Where Is "I" in Classical Chinese Poetry? An Experimental Interpretation

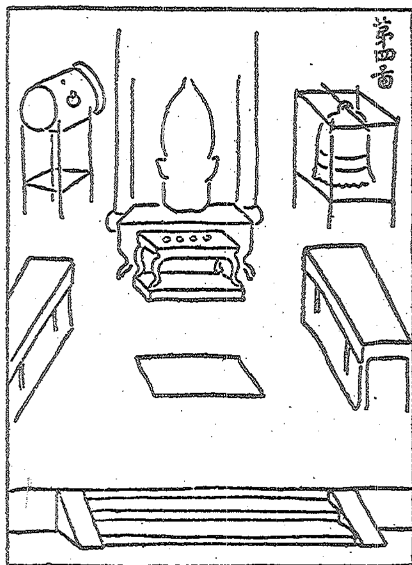
Mei-shu Hwang

Since Wang Kuo-wei (王國維) classified the classical Chinese poetry into two types: one "a world with I (self)" (有我之境) and the other "a world without I (self)" (無我之境), there have been various explanations and arguments about the nature of the latter. It is true that the Chinese poet usually does not like to stand out and say, for instance, "I wandered lonely as a cloud . . ." or "My heart leaps up when I behold / A rainbow in the sky . . . ," Yet "a world without I" does not mean that the poet is absent or completely at one with that world.[1] But where is the poet? The present paper tries to find an answer to this through a comparison between the Chinese painting and poetry in terms of viewpoint or perspective and to suggest a tentative angle in the appreciation of Chinese poetry, and painting, too.

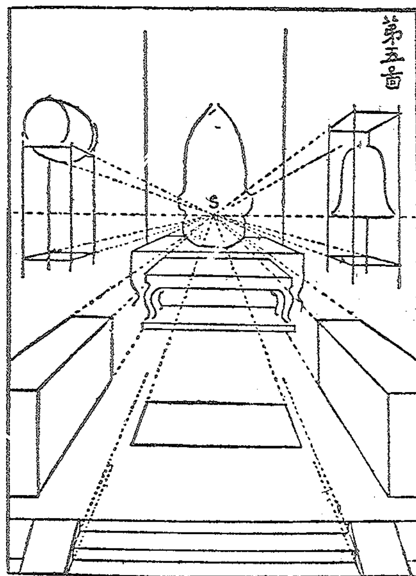
In his long discussion of the treatment of time and space in classical Chinese poetry, Huang Yung-wu (黃永武) says that a poet, like a painter or film photographer, may shoot his pictures from one fixed viewpoint or from various places and angles. He may zoom in or out to change the scope from a close-up to a long shot or *vice versa*. In other words, a poem may contain several viewing points and the impressions of different moments.[2] Unfortunately, Huang analyses no painting to support his ideas.

To my knowledge, Feng Tze-k'ai (豐子愷) has made the best comparison between Chinese painting and poetry in his *Painting and Literature* (繪畫與文學, first published in 1934). He writes, "A painter and a poet look at nature with an identical attitude. They are different only in methods or media or expression." He adds that, in terms of the nature of media, the verbal language is three dimensional (including the dimension of time-flux), while shape and color (the medium of painting) is two dimensional (of space only). But the poet likes to use the 3D medium to present nature

in 2D "pictures." For example, when the poet says "野曠天低樹" (*Field wide, sky lower than the tree*[s])[3] or "碧松梢外掛青天" (Over the twigs of the evergreen pine *hangs the blue sky*) (original emphases), he is looking at the scenery as a picture in a frame. On the contrary, the painter often employs his 2D medium to express a 3D world by means of multiple or indefinite viewpoint perspective. He explains this with two paintings by Ch'ou Ying (仇英), a very famous artist of the Ming dynasty, and his own drawings of "corrected" perspective. In the following, (a) is one of his simplified drawings of Ch'ou Ying's work, and (b) is his own drawing in perspective:



(a)



(b)

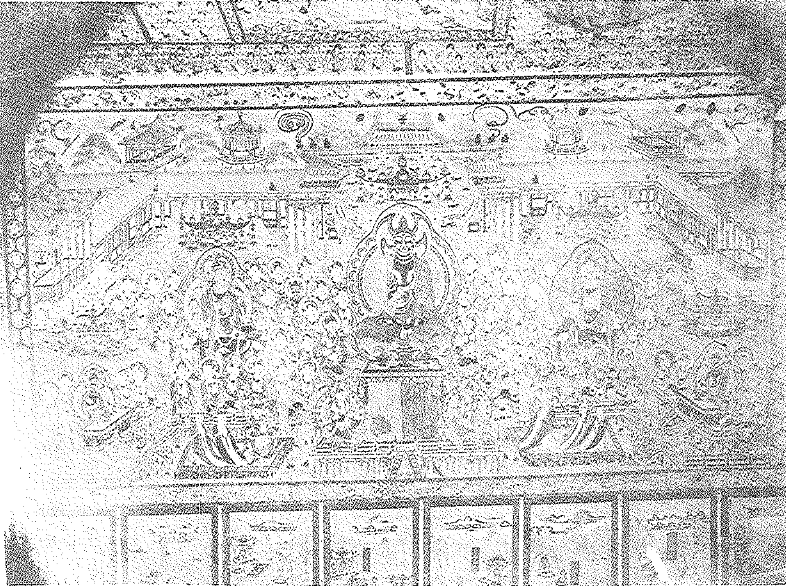
According to his analysis, Ch'ou Ying sees the objects from four VPs (viewpoints) of different levels: VP1 – from the top of a high ladder at the eastern corner of the yard when he looks at the steps, mat, and the central table; VP2 – from the center of the yard when he looks at the shrine; VP3 – from the top of a high ladder at the center of the yard when he sees the drum and bell; VP4 – from the top of the shrine when he looks at the two long tables on both sides.[4]

Now, if we are not preoccupied by the traditional Western perspective of one fixed viewpoint, we may find the multi-VP way of seeing much more interesting in the light of psychological reality in time-flux. It is only natural that before entering the main hall of a temple, a visitor sees the steps; when he comes into the hall he notices the mat and, then, the sacrifice-table in the center. It may appear strange at this moment that he does not see the shrine and the table at the same time, which are placed so closely together. But, as we know, the shrine is the most solemn object in the hall, he would look at it with a different mood. In other words, his attitude, and perhaps his actual position too, begins to change before, or as soon as, his eyes turn to the shrine. The drum and bell, two of the symbolic instruments of the temple, must be seen in a like mood. Then, when he turns around he looks at the two side tables.

Before we go any further, it is necessary to make clear that the term "perspective" is used here in a rather loose sense to indicate any "picture" – in painting or poetry – that may show a viewing point or points of a painter or a poet. With this understood, we may come back to drawing (a) above, of which the perspective seems to me more complicated than what is already said. Here, the painter depicts not only his impressions of different objects seen from different angles as Feng explained, but also different impressions of the same object seen at different moments. Judged from the tops of the two side tables in reverse perspective, he is looking from inside out; but if we ignore the tops, we may find that they are viewed from outside in a quite normal perspective. This "adjustment" could be the result of technical necessity because when a painter comes to translate his impressions into a painting on a flat surface he has to consciously stand away in order to find a distance that may enable him to see the total impression in a more or less logical order. (So does a poet in composing his lines.) But could this ambiguity of indefinite or multi-VP perspective be a result of a happy

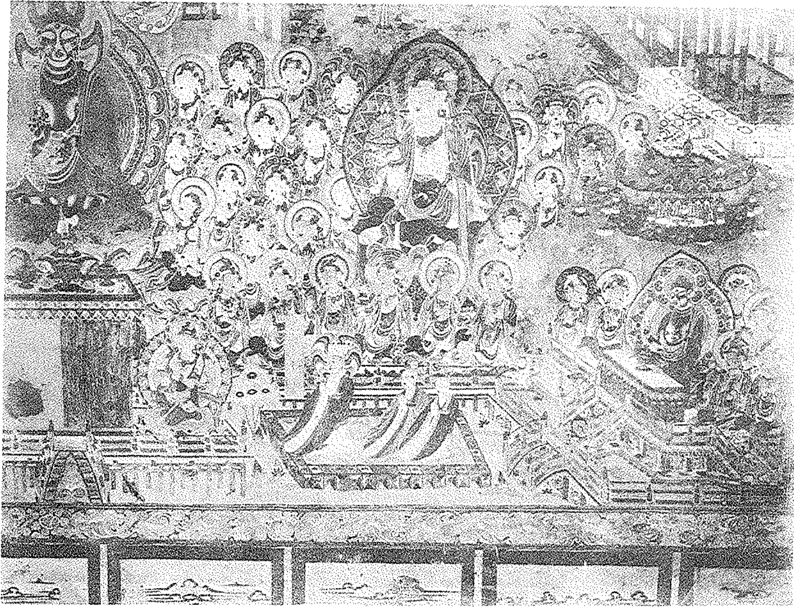
accident by mistake, or is it an artistic achievement? A few more examples may be helpful in making this clearer.

To me, the traditional Chinese artists neither observe nor ignore the physical world of time and space. For instance, flowers of different seasons may appear in one painting, and these flowers have all the objective, concrete characteristics in shape and color but are not copies of nature. The painter selects, re-creates, and presents – not represents – what he sees and feels at various time and space. Here is another example of opposite-VP perspective, with emphasis on three more important figures of Buddha:



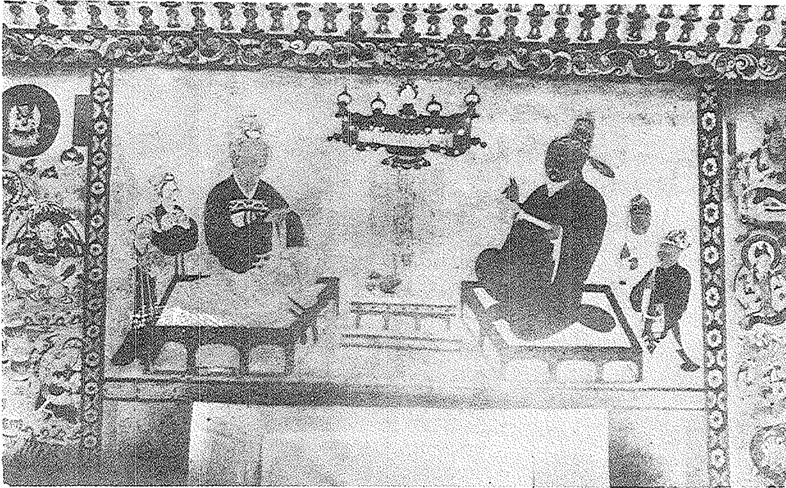
"Preaching Buddhism"
a Tun-Huang mural

Opposite:
A detail of the above mural



In this painting of the T'ang dynasty entitled "Preaching Buddhism," (說法圖),[5] the central table and its base in front of the preacher is seen in perspective, whereas the rest is from a reverse direction. Generally speaking, the best and most convenient relationship between a speaker and a listener is to sit facing each other. To portray such a face-to-face relationship on a 2D surface, with both their faces shown to the spectator, the only possibility is to draw one face through the reflection of a mirror. Obviously, to arrange such a mirror in a painting with a big audience in a place like this would not be possible. Our painter has wisely solved the problem by presenting the relationship through a double-VP perspective – with the preacher and his table as the focus of the listeners and the rest (including the buildings in the background) from an opposite direction. I think this is easy to follow if the spectator is more imaginative and less scientific. In history, such an arrangement between the speaker and listener should be familiar to people, judged from the stage convention in both classical Chinese and Western theatres – that is, a down-stage actor may deliver his lines with full face toward the audience while his listener sits up-stage facing

also the audience. I believe the convention is still alive in Peking Opera and some other theatres. This double-VP presentation in painting may have the advantage of suggesting a two-way communication between the speaker and the listener. It seems more like an artistic achievement than a result of ignorance of the laws of perspective. Here is a copy of another mural on top of a cave entrance.[6]



The square seats are also in reverse perspective. Why? The very obvious reason to me is that the painter must have taken into his considerations the location of the painting. As a rule, an entrance or gate is the "mouth" of a building for going out to the outside world. To make the painting a part of the cave, it should also be made to look toward outside. Therefore, there is nothing more natural than the application of the reverse perspective. People who can accept the modern art like the works of Surrealism should have no difficulty in the appreciation of such a viewpoint.

To an objective mind used to scientific rules of perspective, both in the East and West, paintings like these are conceived of wrong knowledge of reality and are therefore unnatural. Yet to a subjective mind capable of free, intuitive association and imagination, they can be more suggestive and more natural. And "being natural" has been a very high, if not the highest, criterion of achievement in art and literature in China. It does not mean to copy nature; it is an artistic achievement that shows no trace of artistic effort. In appearance, such a work of art or literature looks like that

of an innocent child, yet it is the sincerest expression of what the artist feels, thinks, and sees. For instance, in calligraphy, the so-called return-to-childhood style (返童體) is considered the most natural and the best. A work of this nature has usually all or some of the carefree characteristics of children: simplicity in form, exaggeration as a means for emphasizing the object of main interest, and indefinite or multi-VP for presenting psychological reality in time-flux. In a brief survey of 588 prize-winning paintings by school children aged from 7 to 14, of which 244 are Chinese and 344 are from Japan, Korea, and Western countries, I found that exaggeration of central human figures, animals, or inanimate things of main interest is quite common among children all over the world. The following is one by a West-German girl of 13 years of age.

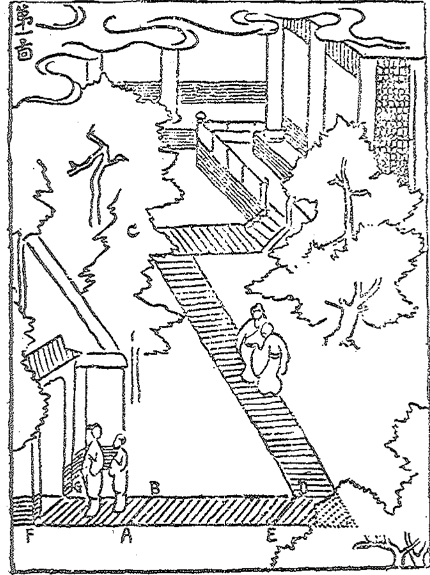
There are 12 paintings using obvious multi-VP perspective, of which 9 are by Chinese children (aged from 7 to 10) and 3 by Western children (aged from 8 to 12).[7] Paintings of correct bird's-eye view are not included in the statistics. The following are some of these 12 examples and works by traditional Chinese artists.[8]

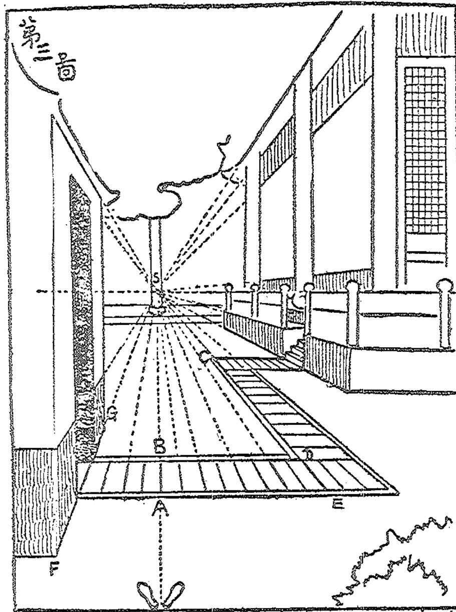
Above:

1-a. Feng Tze-k'ai's drawing of Ch'ou Ying's work

Below:

1-b. Feng's drawing in corrected perspective.



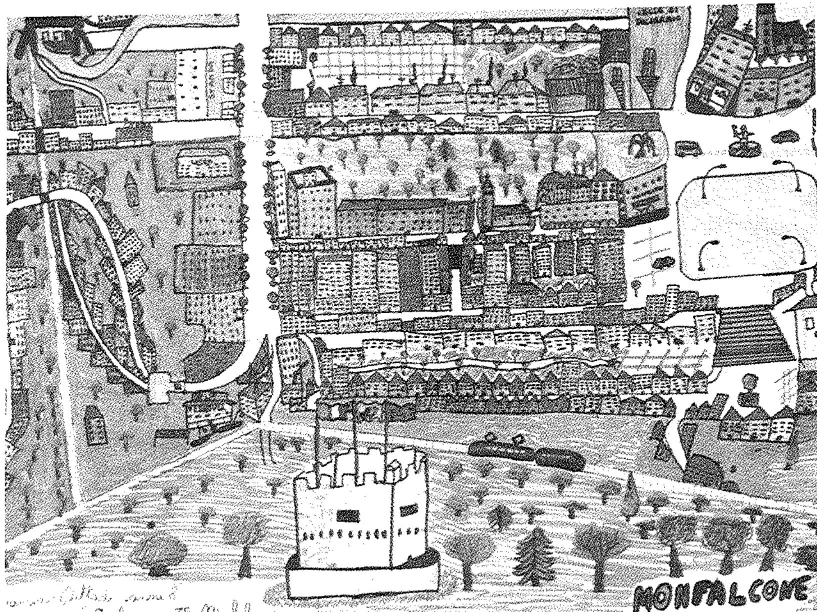


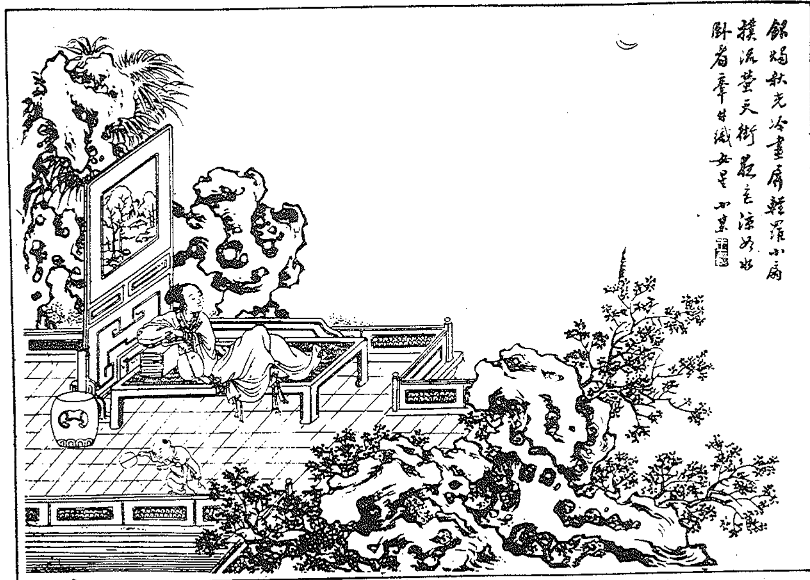
Opposite above:

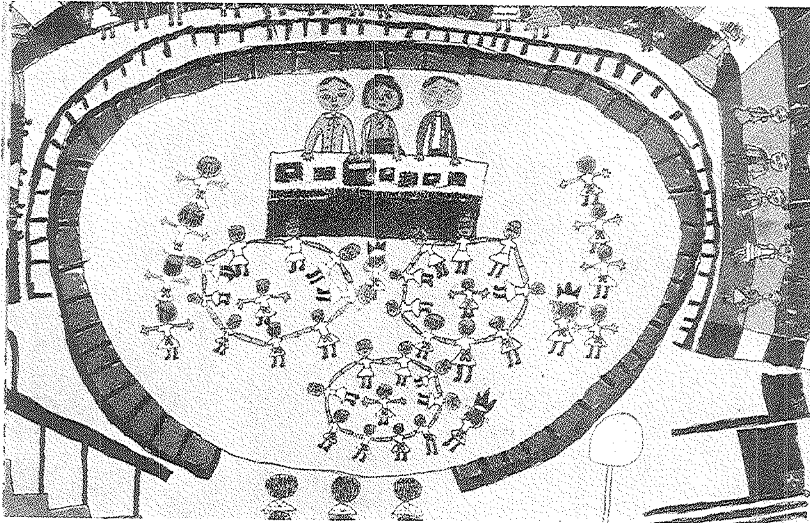
2. By an Italian Child of 8. It is not of bird's-eye view but of Multi-VP perspective

Opposite below:

3. "A Lady Watching the Evening Sky" – Notice the floor and screen in reverse perspective and the sizes of the lady and the child


MONFALCONE


銀燭秋光冷畫屏輕羅小扇
撲流螢天街夜色涼如水
臥看牽牛織女星



4. "A Contest of Singing and Playing" – by a Chinese girl of 7. Notice the desk and the size of the teachers behind it in the light of their importance in the painter's mind.

Though paintings like these are of a small minority in Chinese art and children's work, the analyses above, I hope, may illustrate my point that the free use of the multi-VP and mixed opposite-VP perspectives is not the result of a mistake of some happy accident, but is planned and natural. And it must be mentioned that I have not included in my examples any Chinese landscape paintings because: (1) Though any long scroll of landscape may clearly show the multi-VP perspective, it is technically inconvenient to be reproduced here. (2) It is difficult to say for sure how many viewpoints there are in a landscape of "regular" proportion (within 1:2 in width and length) simply because the direction and size of a tree, a rock, a mountain range, etc., cannot be easily judged as those of a table, a house, a room, or a screen.

So much for the perspective in painting, and we shall now come back to the viewpoint in Chinese poetry. Like the painter, the Chinese poets have been less scientific and more childlike than the Western poets and, therefore, are interested in presenting their experiences and impressions of various moments in a similar carefree manner. Wai-lim Yip's favorite analysis of Wang Wei's "Mount Chungnan" is an excellent illustration of this multi-VP perspective. He writes:

The Chungnan ranges verge on the Capital,
(viewer on level ground looking from after
– Moment 1)

Mountain upon mountain to sea's brim,
White clouds – looking back – close up.
(viewer coming out
– Moment 2)

Green mists – entering – become nothing,
(viewer entering
– Moment 3)

Terrestrial divisions change at the middle peak.
(viewer atop peak looking down
– Moment 4)

Shade and light differ with every valley.
(viewer on both sides of Mount simultaneously
– Moment 5)

To stay over in some stranger's house –
Across the water, call to ask a woodcutter.
(viewer down on level ground
– Moment 6)[9]

Though Yip does not tell us where the viewer exactly is at Moment 2 (coming out from where? where is he now?) and how he could be on both sides of the mountain "simultaneously," he has shown us clearly that the poet has stopped at six different places to enjoy the scenery from various angles and directions. Chinese poems of this kind are easy to find. But before we study another example of a slightly different nature, we may go back a little to Feng Tze-k'ai's observation: the Chinese poet likes to use the 3D medium to present a 2D world. Judged from the examples he cites to support his opinion, he is only thinking of single lines that fit his "picture." As a matter of fact, not only may a complete poem like "Mount Chungnan" present a 3D world; there is the dimension of time-flux in a single line like "橫看成嶺側成峯" (Look sideways it is a mountain range; look from another direction, it is a peak [they are peaks]), "輕舟已過萬重山" (The light boat has passed ten thousand mountains), or "青靄入看無" (The green

mist[s], [when I have] entered, [is] no longer visible). Now let us have a look at Wang Chih-huan's (王之渙) "A Visit to the Heron Tower" (登鸛雀樓):

白 日 依 山 盡
The white sun along the mountain declines [-d]

黃 河 入 海 流
The Yellow River into the sea runs [ran]

欲 窮 千 里 目
Wish to see as far as a thousand *li* sight

更 上 一 層 樓
Again go up a flight of stairs.

A quick reading of this quatrain may give us the impression that the poet has been to two stories of the tower and seen the sunset, river, and sea from different angles. But a second reading may suggest a different picture, which is beyond the normal means of a painter. When the poet is looking at the sunset, he must face the west. But since it is geographically impossible for him to see the sea there, the river-into-sea picture must be imagined. The action of line 4 can be physical or also imagined.[10]

From the analyses of the two poems above, we can say that a poet may not only move freely from one standing point to another, but also travel between the immediate reality and the world of his imagination. He has even greater freedom in "drawing" his pictures than a painter, who can hardly express Wang's experience and feeling of visiting the tower, or lines like "白髮三千丈" (The white hair [is] three thousand yards [long]) and "黃河之水天上來" (The water of the Yellow River comes from heaven).

In connection with the discussion above, two unique aspects of the Chinese language may be mentioned at this point. First, unless there are words like tomorrow, yesterday, last year, etc., the Chinese verbs do not tell us the time of action. This tense-less verb form, which is in nature different from the present tense for habitual actions and truth in English, makes the action of a poem appear in the present and, therefore, more like a painting or film, which is always in the present tense.[11] This presentness, especially in poems without the appearance of "I" – the speaker or

actor, may create a more adjustable and flexible aesthetic distance for the reader.

Secondly, in regard to location or position relationship among images and objects, no matter how many viewpoints or what kind of perspective a painter may choose for a painting, there are always fixed relations between and/or among individual shapes, colors, and lines in the form of trees, houses, rocks, clouds, or even blank spaces, simply because they are fixed, definite forms and cannot be changed by the spectator's will or imaginative power at all. This is also true in works of Dadaism, Surrealism, or Expressionism. But a Chinese poet may sometimes give us only individual images without any indication of their shape, size, or relative location. Take for instance the famous lines by Ma Chih-yüan (馬致遠):

> 枯 藤 老 樹 昏 鴉
> withered vine(s) old tree(s) evening crow(s)
>
> 小 橋 流 水 人 家
> little bridge(s) flowing water people's house(s)
>
> 古 道 西 風 瘦 馬
> ancient road(s) west wind lean horse(s)
>
> 夕 陽 西 下
> evening sun westward setting
>
> 斷 腸 人 在 天 涯
> broken-hearted man (men) at heaven's end.

The reader may arrange these nine images (or nine kinds of images) of the first three lines in various shapes, sizes, positions, and relations – and in different numbers too since the Chinese nouns have no plural form. This last characteristic may offer to the reader another kind of freedom.[13] In this light, we may say that an English poem of scenery can usually give us a much more definite picture than a Chinese poem of similar nature. Take the last two lines of Walter De la Mare's "Silver":

> And moveless fish in the water glean,
> By silver reeds in a silver stream.

and William Carlos Williams's small scene:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

Here, though the reader may also choose his own favorite shades of silver, red, and white, and picture different numbers of fish, reeds, and chickens, he is told that there is only "a" stream, "a" wheelbarrow, and the reeds are "in" a stream and the wheelbarrow is "beside" the chickens.

However, we must add that though a classical Chinese poem leaves more room to the reader's imagination and association than an English one, he is also very much conditioned by factors concerning the poem itself and his literary and cultural background. But a thorough study of these factors is beyond my knowledge and too complicated to be included here. The present paper ventures only to have a brief look at them from the point of image sequence and shall approach it in terms of aesthetic effect,[14] versification or the musical patterns of poetry, and the cultural concept of spatial relation, to be illustrated by a further analysis of Ma Chih-yüan's lines quoted above.

First of all, we can say that the poet's grouping of the nine images follows our common sense of association, which makes it easier for the reader to "see" his picture – or easier for the poet to control or guide the reader's mind. According to our common knowledge, vines grow on trees and crows look for trees to perch by evening; when there is a bridge across a river or stream there are usually houses nearby; and the lonely traveler is riding along the road in the wind. (This is more interesting than the wind is associated with or expressed through the trees.)

Secondly, the order of these three groups or units follows a common conception of the Chinese – thinking from the general to the particular (e.g., from scenery to a horse on a road), which can be found in many other poems and life manners in China.[15]

Thirdly, the sequence of images in each of the three groups (i.e., in a line) is a much more complicated problem. It is perhaps more logical for

the poet or traveler to see the trees first, or to be attracted by the crows first if they are flying toward the trees. But to begin the line with 老樹 (old trees) or 昏鴉 (evening crows) would not only be against its musical pattern but create certain difficulty for the riming of the whole verse. It is true that a great artist (a poet or a painter) usually looks up to naturalness (自然) or some universal order as the highest law of his creation, and he may sometimes try to bend the conventional rules a little to suit his own aesthetic purpose. This is not always realized. A less artist tends to hold works of great masters and established rules or long existing conventions to be his highest standard of naturalness, consciously or without knowing it. In other words, rhyme, meter, and other mechanics of versification may play an important role in the arrangement of image sequence, to both major and minor poets. But this is only one side of the whole story. To the general reader who is used to the traditional poetic forms, the aesthetic effect of image sequence is usually not as vital as the rhythm, especially when the grouping of images follows the logical, habitual order of sequence. To him, each group of the images is a wholeness by itself. He goes from line to line (unit to unit) and then back to a certain distance in order to have a look at the total picture. This initial step of viewing process (from individual lines to the whole poem) is different from the spectator's approach to the appreciation of a painting, who would usually grasp the overall impression first and then go from one detail to another and back to the whole picture again. Up to this stage, we can say that the poet could have stronger control of the image sequence over the reader than the painter. But the sequence does not always play as important a role as some critics think. It is perhaps for a similar reason that the opposite and multi-VP perspective in traditional Chinese paintings and children's work is often ignored by most critics and spectators, and even artists, either as a merit or as a defect.

To sum up: though the above discussions on Chinese painting and poetry are quantitatively inadequate as a foundation to draw any definite conclusion, we may at least say that there is always an "I" in a poem, as there is always a viewpoint or viewpoints in a painting, only sometimes it is difficult to ascertain where the poet exactly is. The indefinite or multi-VP perspective, when it is used, allows the poet and the painter, and the reader and the spectator too, to move more easily from one viewing point to another, back and forth, and even in and out of the world of reality and that of imagination. The absence of verb tenses always gives a poem a sense of presentness like that of a painting. This and the non-appearance of "I"

help make it more convenient for the reader to feel free to wander in the land of a poem without feeling the appearance of its original "owner" there to interfere, as a spectator may roam in a painting. The indefinite location-relationship of images and the no-number characteristic of the nouns offer to the reader an extra freedom to picture the images and his relationship with them. But all these conscious or unconscious activities are performed or happen within certain aesthetic and cultural conventions.

Notes

1. There are numerous discussions on Wang's concept. See for instance: Yeh Chia-ying (葉嘉瑩), "人間詞話中批評之理論與實踐," 文學評論 I (May 1975), pp. 213-22. The article is included in her 王國維及其文學批評 (台北：源流文化事業公司, 1982), Chapter III; Wong Wai-leung (黃維樑), 中國詩學縱橫談 (台北：洪範書局，1977)pp.64-71; Hsü Fu-kuan (徐復觀), 中國文學論集續篇 (台北：學生書局，1981), pp. 72-76. Yao Yi-wei's analysis on the use of personal pronouns in Chinese poetry is worth reading in this connection. See 姚一葦，文學論集 (台北：書評書目出版社社,1977), pp. 45-90.
2. Huang Yung-wu (黃永武), 中國詩學：設計篇 (台北：巨流圖書公司, 1976), pp. 56, 60, 61. For further discussion on the treatment of time and space, see pp. 43-76 and his 中國詩學：鑑賞篇, pp. 62-77, 93-106.
3. Wai-lim Yip's "picture" of the line is quite different. See his "中國古典詩與眞美現代詩 — 語言、美學的滙通," 文學評論 I, pp. 373, 378-81.
4. Feng Tze-k'ai (豐子愷), 繪畫與文學 (1934; rpt. 台北：開明書局, 1978), pp. 62-65. For the complete discussion on perspective in traditional Chinese painting, see pp. 52-71; perspective in Chinese literature (actually only of poetry), see pp. 1-15. Tsung Pai-hua's analysis of Chinese poetry and painting seems to me to beat about the bush of past poetics. (See 宗白華，美學的散步 [台北：洪範書局，1981], Chapter 1, 2, and 5.)
5. Lin Ts'ung-ming and others, eds. (林聰明導編), 敦煌千佛洞壁画輯覽 (台北：盤庚出版社，1978 according to the Preface), No. 19. (The collection has no page number.)
6. Ibid., No. 6.
7. My statistics is based upon *The Seventh Exhibition of World School Children's Art in the Republic of China* (edited and published by the Chinese Association for Education through Art, 1976), and the collections of the eighth (1977), ninth (1978), and tenth (1979) exhibitions. All these four collections have no page number. The painting above is from the ninth exhibition.
   In the 13th International Children's Art Exhibition presented by Japan I saw in Taipei in July 1983, which was composed of 345 paintings (respectively Japan – 120, China – 103, Panama – 1, Thailand – 4, and Argentina, Australia, Bangladish, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, Hungary, Egypt, Poland, U.K., U.S.A., France, Iran, Sri Lanka, Mexico, etc. – 3 each, I found two paintings of obvious opposite-VP perspective: one by a ten-year old girl from Sri Lanka, the other by a Chinese girl of 15.
   I believe that the use of multi-VP perspective is common among children all over the world, and many more can be found in schools and families than in exhibitions

which contain only the prize winners' work, selected by "well trained" artists. Maybe the Chinese children do more of such paintings.

8. These paintings are from: 1-a and 1-b – 繪画與文學, pp. 53, 61; 2 and 4 – the seventh and tenth collections of the Exhibition of World School Children's Art in R.O.C. respectively; 3 – 古今名画三百種, edited by publisher (台北：文化圖書公司, 1964), p. 157.
9. Wai-lim Yip, "Wang Wei and the Aesthetic of Pure Experience," *Tamkang Review* II, 2 – III, 1 (Oct. 1971-April 1972), p. 208. See also his slightly different analysis on this poem in "中國古典詩與眞美現代詩一語言·美學的滙通," pp.385-86.
10. For further discussions on this poem, see my "詩與画," "文史季刊 I, 2 (1979), included in my 象牙塔外 (台北：經世書局, 1981), pp. 47-52; and Yao Yi-wei, 欣賞與批評, 2nd ed. (台北：遠景書局, 1982), pp. 36-37.
11. George Bluestone says, "The novel has three tenses; the film has only one." See *Novels into Film* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1957), p. 48. For his discussion on chronological and psychological time in both novels and film, see pp. 48-64.
12. The line also reads: "小橋流水平沙" in various editions.
13. For further examples and discussions on the advantage and disadvantage of such lines and the number of nouns, see my "Peking Opera: A Study on the Art of Translating the Scripts with Special Reference to Structure and Conventions" (Dissertation, 1976), pp. 15-22, 83-86, 171-72.
14. Wai-lim Yip has made very significant analyses on the importance of image sequence in the light of cinematic effect. See specially his *Ezra Pound's Cathy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 22-26.
15. For more examples and related analysis, see my dissertation, pp. 164-73; or the slightly revised version of it: "Translating Verse Passages in Peking Opera: Problems and Possibilities" (Part I), *Tamkang Review* VII, 2 (Oct. 1976), pp. 108-112.