T'u tries to transform poetic commentaries into images, forming a kind of holographic image in which the presence and absence are born, the real and the imaginary are shaped, the subject and the object are connected, and poetic thoughts are harmonized, thus leading to a broader space of mood. The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry consists of only twenty-four four-character poems, but it was called by Sun Liankui, a critic of the Qing Dynasty, “a glimpse of heaven and earth and a discussion of the past and present” (可与窥天地, 可与论古今) [8]. This indicates that The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry is extremely rich in the “extra-rhyme” and “extra-flavour” [9], showing the beauty of the vastness of life.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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