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Idea-scape (yijing): Understanding Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition

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Autumn Thoughts / Withered vines, old trees, twilight crows. / Small bridge, flowing water, people's homes. / Ancient road, the west wind, gaunt horse. / The evening sun sinks westward. / A man, broken-hearted, on a far horizon. [1]

This poem was written by Ma Zhiyuan (马致远, c. 1250 – c. 1324), a Chinese poet and celebrated playwright of the Yuan Dynasty (1271 -1368). It best illustrates idea-scape (yijing, 意境), a living tradition that is used as a major device for poetic representation and key to understanding Chinese poetic imagery.

Chinese scholarship on idea-scape has been focused on its origin, development, and characteristics, and scholars have reached the consensus that "it refers to a poetic realm consisting of a series of images, in which yi (意) and jing (境) fuse and the metaphysical and the physical engender each other, evoking and opening up the aesthetic imagination". [2] Idea-scape is also mentioned in a few English publications on Chinese poetry, where it is translated as "idea-scape" [3], "idea-realm" [4], or the vague term "aesthetic idea" [5], but has not received much attention in the Chinese studies field. On an occasion, when I introduced my
preliminary research on the structure of idea-scape, I surprisingly found it aroused tremendous interest in the audience of English poets and critics and thus realized the necessity to go beyond its generic traits and explore its structure, and based on a grasp of its inner configuration, understand the characteristics of this concept. This paper is inspired by that audience, and is written for practical reasons: to provide a way to approach Chinese poetry and some inspirational ideas for the creation of poetic imagery in other languages. 

I. Four Elements and Two Aspects

I agree that idea-scape is a poetic realm, in which yi ("idea"—a thought, conception, or notion, or a feeling or emotion) and jing ("scape"—a scene, a view) fuse, and in which the metaphysical and the physical engender each other. We however need to go further to examine its structure layer by layer, reveal how the two aspects fuse, and show what elements are involved. Idea-scape can be seen as a dynamic mental landscape; below I will describe an actualization, in the imagination, of this dynamic mental landscape in the above poem from the reader’s viewpoint.

First, the reader visualizes images of the objects depicted in each line: in his mind’s eye, the reader sees withered vines, old trees, crows in the twilight; a small bridge, a creek, houses; and an ancient road, a gaunt horse, a sad-looking man, and the sinking sun. Immediately after this, the imagination naturally turns these images into a mental picture. Each reader may generate a different mental picture, drawing as he would from his own life experience, but it should not be too far from one like this: a sad-looking man rides a gaunt horse roaming on an ancient road toward a far horizon in the sinking sun; nearby is a small bridge over a creek; beside it are scattered some houses, withered vines, and old trees with a few of crows in the twilight.

Second, the mind’s eye visualizes colors of the objects: the above picture is by no means black and white. Colors are only suggested, yet the images formed are all clear and even striking—the browns of vines, leaves, and tree trunks, black-feathered crows in the dim twilight, light from the sky reflected in water, the rosy radiance of the setting sun, and faint white clouds on the far horizon. Also, in the extended imagination, the reader would see the flashing creek, the grey-white stone bridge, and perhaps white smoke curling out of chimneys. Moreover, in this psychological view the parts of the scene described in the first and third lines would
bear darker hues, contrasting to the bright hues painted in the second and the last two lines. Further, the contrast of the white smoke and the rosy rays of the setting sun are striking. So far, this poem has become colorful painting.

Third, this colorful painting is in no way static but dynamic. At the same time, the reader would perhaps see the crows returning to nests in trees, water flowing under the bridge, and perhaps smoke curling upwards; he would also see the horse on the road passing the houses, and the man swaying back and forth on it, his clothing flying with the wind. Fourth, the mind’s ear would hear sounds emerging from these dynamic pictures: the caws of the crows, plodding of the horse, the rippling, splashing, and dropping of the flowing water, the drones, moans, and buffets of the blowing wind, the rustling of leaves, and so on.

Melancholy pervades this jīng (scape). The yi (idea) is generally understood as a deep feeling of homesickness associated with evening scenes. In traditional Chinese agricultural society, people “Work when the sun rises and rest when the sun sets” (日出而作, 日落而息). Especially, the trope that implies crows returning to nest suggests people returning to their homes by the creek; on the contrary, the lonely man’s horse is thin, roaming for so long, and now he is heading into the unknown, even further from home. Thus, the idea-scape is both a “scape” of a typical evening in a small village in agricultural Chinese society and an “idea” of homesickness.

The above actualization manifests the structure of idea-scape: it is an organic combination of four elements—images, colors, movements, and sounds. The poet, by creating such an idea-scape, expresses his emotions and feelings. In other words, the poet encodes “idea” into “scape”. “Idea” and “scape” are two-in-one: it is a “scape” viewed from the physical aspect, but an “idea” viewed from the metaphysical aspect.

Why do Chinese poets use idea-scape as a major device for poetic representation? I would like to point out that, if we take poetry as the art of language, the properties of a language can be seen to give rise to a certain type of poetic representation. That Chinese poetry uses idea-scape, which is picturesque, as a major device stems from the iconic and logographic nature of Chinese characters. The embryo of this device can be found in the Classic of Poetry (approx. 10th - 7th century B.C.), where poetry involving a scene of natural objects interacts with human situations, as shown in the ways of “expounding” (fu), “comparing” (bi), and “evoking” (xing).
Chinese characters are unique and effective in representing images and evoking mental images, and the creation of idea-scape in poetry stems from this unique image-bearing property of the Chinese character. Chinese language mainly uses graphic and symbolic representation. As Jordan D. Paper indicates, "[...] the written symbols of Indo-European and other languages represent spoken sounds, so that their writing is in essence a code for the spoken language, the written symbols of Chinese represent concepts." \[9\]

When reading the English word “Chinese poetry”, the reader's mind's ear hears the sounds spelled by the roman letters, which represent the notion of “the poetry produced in/by China”, but its components, “Chin” - “ese” “po” - “et” - “ry”, do not mean anything substantially. However, when looking at the Chinese characters “中國詩” for “Chinese poetry (China’s poetry)”, the reader's mind’s eye “sees” the denotation directly from them, as these characters are pictographs and ideographs: the word for “China” consists of two characters, 中 (zhong) meaning “middle” or “central”, which is developed from a picture of a flag pole in front of a military camp; and 国 (國, guo) meaning “country”, which is formed by 固 symbolizing a boundary of a country, 戈, a pictograph for a halberd, 囟, “mouth” a metonym for people, and meaning “ground” or “territory”. \[10\]

The word for “poetry” (诗/詩, shi) is composed of the radical for “speaking” (言, yan) and a component meaning “intention” (志, zhi), giving the notion that “Poetry speaks intentions”, \[11\] which is regarded as the primary literary concept in China. Chinese characters fall into three major kinds formed in three ways: (1) pictographs—deriving from pictures of objects, representing things graphically; (2) ideographs—deriving from abstract symbols, representing things symbolically; and (3) semantic-phonetics—combining a pictograph or ideograph as radical and a component indicating the sound. Since the pictograph is based on the external form of objects, which renders it impossible to picture abstract concepts, pictographs are very limited; yet the pictograph formation is the basis of all other character formations. There are only a few hundreds of pictographs in use, which are simple sketches of physical objects or of a characteristic part of the objects they represent. Also, there are a good number of ideographs and ideographic compounds, which each express an abstract idea through an iconic form that contains iconic modification of pictographic characters. The majority of Chinese characters were created by combining a pictograph or ideograph as the radical plus the phonetic component. \[12\]

However, the notion of idea-scape originated from the discussion about discrepancy of language and meaning in pre-Qin (2,100 B.C. – 221 B.C.)
philosophy, which inspired the idea that seeking full expression of meaning should use imagery, not language alone.

Traditionally, the Chinese think that language cannot fully render what is on the mind. The *Classic of Changes* has Confucius state that writing cannot exhaust words and words cannot exhaust meaning (书不尽言, 言不尽意) (2: 12). Also, the *Laoszi* opens by asserting that the true nature of the world is beyond linguistic expression: “A Way that can be talked about is not a constant Way; a name that can be named is not a constant name.” (道可道, 非常道; 名可名, 非常名。) (1: 1). In the Daoist concept, the Way (Dao), which is the way of nature and human beings, is not tangible and cannot be described in words. Zhuangzi tells the following story to exemplify that the true nature of the world is incommunicable:

Duke Huan was reading a book in the hall. Wheelwright Pian, who had been chiseling a wheel in the courtyard below, set down his tools and climbed the stairs to ask the Duke, “May I ask what words are in the book Your Grace is reading?”

“The words of sages.” The Duke responded.

“Are these sages alive?”

“They are already dead.”

“That means you are reading the dregs of long gone men, doesn’t it?”

The Duke said, “How does a wheelwright get to have opinions on the books I read? If you can explain yourself I’ll let it pass, otherwise, you’ll be put to death.”

Wheelwright Pian said, “In my case I see things in terms of my own work. When I chisel at a wheel, if I go slow the chisel slides and does not stay put; if I hurry, it jams and doesn’t move properly. When it is neither too slow nor too fast I can feel it in my hand and respond to it from my heart. My mouth cannot describe it in words, but there is something there. I cannot teach it to my son and my son cannot learn it from me. So I have gone on for seventy years, growing old chiseling wheels. The men of old died in possession of what they could not transmit. So it follows that what you are reading is their dregs.”

If “words cannot exhaust meaning”, then how does meaning get across to an audience? The *Classic of Changes* suggests the solution of encoding meaning into images. It states, “What is written does not give the fullness of what is said; what is said does not give the fullness of the concept in the mind.” So, “the Sages established the Images to give the fullness of the concepts in their minds”. In the *Classic of Changes* a set of sixty-four iconic hexagrams (卦, gua) are used to describe an ancient system of cosmology, philosophy, and divination. For example,
the first five hexagrams are as follows:

- Force (乾, qian) means “heaven”;
- Field (坤, kun) stands for “earth”;
- Sprouting (屯, zhun) signifies “a difficult birth”;
- Enveloping (蒙, meng) denotes “ignorance”; and
- Attending (需, xu) suggests “waiting”.

These iconic hexagrams each express a meaning and the whole set of them suggest that balance is obtained through opposition and acceptance of changes. Supposedly, by way of creating images—the iconic symbols—the Classic of Changes fully expresses its views about cosmology, philosophy, and divination. In other pre-Qin philosophical writings, such as Zhuangzi, Mengzi, Hanfeizi, and Xunzi, anecdotes, fables, and similes as well as historical stories, poems, and figures of speech are widely used as ways of creating images in expressing meaning. As well, in poetry, idea-scape is produced to express emotions and feelings.

## II. Characteristics

As a poetic concept, idea-scape did not come about until the Tang dynasty (618 - 907); thereafter however it gets attention of both poets and critics throughout Chinese literary history until the present. The term first appears in Poetry Standards (《诗格》, Shige) attributed to the prestigious Tang poet Wang Changling (王昌龄, 698 - 756). Poetry Standards states that poetry has three kinds of “scape” (jing): “material-scape” (物境, wujing), which is mimetic description of objects; “emotion-scape” (情境, qingjing), in which the self is dominant over other elements; and “idea-scape” (意境, yijing), which is derived from the heart’s reception of the truth. This book regards “idea-scape” as the highest level of poetic creation, and its theory draws on the Chan Buddhist idea about knowing the world. The Chan Buddhist Wei Xin (惟信, Tang dynasty, dates uncertain) describes his experience in practicing Chan Buddhism in the following way:

Thirty years ago when I did not practice Chan, I saw mountains as mountains and waters as water. Later, when I learned some knowledge of Chan and approached the entrance to Buddhism, I saw mountains as non-mountain and waters as non-water. Now having gotten a place to rest [my soul], as I did at the very beginning, I see mountains only as mountains and waters only as water.
This description allegorizes the three levels that Wei Xin experienced as a Chan practitioner. The first is the way of knowing the world before he practiced Chan Buddhism, in which he regarded mountains or water as having physical existence. The second level takes place when Wei Xin, as a Chan Buddhist novice, regards objects as symbols for his abstract Buddhist conceptions. At the third level, he has accomplished oneness of mind with the experienced object. Similarly, the three kinds of "scape" in the Poetry Standards refer to three levels of scape in poetry, among which "idea-scape" is the highest level; at this level the poet has entered the aesthetic realm where his mind and observed objects—"idea" and "scape"—become a oneness.

Some scholars characterize idea-scape as achieving poetic scene beyond images, winning the perfect fusion of feeling and image, and recreating the harmony of music sounds, or blend of feeling and artistic scenes, infinity of meaning, and reader's participation and awareness. Considering its philosophical basis and its structure and elements involved, I argue that the foremost characteristics of idea-scape are its intuitive nature and its function to invite the reader's participation.

1. The Intuitive Nature

Following the example of the Poetry Standards, poets and critics draw on Chan Buddhism or Daoism to elaborate main facets of idea-scape, among whom well-known poet-critics Sikong Tu (司空图, 837–908) and Yan Yu (严羽, ca. 1192–ca. 1245) focus on its intuitive nature, formulating the creation of idea-scape as an intuitive apprehension of reality and emphasizing that, as an aesthetic product, idea-scape has no trace of rationality.

In his tenth poetry commentary "Spontaneity" in the Ershisi Shipin (《二十四诗品》, The Twenty-four Categories of Poetry), Sikong Tu presents this process of creating idea-scape:

Stoop to get it, there it is;
Don't go seeking everywhere.
Move along with the whole Tao (Dao)
And a hand's touch creates spring.
The beginning couplet “warns against forceful or teleological movement” and the next couplet is reminiscent of *Zhuangzi*. Sikong sees producing idea-scape as intuitively apprehending the essence of phenomena, identifying and flowing with the Dao. As in the aforementioned anecdote in *Zhuangzi*, the experienced, skillful wheelwright does not seek the Dao in chiseling wheels, but it is there when he works; poets should do the same in creating idea-scape. Sikong Tu sets forth a mode of thinking for idea-scape creation, which involves images, not rationalities, as he describes, “Thinking in the company of [images of] ‘scape’.” (思与境偕) (807: 9) [23]. This mode of thinking can be understood in the context of its development.

First, in the course of conceiving idea-scape, the poet thinks in lively images of experienced objects from his memory and then enters a mental state in which the spirit of emotions and feelings interact and intermingle with images. Critic Liu Xie (刘勰, ca. 465 - 520) suggests this before Sikong in the “Spirit Wandering with Things” chapter of his *Wenxin Diaolong* (Owen, 202). [24] Poet Quan Deyu (权德舆, 759 - 818) also emphasizes that “In all poetry writing, ‘idea’ merges with ‘scape’” (凡所赋诗，皆意与境会) (Quan Tang Wen, 490: 3) Both imply the interaction and intermingling of emotions/feelings with images in such a mode of thinking process. After Sikong, the thinker and poet Wang Fuzhi (王夫之, 1619 - 1692), who equates idea-scape with “affection-scene” (情景, qingjing), expounds on the interacting and intermingling of “affections” and “scene”: “Scene is put together by the affections, and the affections are generated by the scene.” (夫景以情合，情以景生) (Owen, 475). [25] In the thinking process, at one moment, “scene” is disassembled and reassembled according to “affections” and, at another moment, “affections” is bred from “scene”; thus, “scene giving rise to the affections and affections giving rise to scene, with the conflict of misery and joy, they take secret lodging in one another” (Owen, 490). That “affections” and “scene” “take secret lodging in one another” is a description similar to Quan Deyu’s “‘idea’ merging with ‘scape’”; it suggests the generation of idea-scape at the last stage of the thinking process.

Second, at the last stage, when idea and scape intermingle, as Shen Yue (沈约, 441 - 513) seems to say, the poet cannot distinguish “self” from “things.” [26] This is akin to Zhuangzi’s “Butterfly Dream” riddle: “Once Zhuangzi dreamt he was a butterfly—a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased; he didn’t know he was Zhuangzi. Suddenly he woke up and there he
was, solid and unmistakable Zhuangzi. Yet at this moment he could not figure out whether he was Zhuangzi who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or he was a butterfly who was now dreaming he was Zhuangzi. ” [27] Similarly, when piecing parts of scape together and intermingling idea and scape, the poet cannot differentiate the self from external images.

The process and the thinking mode that Sikong Tu described can be understood as a process of the intuitive apprehension of reality and the creation of idea-scape: the poet thinks in images that he has experienced and stored in his memory; during the course of contemplation, idea and images interact and intermingle, boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity disappear; and finally, idea and scape merge into one and idea-scape obtains. In this process, the poet’s thinking goes beyond the perceptual level, but does not seek any conceptual elements, yet naturally follows the Dao—the essence of the universe.

In his Canglang’s Poetry Talks (《沧浪诗话》), Yan Yu (严羽) exploits Chan Buddhist ideas in viewing the production of idea-scape. He compares it with Chan enlightenment and suggests that idea-scape is an attainment of intuitive apprehension of world: “Generally speaking, the Way of Chan is concerned only with wondrous enlightenment; the way of poetry is also concerned with wondrous enlightenment.” (大抵禅道唯在妙悟，诗道亦在妙悟。) [28] The Chan Buddhist obtains sudden enlightenment after long practice, during which worldly concerns are cleared away and no intellect is used. One can only grasp the Buddha nature through intuition; and at the highest level of concentrated meditation, the phenomenal world merges with the experienced object and the oneness of Buddha nature with the phenomenal object is completed. This is also the way of creating idea-scape: After a long accumulation of literary observation, during which he has cleared his mind and discarded worldly concerns, the poet gets inspiration (for idea-scape) as an aesthetic, creative awakening, enters an aesthetic realm, and obtains idea-scape.

Also, Yan Yu uses the most talented poets of the eighth century and their poetry as examples of the intuitive nature of idea-scape as aesthetic product. He explains:

The very best involves what is known as “not getting onto the road of natural principle” and “not falling into the trap of words.” Poetry is “to sing what is in the heart.” In the stirring and excitement of their poetry, the High Tang (Tang) writers were those antelopes that hang by their horns, leaving no traces to be followed. Where they are subtle, there is a limpid and sparkling quality that can never be quite fixed and determined—like tones in the empty air, or color in a face, or moonlight in
the water, or an image in a mirror—the words are exhausted, but the meaning is never exhausted. (Owen, 406)

As Yan Yu allegorically describes, idea-scape is an aesthetic product that resembles the antelope moving by hanging its horns or is like tones in the empty air or moonlight in the water, leaving no traces of artistry or principles.

2. Invitation of The Reader's Participation

The description of the actualization in imagination of the idea-scape in Ma's poem at the beginning of this paper shows that the good reader's participation in re-creating idea-scape in the appreciation process is inevitable. The Chinese scholar Wang Yeqing rightly points out that the reader's participation plays an important role in (re-) creating idea-scape, but she does not elaborate on this. [29]

The last sentence in the aforementioned Yan Yu passage, “The words are exhausted, but the meaning is never exhausted”, can be understood to mean that verbal depiction is limited, but the depicted scape transcends real scape and rationality, and opens up infinite potentiality of meaning.

First, idea-scape should be evocative, in terms of the scape aspect. The poet Liu Yuxi (刘禹锡, 772 – 842) writes that “Scape originates beyond images” (境生于象外) (606: 7). Sikong Tu indicates the same: idea-scape is “an image beyond image and a scene beyond scene” (象外之象, 景外之景) (807: 12). The scape is not merely depicted image/s; it is an image or a series of images evoked by the depicted image/s. In other words, the scape is what the poet creates in his mind and transmits to the reader through depicted images that evoke mental pictures, like the scape in Ma's “Autumn Thoughts”—“a sad-looking man rides a gaunt horse roaming on an ancient road passing by a small village”, which is evoked by the images, as well as the colors, movements, and sounds, of such objects as old trees, crows, bridge, a creek, houses, a horse, a man, and the sinking sun.

Second, idea-scape should be suggestive, in terms of expression or the idea aspect of idea-scape. Sikong Tu holds that poetry should be written in the way of “Without writing a single word, but achieving the utmost effect” (不著一字, 尽得风流). [30] The poet expresses his intuitive apprehension of essence of reality through scape, but since his apprehension naturally fuses with scape, there are no traces of any rational elements. Therefore, idea is suggested and can be understood in different ways. Sikong Tu emphasizes “an interest beyond the charm” (韵外之致) and “a meaning beyond the flavor” (味外之旨) (807: 8). The “charm” is the
appealing part of idea-scape and the “flavor” is its distinctive yet intangible quality; they give the reader pleasure but not meaning. The “charm” and “flavor” together however suggest an indefinite meaning.

Since idea-scape is created by using evocation and suggestion rather than direct presentation, it invites the reader to make out what are evoked and suggested. To be specific, the poet provides images that evoke “scape beyond the images” and suggests meaning beyond the “flavor” of the scape; therefore, in the appreciation process the reader needs to actualize idea-scape through imagination, restructuring scape out of images, and explore meaning beyond the “flavor” of the scape. In other words, the reader is invited to participate in re-creating idea-scape in the appreciation process.

Also, because of rigid rules of length, Chinese poetry relies heavily on content words and less on function words, leaving linguistic gaps open for readers and inviting them to fill them in the appreciation process. Chinese characters are square graphs; a character always has the same square appearance and is the same size as any other character. A poem consisting of a regular number of characters in each line results in a square or rectangular shape as a whole. Poets intentionally try to make a poem a square shape. Classical Chinese poetry normally contains lines of equal length, tetrasyllabic, pentasyllabic, hexasyllabic or heptasyllabic. Due to the iconic and logographic nature of the Chinese language, meaning is mainly shown in individual words and less on relations among words; therefore, in the given length of lines, poets choose to use content words—nouns, lexical verbs, adjectives, and adverbs—as frequently as possible and function words such as conjunctions, prepositions, and articles as little as possible. The following is a pentasyllabic poem titled “Lu.zhai” (《鹿柴》, “Deer Fence”) by the renowned Tang dynasty poet Wang Wei (王维, ca. 701–761):

空山不见人。  Empty, hill, not, see, person/people
但闻人语响。 Only, hear, person/people, talk, sound
返景入深林。 Return, sunlight, enter, deep, woods
复照青苔上。 Again, shine, green, moss, top

As shown in the English equivalent for the Chinese characters, there are no function words in any line of this poem. Also, Chinese has no number for nouns, verb agreement and tense, and gender. Even though there are ways of indicating number for nouns and tense for verbs, such as adding the noun suffix “men”（们）,
the verb suffixes “guo” (过) or “le” (了), and placing a number before nouns, a
time word before verbs and so on. In poetry these indicators rarely appear.

How does the readers participate in re-creating idea-scape in the appreciation
process? Since idea-scape uses images to render meaning, the neo-Daoist philosopher
Wang Bi (王弼, 226 – 249) proposed that the reader take two steps to catch the
meaning in the Classic of Changes. First, the reader should “look for words in order
to observe imagery” (寻言以观象), and second, “look for images in order to
observe meaning” (观象以观意). These can be used as a departure for the said
process.

The first step the reader should take is to translate the words that depict images
and, based on the verbal description, actualize the scape. This step should contain
the task of filling in language gaps—roughly figuring out the number of objects, the
tense of actions, the gender of people, and relations between content words, during
which the reader has the freedom to supply conjunctions, decide tense, number,
gender, and interlexical relations. For example, the reader can determine in the
above poem of Wang Wei whether there are one or more hills and people, the relative
times of occurrence for the actions (“hearing”, “returning”, and “shining”), as
well as how the hill/s, people, woods, and moss are arranged in space, and when
people are heard talking, image/s return, and sunlight shines. Thus, any one line
can be interpreted in multiple ways. The third line, for instance, can be translated as
“Returning sunlight is entering the deep woods” or “Sunlight casts back and comes
deep into the woods.” Based on such translation, the reader then actualizes idea­
scape by visualizing images, colors, movements, and sounds of the objects depicted.
Since the words that depict images can be translated differently, any idea-scape can
be reshaped in numerous ways. For example, the above poem presents a moment
transcending the limits of time and space due to the absence of verb tense, noun
numbers, and relational words, and its undefined relations among images invite the
reader into the infinite potentiality of the scape.

The second step is to seek idea through scape. The poet may have indescribable
instant feelings, some momentary, mysterious, confusing emotions, a sudden
revelation, ineffable philosophical ideas, or some experience that is ingenious beyond
description; he may encode any of these into scape, leaving them to the reader to
explore. Also, as in the Classic of Changes the hexagrams are used not simply to seek
the communication of a meaning, but to provoke an indeterminate, boundless
meaning; idea-scape in poetry may not only seek to communicate a meaning, rather
its purpose is to arouse infinite meaning. The reader may or may not catch what the
poet tries to get across, but he is supposed to get idea from scape.

The reader's actualization and exploration however are not necessarily, or mostly
not, the same as the ones made in the poet's imaginary world. In other words, reader
participation is a re-creation process; the reader re-creates the idea-scape.

Ⅲ. Variety of Types

Idea-scape appears in various types in poems, which poets and critics have also
discussed during its lengthy historical development; in view of the relationship
between idea-scape and reality, there are descriptive types and creative types; in
terms of the relationship between idea-scape and the self, they fall into self-
involved types and self-detachment types; and in consideration of the relationship
between idea and scape, there are two types, scene-within-affections (qingzhongjing)
and affections-within-scene (jingzhongqing).

On the descriptive type and the creative type, the scholar and poet Wang
Guowei (1877 -1927) states that poetry has both
creative scape (造境, zaojing) and descriptive scape (写境, xiejing), but it is
difficult to distinguish between the two because the scape that the great poets create
must accord with what is natural and the scape that they describe must approach the
ideal. [35]

Wang identifies two different types in relation to the degree of likeness to
external objects, out of which they are produced. Both types involve creativity, while
the creative type seems more artistic and the descriptive type looks as if it is mimetic;
the former represents reality in a “novel way” and the latter is a representation in a
“usual way”. As Wang emphasizes, the creative type must accord with actuality and
the descriptive type must approach the ideal (the descriptive type is different from
the “material-scape” aforementioned in Wang Changling's discussion; in the
“material-scape” the poet describes the external object mimetically, which does not
involve much creativity). Both the descriptive type and the creative type are high
level aesthetic products; one is not superior to the other.

Wang Guowei also discusses idea-scape in relation to the self-involvement and
self-attachment types;

[ Poetry has both ] self-involvement scape (有我之境, youwo zhi jing) and
self-detachment scape (无我之境, wuwo zhi jing). Self-involvement scape is
present in the lines: “With tear-filled eyes, I ask the flowers, but they do not speak. / Red petals swirl past and swing away.” In contrast, self-detachment scape is implied in the lines; “I pluck chrysanthemums by the eastern fence, / far distant appear the southern mountains.”

Wang further indicates that

in a self-involvement scape, the poet views the objects egoistically in terms of himself, and everything therefore takes on his own coloring. In a self-detachment scape, the poet views objects per se, and one cannot tell what should be ascribed to the poet himself, and what to the object.\[36\]

These two paragraphs clearly define this pair of types and the difference between them. The self-involvement type is subjective and personal, while the self-attachment type is objective and impersonal. The self may appear in either type, but in self-involvement it is dominant over all other elements while in self-detachment it is a natural part.

Wang Fuzhi posits the type of affections-within-scene and the type of scene-within-affections. He points out that affections-within-scene describes “affections as a scene”, as illustrated in the poetic line “A sheet of moonlight in Chang’an” (长安一片月). This line is culled from Li Bai’s (李白, 701 – 762) “Midnight Song of Wu”\[37\] that depicts a quiet night on which a wife is yearning for her long-absent husband. Wang explains, “This is naturally (自然, ziran) the sentiment (情, qing) of lodging alone and recalling someone far away.” “A sheet of moonlight” is a quiet, lonely scene from the wife’s perspective; so, it is actually a depiction of yearning.

Regarding the scene-within-affection, Wang says that it is difficult to describe this type precisely, but Du Fu’s (杜甫, 712 – 770) poetic line “The poem completed, pearls and jade lie in the flourishing brush”\[38\] (诗成珠玉在挥毫) may explain it; this line describes “a free-flowing manner in the brushwork of a person of talent and the poet’s appreciation of it” (Owen, 472 – 473). This line expresses joy and appreciation; however it is actually a depiction of a scene.

Affections-within-scene is a type of idea-scape that describes “affections as a scene”, or a “scene” of affections; in contrast, scene-within-affection is a type of idea-scape that depicts a scene representing affections or affections in a scene.

An idea-scape can fall into one or more of the idea-scape types discussed above, and as well, these types are far from being exhausted—points to which I will return.
IV. Conclusion: Understanding Chinese Poetic Imagery by Decoding Idea-scape

Idea-scape is an organic combination of four elements of images, colors, movements, and sounds, in which the poet encodes “idea” into “scape”; the creation of idea-scape is a process in which the poet grasps reality intuitively and integrates intuition with imagery. Reading poetry is to decode/re-create its idea-scape, in which the reader fills in language gaps, actualizes scape, and explores meaning.

While its structure has been examined via Ma’s “Autumn Thoughts” at the beginning, below I attempt to understand the characteristics of idea-scape through “Spring Resentment” (《春怨》, “Chun Yuan”) by Jin Changxu (金昌绪, Tang dynasty, dates uncertain). The poem reads,

打起黄莺儿，
莫教枝上啼！
啼时惊妾梦，
不得到辽西！

I chase yellow orioles away,
Don’t let them chirp in the tree!
Their chirps wake this humble wife from a dream,
Preventing her from reaching Liaoxi!

If we read the Chinese text, we would need to begin with filling in language gaps—to make out an approximate number of orioles and determine the tense for actions, etc. Now since we are reading the poem in English translation, we can skip this part in the first step and actualize the scape by visualizing images, colors, movements, and sounds from the verbal depiction. Although I translate qie (妾) as “this humble wife” in the third line, this word is a first person pronoun conventionally used by a married woman when directly addressing her husband. This leads the reader to surmise that her husband, who seems to be in Liaoxi, is the subject of her daydream.

The effortless language presents a simple, clear yet vivid scape: We should “see” an action depicted in the opening couplet: the woman goes out of her house and shoos the yellow birds from the green tree—and the birds fly away with panicked chirping. In the second couplet, we “hear” her telling her husband, in her heart, that before chasing away the birds she was unable—or rather almost able—to travel in a dream to Liaoxi to meet him.

Then we take the second step to observe idea from scape. The idea-scape is depicted with natural, spoken language in the voice of a housewife, and it only
involves images that portray everyday, trivial action as a moment in reality, in which no traces of any artistry of language or rational elements are found. When we look at the other aspect of the idea-scape, we should see the meaning shown in the scape: she is longing for her husband who has been long gone.

However, different readers may get a different "idea"; as well, we may find some meaning beyond the immediate meaning if we explore it further. Since yellow orioles singing in trees is seen as a pleasant springtime experience in Chinese culture, as joyfully pictured in Du Fu’s quatrains “Two yellow orioles chirping in the willow” (两个黄鹂鸣翠柳)⁴⁰, and since sleeping during the day was regarded as lazy,⁴¹ some readers might think the woman’s resentment betrays a strong longing for her husband, while others might hold that her action of stirring up the orioles and desire for daydreams are countercultural because she wants to seek pleasure for herself so badly. Another interpretation might hold that the woman’s resentment is toward the orioles, whereas another reader might take her resentment as an allegory for the poet’s political disapproval. Long-term war in Liaoxi against the Khitan at the time caused much suffering, and public complaint rose against over-conscription as well as military inefficiency against the raids and invasions of the Khitan.⁴²

For the type of idea-scape, it is more descriptive than creative since it is an action along with its psychology, which can happen anywhere and anytime. Also, even though “I” is used in narrating, the speaker is a woman, not the male poet; so, this idea-scape belongs to the self-detachment type. Further, it should be regarded as the type of affections-within-scene, because it describes “affections as a scene” or longing as an action. Its salient trait, however, compared to the one in Ma’s “Autumn Thoughts”, is that this idea-scape centralizes an action—to stir up the orioles, while Ma’s centralizes picturesque images—vines, crows, bridge, creek, houses, horse, man, and the sinking sun. These can be seen as another distinctive pair of types: picture-based idea-scape and action-based idea-scape.

Notes:


[8] In this paper original texts in Chinese characters are given only for my own translations; no Chinese texts are given for quotations of English translation from Chinese, unless they are present in translation.


[25] Note that scape (jing 境) and scene (jing 景) are two different Chinese words. In pinyin romanization without tone marks, they are both spelled identically as jing.

[26] “Forgetting both the self and things” (物我两忘) (Liangshu, 13: 7). This expression was derived by Chinese scholars and used in their discussions on poetic creation, from Shen Yue’s line, “Only sages are able to reach the state of the not-self, naturally forgetting the self and things simultaneously.” (惟圣人之非己，固物我而兼忘。) Shen Yue, “Jiaoju Fu” (《郊居赋》 [Rhapsody on Dwelling in the Suburbs]) in Yao Silian (姚思廉), Liangshu (《梁书》 [History of the Liang Dynasty]) (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu Yinshu Guan, 1986), 13: 7.


[34] See Owen, Chinese Literature, 393.


[36] Ibid., Rickett’s translation, 42.

[37] Peng, Quan Tang Shi, 165; 29.

[38] This line is from Du Fu’s (杜甫) “Fenghe Jia Zhi Sheren Zaochao Daming Gong” (《奉和贾至舍人早朝大明宫》 [A Poem on Request to Respond to Jia Zhi’s “Early Morning Levee at the Palace of Great Brightness”] ) (Quan Tang Shi, 225: 19).

[39] Peng, Quan Tang Shi, 768; 36.

[40] Peng, Quan Tang Shi, 228; 36.

[41] In Analects, Confucius harshly censures one of his students for this habit: “Zaiyu used to sleep during the day. The master said, ‘Rotten wood cannot be carved, nor a wall of dried dung be troweled.’ ” The Analects, trans., Arthur Waley (Beijing: Waiyu Jiaoxue yu Yanjiu Chubanshe, 1998), 53.

[42] Liaoxi was the western region of the Liaoning province, adjoining Khitan and Mongol tribal territory. During the Tang dynasty, the Khitan frequently raided China in that area. The Chinese government sent a great number of troops to this important and troubled frontier, where soldiers had to serve for an extended period of time and many died without ever returning home.
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