

Yan 言, *Xiang* 象, *Yi* 意
(Word, Symbol, and Meaning)

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SUMMARY

The meaning of the triad of *yan* 言 (word), *xiang* 象 (symbol) and *yi* 意 (meaning) is one of the most essential and complicated issues in Chinese poetics. According to traditional Chinese poetics, the triad represents the three stages in the regressive process of retrieving authorial meanings. Put briefly, it is held that a reader can figure out a writer's ideas through his words, because as signifiers they have emerged from symbols fashioned by sages of old to express ideas.

However, not all scholars in the past millennia have shared this view. Emerging from a debate over the use of language during the Wei-Jin Period (2nd-3rd centuries A.D.) were three schools which believed, respectively, in the expressivity, inadequacy and invalidity of language as a tool of communication. While some maintained that language revealed, these replied that language concealed. Among the various exponents of the third point of view, Wang Bi stood out and exerted considerable influence on the generations to come. Following the lead of Zhuang Zi (Chuang Tzu), Wang regards language as a necessary evil. It serves as an instrument to catch meaning like a fishing net or a hare trap that captures fishes or hares. Once the goal is accomplished, the tool, namely language, should be put aside. As a result, speechless understanding is considered one of the highest achievements of hermeneutical practice. In the same fashion, a paradox in Chinese aesthetics is also reached: the formal beauty of a work of art can be realized provided that it is

negated in the first place.

KEY WORDS

Liu Xie

yi (meaning)

Wang Tingxiang

Ouyang Jian

yixiang (images)

yan (words)

Wang Fuzhi

Master Zhuang

yihui (empathy)

xiang (symbols)

Wang Bi

Zhong Rong



The meaning of the triad of *yan*, *xiang* and *yi* is one of the most essential and complicated issues in Chinese poetics. In fact, it is quite mis-leading to translate the three concepts into English as respectively “word,” “symbol” and “meaning,” since the Chinese and English terms have so wide a range of meanings that they hardly correspond to each other.

Broadly speaking, however, we could say that the Chinese word *xiang* more or less approximates the definition of “symbol” as “something [which] stands for or suggests something else by reason, or relationship, association, convention, or accidental but not intentional resemblance, esp., a visible sign.”¹ The Chinese word *yi* means something between “the thing that is meant or intended,” and “the thing that is conveyed or signified, especially, by language.”

The “Great Appendix” to the *Book of Changes* (*Yizhuan xici* 易傳系辭), which was put into book form around the third century B.C., makes the following remarks:

The written characters (*shu* 書) cannot represent speech (*yan* 言) to the full, and speech cannot exhaust ideas (*yi* 意).

Since writing fails to record everything conveyed by speech, and speech fails to reveal ideas in full, how can one understand the ideas of the ancient sages? The answer is that

The sages created emblematic signs (*xiang* 象) to set

forth thoroughly their ideas, and appended thereto their explanations in order to fully express themselves.

To help people understand them, the sages of old fashioned the hexagrams (the symbols which form the basic building blocks of the Chinese divination system) to signify their ideas, while at the same time added an appendix of hexagram judgement texts to explain in detail the meanings of those hexagrams.

This was how the triad of word, symbol and meaning came into Chinese thought in its original sense, which can be summed up as follows: symbols (*xiang*) are emblematic signs; words (*yan*) are language or linguistic signs; and meanings (*yi*) are what those signs express, which may change as their contexts vary.

The Wei-Jin Period 魏晉 (2nd-3rd centuries A.D.) saw a heated debate over the relationship between the components of the triad. The participants in the discussion could be roughly divided into three schools. The first is the school which believed in the expressivity of language (*yanjinyilun* 言盡意論). Its representative Ouyang Jian 歐陽建 (?-300) argues that without the help of words (*yan*) or "names" (*ming* 名), there would be no taxonomy to distinguish one thing from another; as a result, no exchange of ideas would be possible. In his own words, "names vary according to things, and words according to the ideas." Like a shadow matching the body of an object or an echo following the travel of sound, words and names correspond to ideas. Indeed Ouyang holds that language and meaning are one; there is not the least doubt that words can fully convey meanings.

Being suspicious of the adequacy of linguistic communication, the second school promotes the idea that "words cannot sufficiently express ideas" (*yanbujinyi* 言不盡意). Its members were convinced that words as fixed entities can hardly capture the amorphousness of the impalpable thing called "idea" or

“meaning.” While words are fragmented and limited, meaning comes in one piece with no boundaries. The Chan Buddhists press the argument even further, for they declare:

What I tell you will inevitably be a secondary
interpretation.

Once touched by lips and tongue, meaning disappears.

What they meant is that, once ideas are committed to words, their meanings are likely to be confined, curtailed, and even lost. Therefore they held that meanings “can only be realized through empathy, not through words” (*zhike yihui buke yanchuan* 只可意會，不可言傳). As a matter of fact, if possible, they prefer not to use language as the tool of communication. An extreme case is Zhang Han 張韓 (ca. 3rd-4th centuries A.D.), who suggests “leaving the tongue in disuse” (*buyongshelun* 不用舌論).

The third school has Wang Bi 王弼 (226-249) as its leading exponent. Following Zhuang Zi (Chuang Tzu), Wang regards language as an instrument to catch meaning just as a fishing net or a hare trap that captures fishes or hares. Once the goal is accomplished, the instrument, namely language, should be put aside. Wang Bi emphasizes the fact that since “words originate from symbols,” one can “see the symbols” by “searching through the words.” Similarly, as “symbols originate from ideas,” one can “understand the meanings” by “searching through symbols.” Seen in this light, meanings can only be retrieved or realized through symbols via words. That is why Wang avers that “There is no better way of expressing ideas than symbols, nor is there a better way of expressing symbols than words.” Put otherwise, no meaning can exist alone without words and symbols. Nevertheless, Wang continues, if one stops at, or sticks too much to words or symbols that are inevitably fragmented, limited and confined in nature, one will never be able to grasp the formless, constantly changing and limitless thing known as “meaning.” To break

away from the confinement of word or symbol, and to gain access to the meanings contained in them, one has to understand that

Words are to shed light on symbols, and should be ignored once the symbols are revealed; symbols are to hold meanings, and should be ignored once the meanings are obtained.

In short, only by forgetting the confinement of words and symbols is it possible to approach the boundless meanings contained in them.

After the debate in the Wei-Jin Period, the triad word-symbol-meaning loomed large as a major topic in Chinese philosophy as well as in aesthetics. Wang Bi's argument began to gain popularity and eventually exerted profound influence on Chinese aesthetics and poetics. First, it led directly to the conception of *yixiang* 意象, a notion that can only be lamely translated as "image." In the discussion that follows, we shall see how *yixiang* differs from "image" as they are understood in their respective poetic traditions.

It was Liu Xie 劉勰 (467?-532?) who first approached the notion of *yixiang*. In the chapter "Spirit and Thought" of *Wenxin diaolong* (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*), he remarks,

When one's spirit and thought are in operation, all possible vistas will open up. Rules and principles will disappear, and there will only be spontaneity. When one climbs a mountain in such an inspired state of mind, the mountain will be overwhelmed by his feelings; when he surveys the seas, the seas will be filled up by his ideas.²

When invisible "feelings" and "ideas" overwhelm mountains and seas, the otherwise ephemeral "spirit" is concretized

in palpable "images" (*shenyongxiangtong* 神用象通). Such a fusion of "feelings" and "scenery" constitute the object of aesthetics. The selection of an image (*yixiang*), or to be precise, how an image or a scene in nature is used by a writer to express his ideas or feelings, is one of the central issues of Chinese poetics. In "A Letter to Academician Guo Jiefu on Poetry," Wang Tingxiang 王廷相 (1475-1544) has this to say,

To be factual is to dilute the flavor [of poetry]; to be straightforward is to reduce its affective power. This is why images are used.

Thanks to the suggestiveness of images, Wang goes on, poetry can touch the reader to the heart or inspire his imagination. Following Wang Tingxiang, Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619-1692) holds that imagery is the soul of poetry. To him, the depth and novelty of a poem does not lie in its ideas, but in its images that could initiate free association.

Secondly, in Chinese poetics, there is a view that one should "Ignore symbols once meanings are obtained; discard words once symbols are reached" (*deyi wangxiang dexiang wangyan* 得意忘象, 得象忘言). This idea stresses the necessity of transcending phenomena and reaching out for infinity in order to achieve a kind of satori beyond words and concepts. For instance, Tao Yuanming's 陶淵明 (365-427) lines very well demonstrate this point:

Picking chrysanthemums at the east fence, I see the Southern Hills in calm. The air in the hills is fresh day and evening, And the birds are flying homewards two by two. There is a genuine meaning in these things, But I can't find words to express it.³

In the course of artistic appreciation, there is an ultimate hermeneutic moment when a profound meaning is obtained.

Under such circumstances, the reader will be free from the shackles of language and concepts and reach the horizon of speechless understanding. This is exactly what is meant by "forgetting the words when the meaning is caught."

Thirdly, under the influence of this argument, a whole set of ideas about the formal beauty of a work of art was developed. According to traditional Chinese poetics, the most beautiful form of art is the one unbound by forms, through which meanings may disseminate without being restrained. The purpose of art is to create aesthetic images. If a work of art lacks formal beauty, its content, not to mention its imagery, can hardly be expressed in full. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal of formal beauty is to direct the reader's attention to the overall splendour of the work of art, while paradoxically ignoring the form itself. Therefore, formal beauty can be realized only by disregarding itself in the first place. The more it negates itself, the more it will realize itself. In the introduction to *Shipin* 詩品 (*Appreciation of Poetry*), Zhong Rong 鍾嶸 (468?-518) points out, "Too much attention to words harms the real beauty." In other words, Zhong Rong is of the opinion that too much emphasis on formal beauty will be detrimental to the beauty of a work of art as a whole. In fact, many Chinese critics share his view:

When only feelings are apparent and words no longer perceptible, the poem reaches the zenith of the art of poetry. (Jiao Ran 皎然 [Secular name Xie Zhou 謝朓 730-799, *Shishi* 詩式 [*Models of Poetry*])

The shoes are a good fit when one forgets one's feet; the poem is an excellent one when its author forgets to rhyme. (Yuan Mei 袁枚 1716-1798, *Suiyuan shihua* 隨園詩話 [*Talks on Poetry from the Garden of Leisure*])

Du Fu's 杜甫 poems can be categorized by two words: seen (*you* 有) and unseen (*wu* 無); while feelings and personalities show themselves in the former, language

vanishes in the latter. (Liu Xizai 劉熙載 1813-1881, *Yigai* 藝概 [*Introduction to the Arts*])

All the statements quoted above concur in saying that formal beauty can be realized provided that it is negated. They all echo Wang Bi's observation that those who forget the symbols will grasp the meanings.

This is the relationship between "word," "symbol" and "meaning" as conceived by Chinese poetics in the past. The triad is still exerting its influence upon contemporary Chinese aesthetics.

Notes

¹ The definitions cited here and below are from *Webster's Third International Dictionary*.

² Yu-chung Shih, trans., *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1983) 301; my modification.

³ In translating these lines, I am indebted to versions by Arthur Waley and Fang Zhong. See Waley, *Chinese Poems* (London: Unwin, 1983) 92; Fang, *Tao Yuanming shiwen xuanyi (Gleanings from Tao Yuan-ming: Prose and Poetry)* (Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 1984) 101.

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