

Vegetative Imagery and Emotional Expression: Symbolism and Heritage of Plant Imagery in Chinese Classical Poetry

Xingjuan Peng, Huan Cao *, Zhaojing Shi, Qiming Cao

Zhejiang Yuexiu University, Shaoxing, Zhejiang, China

Abstract

The vegetative imagery employed in Chinese classical poetry not only harbors profound cultural significance but also reflects poets' subtle perceptions of nature and life. This study examines how, since the pre-Qin period, Chinese poets have used flora as emotive mediums to intimately link plant life's thriving and withering with human sentiment and destiny. Using "grass" and "willow" as focal imagery, the study reveals how poets articulated concerns for national fate, sentiments of parting with friends, and admiration for the vigor of life. This paper further analyses the importance of the transmission and international dissemination of vegetal imagery, emphasizing how modern youth should perceive and protect this "living heritage" from a multidimensional perspective and proposing how high-quality translations can help the world understand and appreciate China's exceptional cultural traditions. The study contends that placing vegetal imagery within broader cultural and historical contexts not only deepens our comprehension of our national culture but also serves as an essential conduit to introduce this beautiful cultural heritage to the world. Investigating the unique symbolism of vegetal imagery, emotional expressions in poetry, and its contemporary living heritage, this research offers new perspectives on the international spread of Chinese culture and the enhancement of cultural confidence.

Keywords

Chinese classical poetry; Plants; Vegetative Imagery; Emotional Expression; inheritance.

1. Introduction

In Chinese classical poetry, plant imagery plays a vital role as poets employ elements of nature such as flowers, plants, and trees to express their emotions, fate, and thoughts. Plant imagery not only enriches the artistic conception of poems but also reflects the poets' subtle insights into nature and life. Through the use of plant imagery, poets can tightly link their emotions with natural landscapes, thereby creating profound poetic works. Individual plant imageries have their unique symbols and implications in poetry. Taking the imageries of "grass" and "willow" as examples, this article explores not just the unique cultural implications of plant imagery in poetry but also attempts to discover the expressions of artistic conceptions they convey. It aims to make more people understand plant imagery beyond mere appreciation of the scenery of flowers, grass, and trees. This also facilitates understanding Chinese classical culture, inheriting China's intangible cultural heritage, and letting foreign friends experience the charm of Chinese culture, thereby promoting Chinese culture to the world.

2. The Artistic Conception and Emotional Expression of the Imagery "Grass"

2.1. What is "Grass" Imagery

The article will first introduce what "grass" is; then explain the relationship between grass and Chinese culture, the daily lives of Chinese people, and ideology. Then, the article will use examples to illustrate the artistic conception and emotional expression of the imagery "grass" in Chinese classical poetry.

Grass, beyond our common understanding as a herbaceous plant, also serves as fodder and combustion material, playing an important role as a production resource in agricultural civilization and closely related to human life. Thus, grass has become a part of Chinese culture, passed down to us today through a series of related radicals, phrases, idioms, and poetic lines. For instance, when we mention "grass and mustard seed," it brings to mind the notion of triviality; "wall-head grass" scorns indecisive and opportunistic people; "to touch flowers and provoke grass" hints at a person of romantic pursuits. As such, grass in Chinese culture is endowed with extremely rich meanings. The following three Tang poems will explore the imagery of "grass" under different circumstances by different poets to restore the imagery of grass.

2.2. The Imagery "Grass": Depicting the Decline of the State

Grass is a common sight in our daily lives, yet rarely does it evoke special emotions. However, during the Tang Dynasty, "grass" often appeared in the works of renowned poets such as Wang Wei, Bai Juyi, Du Fu, Li Bai, Liu Yuxi, and others. An example is the famous "Spring Outlook" by Tang poet Du Fu.

chūn wàng	"Spring Outlook"
	[Tang Dynasty] Du Fu
guó pò shān hé zài,	The nation shattered, yet mountains and rivers still remain,
chéng chūn cǎo mù shēn.	In spring the city lies deep with wild grass.
gǎn shí huā jiàn lèi,	Moved by the times, flowers bring forth tears,
hèn bié niǎo jīng xīn.	Parting from birds shocks one's heart.
fēng huǒ lián sān yuè,	Beacon fires lasted for three months, a priceless letter comes.
jiā shū dǐ wàn jīn.	
bái tóu sāo gèng duǎn,	Scratching his white hair even shorter,
hún yù bú shèng zān.	Such despair he can hardly bear the hairpin.

This poem was written during the Tianbao years of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang. A year before, in June, An Lushan's rebel forces invaded Chang'an, plundering the city and setting it ablaze. The glorious capital was reduced to ruins. In August of the previous year, Du Fu had placed his wife in Qiang village of Fuzhou and while traveling north to Lingwu he was captured and sent to the fallen Chang'an. At this time, the country was in a state of ruin and chaos, the people displaced and suffering, and Du Fu was extremely pained, unable to effect any change although he so wished. As the late spring arrived, heavy with emotion, he composed this legacy of a regulated verse.

"Deep with wild grass in the city of spring" paints a scene of lush and thriving grass, brimming with life. But, is that truly the case as described in the poem? Of course not. Where the human hustle and bustle is found, who would allow grass to grow taller than people, letting weeds

hinder their passage? The capital had fallen, the city was wrecked, most citizens were either dead or homeless, uncared for, starving. The small wild grasses grew untended, resulting in a desolate wilderness. It is this description that deepens the artistic conception; savoring these words, one cannot help but feel sorrow for this scene.

The poem infuses the adversity brought to the people by war into the landscape, expressing the poet's melancholy through shattered countries, desolate cities. The blooming of grass and flowers should signify a thriving spring, yet because of war, the people have lost hope. Reading the whole passage, the poet fuses his fate with that of the country, conveying a sincere and poignant feeling of national and personal grief, creating a profound artistic conception.

Of course, poets of that time always had ideological collisions during different periods. The line "Passing spring breeze ten miles, only shepherd's purse thriving" from the Song Dynasty lyricist Jiang Kui in "Yangzhou Slow" has a congenial wisdom to Du Fu's "The nation shattered, yet mountains and rivers remain, deep with wild grass in the city of spring." Upon his initial arrival, Yangzhou presented a flourishing scene, yet upon returning, much had changed. Walking along the long streets of Yangzhou, all in sight were abundant shepherd's purse, lonely and pitiful; and Yangzhou city would no longer thrive as they do. The lyricist expresses sorrow through a joyous scene, the lushness of shepherd's purse starkly contrasting with the now desolate view, causing contemplation.

Furthermore, by the same poet Du Fu, another piece titled "Song of the Chancellor of Shu" goes:

shǔ xiāng	"Song of the Chancellor of Shu"
	[Tang Dynasty] Du Fu
chéng xiàng cí táng hé chù xún?	Where can we find your shrine, O grand chancellor?
jǐn guān chéng wài bǎi sēn sēn.	Outside the city of brocade, dense cypresses.
yìng jiē bì cǎo zì chūn sè,	Blue grass reflects on steps tinted with spring hue,
gé yè huáng lí kōng hǎo yīn.	The oriole's mellow strains seem all in vain.
sān gù pín fán tiān xià jì,	Three visits troubled with world affairs,
liǎng cháo kāi jì lǎo chén xīn.	Two reigns opened, heeding tried minister's heart.
chū shī wèi jié shēn xiān sǐ,	In strategies unfulfilled, he breathed his last,
zhǎng shǐ yīng xióng lèi mǎn jīn.	Leaving heroes forever stained with tears.

This regulated verse "Song of the Chancellor of Shu" conveys reverence for the wisdom and moral character of Zhuge Liang and laments his unfulfilled accomplishments. The poem combines emotions, scenes, and discussions into one—a critique of history imbued with present-day implications, as an unparalleled ode among poems that praise Zhuge Liang. The second couplet "Blue grass reflects on steps tinted with spring hue, The oriole's mellow strains seem all in vain" depicts "blue grass" and "oriole," in quiet and motion, a graceful, natural contrast, vividly displaying the verdant scene within the Wuhou Shrine. However, the greenery comes to nature but the hopes of national revival are slim. Considering this, the poet cannot help but feel a sense of melancholy and melancholy. The poet infuses his subjective emotions into the objective landscape, conveying his inner anguish through the depiction of scenery, reflecting a patriotic spirit concerned about the country and its people.

2.3. The Imagery "Grass": Portraying Farewells to Friends

Of course, the imagery of "grass" is not solely used to contrast desolate scenes and convey the vicissitudes of prosperity and decline. It can also describe the uncertainty of a friend's return during a farewell. An example is this piece "Farewell in the Mountains" by Tang poet Wang Wei:

shān zhōng sòng bié	"Farewell in the Mountains"
	[Tang Dynasty] Wang Wei
shān zhōng xiāng sòng bà,	In the mountain we bid farewell,
rì mù yǎn chái fēi.	At dusk, I close the wattle gate.
chūn cǎo míng nián lǜ,	Next year's spring grass will be green,
wáng sūn guī bù guī.	Will the prince return or not?

This poem depicts the scene of the poet's farewell to his friend, expressing his reluctance and yearning. In this poem, the poet conceals the loneliness and desolation brought about by the departure of his friend. Come dusk, he'd close the wattle gate as usual, but how to endure the long nights alone? The line "Next year's spring grass will be green, will the prince return or not?" is adapted from "Wangzi's wandering and not returning, spring grass grows wild" in "Chuci· Calling on the Hermit." However, the ode laments the long absence of the wanderer, while these two lines express the fear of a long absence on the day of parting. Tang Ruqian summarized this poem's content in "Tang Poetry Explained" as "The gate closes at dusk, the dwellers parting sorrow deepens; the grass will green in time, the traveler's return is hard to ensure." One reason for the deepening "parting sorrow" is the uncertainty of return. As soon as the friend leaves, the poet worries that when the grass is green next spring, it is unknown if his friend will return. The feeling of parting is evident outwardly, using spring grass as a medium to convey his deep affection for his friend, creating a poignant atmosphere that touches readers with their profound friendship.

Another example is the poem "Sending Off Li Duan" by Tang poet Lu Lun:

sòng lǐ duān	"Sending Off Li Duan"
	[Tang Dynasty] Lu Lun
gù guān shuāi cǎo biàn,	All around the old pass lies withered grass,
lí bié zhèng kān bēi.	Parting brings sorrow so deep it's fit to grieve.
lù chū hán yún wài,	The road leads out through the chill clouds,
rén guī mù xuě shí.	The traveler returns in the evening snow.
shǎo gū wéi kè zǎo,	An orphan young, becoming a guest too early,
duō nán shí jūn chí.	Recognizing you came late through many hard times.
yǎn qì kōng xiāng xiàng,	We cover our tears, facing each other in vain,
fēng chén hé suǒ qī.	For what can we hope amidst wind and dust?

This is a deeply moving farewell poem, especially the first couplet, which sets the environmental atmosphere of the farewell. The old pass, a place full of memories, but now covered with withering grass, accentuating the sorrow of parting. The withering grass imagery here represents not merely the decline of grass but also the physical representation of a heart like cold ashes. With the scene so set, how can the emotions be contained? The pain of parting, expressed vividly on paper.

2.4. The Imagery "Grass": Depicting Vigorous Vitality

Although tiny, unremarkable grass possesses vigorous vitality. An example is this poem "Grass on the Ancient Plain" by Tang poet Bai Juyi:

fù dé gǔ yuán cǎo sòng bié

lí lí yuán shàng cǎo,
yì suì yì kū róng.
yě huǒ shāo bù jìn,
hūn fēng chuī yòu shēng.
yuǎn fāng qīn gǔ dào,
qíng cuì jiē huāng chéng.
yòu sòng wáng sūn qù,
qī qī mǎn bié qíng.

"Grass on the Ancient Plain"

[Tang Dynasty] Bai Juyi

Boundless grass spreads o'er the plain,
Each year it withers then blooms again.
Wildfire cannot annihilate it all,
With spring winds, it rises once more tall.
Fragrant growth encroaches ancient roads,
Brilliant green connects abandoned holds.
Once more, sending off a noble guest,
Sorrowful feelings overflow and manifest.

This poem is Bai Juyi's signature work, an ode to wild grass which further sings praise to life itself. He portrays wild grass to express reluctant farewells to friends. "Boundless grass spreads o'er the plain, each year it withers then blooms again. Wildfire cannot annihilate it all, with spring winds, it rises once more tall." It paints a scene of a vast plain covered with lush green grass, withering annually but reborn each spring. Even the blazing wildfire that burns it to death, when the following spring breeze passes, wild grass resumes its vigorous growth covering the entire wasteland. It cannot help but marvel at the tenacity of wild grass.

"Boundless grass spreads o'er the plain, each year it withers then blooms again." refers to wild grass as an annual plant, thriving in spring, withering in autumn, and continuing the cycle year after year. "Wildfire cannot annihilate it all, with spring winds, it rises once more tall." personifies the aforementioned "withers then blooms again." Ancient plain grass inherently possesses strong resilience, as long as its roots survive, it will regrow next year, which is why it is said to be indestructible. The author uses the burning wildfire to illustrate the magnitude of the damage to wild grass, representing the destroying force grass endures, with destruction set for the arrival of rebirth. Once the spring nurtures life's revival, wild grass swiftly reclaims the land, like wildfire raising a green flag of victory.

3. The Artistic Conception and Emotional Expression of the Imagery "Willow"

3.1. What Constitutes the Willow Imagery

The willow tree, with smooth bark in shades of gray or light gray and gray-white trunk, has flexible, bending branches adorned with slender leaves and verdant blossoms, making it a beautiful ornamental plant. Historical records indicate thousands of years of cultivation of willow trees in China, and they are revered as the "chief among a hundred trees." The willow's branches are pliable, useful for weaving various containers and furniture. Additionally, its ability to bear snow and wind makes it an ideal species for windbreaks and sand fixation. The well-developed root system of willows effectively stabilizes soil and curbs erosion. Furthermore, willows have medicinal properties—their roots, leaves, flowers, and bark all have medicinal uses, including heat-clearing, detoxifying, dispelling wind and dampness, and pain relief. Though the above describes the practical value of "willow," the cultural implications related to it will be elucidated through relevant Tang poems embodying the millennial romance of "willow."

3.2. Willow Imagery :Depicting Farewell Emotions

Ancients often used the image of willows to describe scenes of parting from relatives and friends. This is because willows and such farewells share a "homologous" relationship—the

swaying, delicate willow branches convey the reluctance in parting; the homophony between “liǔ (willow)” and “liú (to stay/leave as a keepsake)” in Chinese, means people would give willow branches as mementos of parting; lastly, willows are easily propagated, symbolizing well-wishers’ hopes for those departing.

Some poets express their heartfelt longing for home through “breaking off a willow.” One such poem is “Hearing a Flute on a Spring Night in Luoyang” by the Tang poet Li Bai:

chūn yè luò chéng wén dí

“Hearing a Flute on a Spring Night ”

[Tang Dynasty] Li Bai

shuǐ jiā yù dí àn fēi shēng,
àn rù chūn fēng mǎn luò chéng.

Whose jade flute's secret soaring tone,
Disperses with spring wind over Luo, fully blown.

cǐ yè qǔ zhōng wén zhé liǔ,
hé rén bù qǐ gù yuán qíng?

This night, amidst the tune, a willow break,
Who isn't moved by thoughts of home to take?

This poem was written by Li Bai during his stay in Luoyang, where he was inspired by flute music, which triggered his homesickness. The line “Whose jade flute's secret soaring tone, Disperses with spring wind over Luo, fully blown.” describes hearing the distant sound of a flute, which awakens his buried longing for home. Hence, “This night, amidst the tune, a willow break” points out the song “Breaking Off the Willow,” which evokes feelings of parting and reflects a melancholic and plaintive melody. This phrase likely reinterprets the sentiment from the “Chant of Yangliu” in the Music Bureau repertoire, expressing deeply held sentiments of someone yearning for their hometown.

Others employ “willow” to bid farewell to friends and convey heartfelt blessings. An instance is the poem “Seeing Off Yuan the Second on His Mission to Anxi” by the Tang poet Wang Wei:

sòng yuán èr shǐ ān xī

“Seeing Off Yuan the Second on His Mission to Anxi”

[Tang Dynasty] Wang Wei

wèi chéng cháo yǔ yì qīng chén,
kè shě qīng qīng liǔ sè xīn.

In Weicheng, a morning rain has doused light dust,
Beside the hostel, the vibrant willow hues seem just.

quàn jūn gèng jìn yì bēi jiǔ,
xī chū yáng guān wú gù rén.

Have one more cup of wine, my friend, I urge you then,
Beyond the sunlit pass, you'll meet no old friends again.

The poem was written by Wang Wei as he was sending a friend to the northwestern frontier. Set to music later, known as “Three Refrains of Yang Pass” or “Song of Weicheng,” it likely dates back to before the An Lushan Rebellion. The scene is in Weicheng, where the morning rain wets the roadside dust and the willows by the hostel grow increasingly verdant, creating a melancholic atmosphere for the friend's departure. Here, the “willow” is a traditional backdrop to partings, signifying not only the poet's reluctance but also the melancholy of an uncertain reunion and concern for the friend's future. Once the friend departs, meeting old acquaintances again will be difficult; hence, may he cherish himself in the days ahead.

The formation of willow as a special imagery is a product of historical and cultural accumulation, determined and constrained by national culture and psyche, exhibiting a certain degree of conventionality. Thousands of years ago, poets from almost every period would use willow to say goodbye, expressing longing for relatives and friends. Yet, there exist usages divergent from farewells, like “willow tears”: expressing bittersweet sentiment, and “smoky willow piles”: evoking fleeting memories often used to express feelings of rise and fall.

3.3. Willow Imagery :Depicting the Vitality of Spring

As spring arrives, heralding the revival of all things, tender green willow branches invariably emerge, cascading splashes of greenery and conveying the stirring message of spring's arrival, delighting people. This vibrancy is observed in "Quatrain" by the Tang poet Du Fu:

jué jù	Quatrain
	Tang poet Du Fu
liǎng gè huáng lí míng cuì liǔ, yì xíng bái lù shàng qīng tiān. chuāng hán xī lǐng qiān qiū xuě, mén bó dōng wú wàn lǐ chuán.	Two orioles sing amid green willows, A line of egrets ascends the blue sky. The window frames the snowy western ridges, By the door are moored ships from eastern Wu.

The poem opens with a vivid natural landscape, creating a fresh and relaxing tone. The poet minutely portrays this beautiful scene from varying angles. The verdant green signifies early spring when nature revives, bursting with vitality. With the orioles' song, a clear, pleasant sound emerges. In early spring, pairs of orioles chirp on freshly budding willow branches, conjuring a celebratory and vibrant picture. The orioles perched atop the willows sing, depicting life within the tranquility. The intrinsic vigor of the still willows beautifully contrasts the vitality of the orioles.

Similarly, celebrating the pleasing sense of spring through willows is the poem "Admiring the Willow" by Tang poet He Zhizhang:

yǒng liǔ	"Admiring the Willow"
	Tang poet He Zhizhang
bì yù zhuāng chéng yì shù gāo, wàn tiáo chuī xià lǜ sī tāo. bù zhī xī yè shuǐ cái chū, èr yuè chūn fēng sì jiǎn dāo.	Adorned like jade, one tree stands tall, A thousand strands of green silk shawls. Who could have shaped these slender leaves? Spring breezes birth anew, as one perceives.

The first line personifies the willow tree as if it were a gracefully dressed woman, suggesting an elegant beauty with the youthfulness of spring. The use of "jade" subtly references famous lines from the Nanchao period and the idiom "small jade household." With "Adorned like jade, one tree stands tall," the poet easily connects the willow with the delicate young girls of the past, envisioning them in tender green, charming and vibrant. The word "tall" further accentuates the elegance of the beautiful figure. In the second line, the drooping willow leaves resemble the green silk ribbons on a young girl's dress. China, renowned for silk production, celebrates silk as the queen of natural fibers, known for dignity, luxury, and elegance. Therefore, the charm of this willow tree can only be imagined. The character "chui" (drooping), while describing the distinctive shape of the willow, adds a sense of dynamic, flowing beauty. In the third line, the poem turns reflective, pondering who could have fashioned these fine willow leaves resembling silk ribbons. It starts with a rhetorical question, praising the heavenly craftsmanship evoking tender feelings. Answering its own questioning, the poem attributes the tender green leaves to the skilful hands of the March spring breeze, which dresses the earth anew, signaling the arrival of spring. These two lines blend metaphor with inquiry, employing personification to depict the beauty of spring and nature's artistry in an original and exquisite way, portraying boundless beauty. The seemingly inquisitive tone also reveals the poet's genuine astonishment and delight. Overall, the poem is ingeniously structured and finely

crafted. It starts with the overall impression of the willow tree, moving onto the branches, then to the leaves, from the general to the specific, orderly. The willow tree is used to praise the spring wind, turning the invisible breeze into tangible scissors, praising its crafting of spring, brimming with the joy of early spring. The language is both smooth and splendid.

3.4. Willow Imagery :Depicting the Resentment of Women

Ancients commonly employed the imagery "willow" to express meanings of separation and homesickness that seem to become synonymous with "willow." However, historical texts also reveal some poets using "willow" to vocalize the pent-up resentments and frustrations of women confined within their quarters. For instance, the poem "Boudoir Resentment" by Tang poet Wang Changling:

guī yuàn	"Boudoir Resentment"
	[Tang Dynasty] Wang Changling
guī zhōng shào fù bù zhī chóu,	Unaware of sorrow, the secluded wife stays,
chūn rì níng zhuāng shàng cuì lóu.	Adorning herself on this spring day, high upon the tower she lays.
hū jiàn mò tóu yáng liǔ sè,	Seeing those willow hues along the way,
huǐ jiào fū xù mì fēng hóu.	Regrets teaching her husband to seek accolades and titles of high array.

This poem depicts a noble lady who, upon observing the vibrant willow hues on the streets and the ebullience of spring, suddenly realizes her own spiritual emptiness, as her beautiful adornments no longer hold meaning when faced with loneliness. In the early Tang period, when national strength was robust, military campaigns and notable services on the frontiers provided a significant route to "seeking titles and honors." Under the romanticized illusions influenced by these societal fashionings, those "seeking titles" and their "secluded wives" harbored optimism about this path. "Boudoir Resentment" captures the lady's psychological onto the "willow" shift—from "unaware of sorrow" to "regrets," evidencing the wife's underlying hardships.

"Seeing those willow hues along the way, regrets teaching her husband to seek accolades and titles of high array," showcases the lady gazing from her tower, the willows' spring vistas stirring her emotions. The "willow hues," often used as a synonym for "spring colors," may also evoke the transience of youth and the separation from her husband; combined with past farewells beneath breaking willows, all prompt from deep within an epiphany framed by her long-unrealized yet potent realization: "Regrets teaching her husband to seek accolades and titles of high array." This corresponds with the poem's title "Boudoir Resentment."

Similarly portraying the grievances of a young wife is the piece written by Ouyang Xiu from the Song period, "Butterfly Love Flower: How Deep Is the Courtyard":

dié liàn huā · tíng yuàn shēn shēn shēn jǐ xǔ zhōng	"Butterfly Love Flower: How Deep Is the Courtyard"
	Ouyang Xiu
tíng yuàn shēn shēn shēn jǐ xǔ	The courtyard's deep,
yáng liǔ duī yān	how deep it extends, willows heap like smoke,
lián mù wú zhòng shù	Draperies unnumbered lend no joke.
yù lè diào ān yóu yě chù	Amidst idle roving in jeweled harness and carved saddle,
lóu gāo bú jiàn zhāng tái lù	The high tower conceals the pathway to Zhangtai.

yǔ héng fēng kuàng sān yuè mù	March's end sees rain and wild winds swirl,
mén yǎn huáng hūn	Doors locked at dusk,
wú jì liú chūn zhù	no way to keep spring in this world.
lèi yǎn wèn huā huā bù yǔ	With tearful eyes, I ask the flowers, they speak not back,
luàn hóng fēi guò qiū qiān qù	Scattered red flies past the swing, off the beaten track.

The first part begins by describing the depths of the "courtyard," with "how deep" expressing the concealed resentment, "heaps of smoke" depicting the stillness of the court, contrasting with the lone, joyless state, "unnumbered" weaves signify the secluded, confined nature of the boudoir, an imprisonment of wonderful youth, a harm to beautiful life. The "courtyard" deep, the "draperies" profound, plus "willows heap like smoke," on the surface depicts the vigorous growth of the willow branches, yet they also obscure the sunlight. Living in such a secluded, dim environment, the heroine feels oppressed and confined both mentally and physically. Triple usage of "deep" articulates the confinement, resembling a prison of suffering, hinting not only at the heroine's solitude but also her burdened sentiments and unspeakable indignations.

4. Inheriting Plant Imagery and Enhancing International Dissemination

4.1. The Urgency of Understanding Plant Imagery

"The Book of Songs" begins with the imagery of plants; Tang poetry excels because of them. Glimpsing the spots to see the leopard, we discern the expanse of a historical canvas through the small window of plant imagery. Ancient poets explored nature's mysteries and the correlations between the virtues of plants and human emotions in their lush and desolate states, embedding their inexpressible moods and aspirations within. Each poem is a child of its author, lovingly crafted, expressing the writer's true feelings, ensuring its legacy is handed down through generations. Later generations perceive the poets' emotional expressions and learn about the characteristics and cultural significance of plants in poetry.

Yet, not many are familiar with plant imagery, often limited to a superficial understanding. Even among the Chinese, the plant imagery in Chinese classical poetry isn't widely recognized, let alone by foreign friends across cultural divides. In a study on the "Development Status of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage" conducted by People's Livelihood Think Tank and China Association of Small and Medium Commercial Enterprises, 66.67% of interviewed inheritors felt "young people's reluctance to inherit" is a reason for the discontinuation of "intangible heritage" projects. The enthusiasm of young people in understanding "intangible heritage" is a crucial factor affecting its transmission. The statistic equally applies to the intangible cultural heritage of plant imagery in Chinese classical poetry, highlighting a research gap in this "intangible heritage" domestically. American poet Ezra Pound once said, "It is impossible to imagine American poetry without considering the influence of Chinese poetry." There aren't many academic treatises on plant imagery in Tang poetry abroad. Due to language barriers and inherent challenges of cross-cultural communication, Western authors still fall short in researching and exploring Chinese plant imagery. Therefore, there is a considerable void in the study and propagation of poetic plant imagery both domestically and internationally, demanding a continuous influx of new vitality for the inheritance and international dissemination of plant imagery.

4.2. Inheriting Plant Imagery and Achieving International Dissemination

On February 20th, the 24th Beijing Winter Olympics closed successfully. During the closing ceremony, people carrying green willow branches walked slowly into the venue, performing a

romantic Chinese-style farewell—the willow, "liǔ," resonating with the word for retain, "liú," signifying a reluctant parting.

China boasts a profound historical heritage, with poetry and prose standing the test of time. Delving into the rich connotations behind the culturally significant imagery of "willow branches" can lead to a deeper understanding of Chinese culture. Take the celebrated Tang poet Li Bai, who often used "willow" to express sentiments of farewell:

chūn yè luò chéng wén dí

"Hearing a Flute on a Spring Night "

[Tang Dynasty] Li Bai

shuǐ jiā yù dí àn fēi shēng,
àn rù chūn fēng mǎn luò chéng.
cǐ yè qǔ zhōng wén zhé liǔ,
hé rén bù qǐ gù yuán qíng?

Whose jade flute's secret soaring tone,
Disperses with spring wind over Luo, fully blown.
This night, amidst the tune, a willow break,
Who isn't moved by thoughts of home to take?

yì qín é · xiāo shēng yàn

"Recalling Fair Qin"

[Tang Dynasty] Li Bai

qín lóu yuè,
nián nián liǔ sè,
bà líng shāng bié.

Moon of Qin tower shines,
year after year willows' hues combine,
lamenting Bai's pass partings all the time.

xuān chéng sòng liú fù shǐ rù qín

"Sending Deputy Governor Liu into Qin"

[Tang Dynasty] Li Bai

wú líng zhǎng xiāng sī,
zhé duàn yáng liǔ zhī.

May you not languish with longing so long,
Stick a broken willow branch to be strong.

From a cultural perspective, employing the willow at the closing ceremony perfectly expresses the Chinese emotions of clinging to athletes and guests from around the world. Merging the snowflake and willow also displays to global spectators the beauty of plant imagery in Chinese poetry, effectively promoting Chinese culture abroad.

In recent years, the state increasingly emphasizes the inheritance of excellent traditional Chinese culture. President Xi Jinping has stated that the classics of ancient poetry have merged into the bloodstream and become the cultural genes of the Chinese nation. A multidimensional outlook is necessary to appreciate the international propagation of "living heritage," bolstering national cultural confidence. The crystallization of harmony between culture and nature is also the inheritance of millennium-old living cultural heritage and national memory. As contemporary youth, we have the duty and obligation to carry forward the tradition of plant imagery, making it truly appreciated by the Chinese and endearing it to friends overseas.

As domestic translators progressively advance in proficiency, they don't just translate Chinese characters into foreign languages but also convey the significance behind the words. They adjust and express the meaning of the original according to different contexts and purposeful culturalization, faithfully reproducing the original author's style, allowing readers to understand authentically.

For instance, translators tasked with translating ancient poetry must enable foreigners to grasp Chinese culture. However, transliterating the verses verbatim may rob the poetry of its classical allure and eradicate its original charm. Translators must deeply comprehend the meaning of the ancient poems, understand their context, and unearth the underlying connotations

expressed by the authors to render the poems effectively, allowing foreign friends to truly understand and appreciate the beauty of Chinese culture.

Although foreigners are not intimately knowledgeable about the traditional culture of plant imagery, and some may not even be aware that poets use plant imagery in their works, continued research and exploration, coupled with dissemination through translation, will bring Chinese plant stories to the world stage. This will certainly allow international audiences to learn about and develop a deep appreciation for China's excellent traditional culture and enhance the cultural confidence of the Chinese people.

5. Conclusion

Ancient poets and literati have long enjoyed incorporating plant imagery into their poetry, adapting the splendor or decay of plants to depict their personal experiences or reactions to environmental changes. Plants are static to outsiders, confined to a world of silence, yet they are alive with vitality obscured by nature. Poets have discovered their unique charm and imbued them with new meanings, whether interpretations of their inherent qualities or praises transcending themselves. In summary, poets have introduced readers to a special plant culture that is but a minor aspect of a yet grander cultural connotation of the Chinese nation. This article, using the imageries of "grass" and "willow," analyzes the context and the role of imagery in poetry, along with the atmosphere they create, showing how poets integrate imagery into their works to infuse the poems with unique cultural significance.

Long before, Tang poetry entered the cultural domain of the West, also playing an essential role in facilitating Sino-Western cultural integration. As a hallmark of Chinese traditional culture, Tang poetry has interactively contributed to Western poetry, sinological studies, and even artistic creation. However, when touching on Chinese traditional plant culture, relevant translations become scarce, with specialized research on plant imagery in Tang poetry even rarer. While current research on plant imagery is limited, numerous scholars dedicate themselves to its study. In the foreseeable future, plant imagery will undoubtedly become widely known, cross continents, and shine on the international stage.

As the youth of a new era charged with "taking up new cultural missions," we must uphold cultural confidence and heed Xi Jinping's entrustment to enhance traditional Chinese culture for posterity and international propagation. President Xi Jinping has stressed three keywords in his speeches: "guardianship, craftsmanship, inheritance." Guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, we must fully explore contemporary value in Tang poetry's inherent plant culture, examine the stalwart character of pines, the verdancy of willows, the enchantment of flowers, and the loftiness of lotuses. May the excellent traditional Chinese culture display its everlasting charm and modern grace, permeating every corner of the world.

Acknowledgements

This work is the research result of the Innovation Experiment Program Project of Zhejiang Yuexiu University in 2023, "National Innovation Project: A Study on the Cultural Connotations of Plants' Imagery Implied in Tang Poetry and Its International Communication: Taking the Road of Tang Poetry in Eastern Zhejiang as an Example", under Grant No. 202312792004 and funded by the Innovation Training Program of Zhejiang Yuexiu University. The ownership of the thesis belongs to Zhejiang Yuexiu University.

We also thank the corresponding author Huan CAO for being our instructor and for her great contribution and assistance to this article. And this work is also a research result of the following three projects. The first is Shaoxing Education and Science Planning Project: Study on

Cultivating College Students' Translation and Communication Ability to Introduce "Chinese Spirit" Well to Internal Community from the Perspective of Political Discourse, under Grant No. SGJ2023006. The Second is Zhejiang Province's Higher Education "14th Five Year Plan" Teaching Reform Project: Translation and Communication of the "Chinese Spirit" Implied in Political Discourse to Internal Community---Theoretical Construction and Teaching Innovation, under Grant No. jg20220618. The third one is Zhejiang Yuexiu University's Model Course for Ideological-political Education: English Lexicology (2022).

References

- [1] Zhang Yuanyu. Grass and trees have their own hearts - Su Shi's "Hezi Youji's Eleven Herbs and Trees in the Garden" Grass and Wood Image Exploration [J]. Middle School Chinese Teaching Reference, 2023, (16): 66-68.
- [2] Zhang Xinyu. The relationship between women and vegetation in the Book of Songs [J]. Literature Education (Part I), 2023, (01): 69-71. DOI:10.16692/j.cnki.wxjys.2023.01.019.
- [3] Guo Yue'e. Unified Edition High School Chinese Ancient Poetry and Grass and Wood Image Teaching Research [D]. Minnan Normal University, 2022. DOI:10.27726/d.cnki.gzzsf.2022.000229.
- [4] Li Fujun. The female image of vegetation in the Book of Songs [J]. Peony, 2022, (10): 33-35.
- [5] Zheng Yihan. Reading and teaching research on vegetation writing from an interdisciplinary perspective [D]. Central China Normal University, 2022. DOI:10.27159/d.cnki.ghzsu.2022.003130.
- [6] Shi Tao. The image of grass and trees in Xie Lingyun's poems [J]. Journal of Qiqihar Normal College, 2021, (03): 40-42. DOI:10.16322/j.cnki.23-1534/z.2021.03.014.
- [7] Lan Cui. Analysis of Grass and Tree Imagery in Tang Shiyuanyu [J]. Research on Chinese Traditional Culture, 2020, (02): 85-94.
- [8] Yang Yang. The image of vegetation in the Book of Songs [J]. Young Writers, 2020, (24): 75-76.
- [9] Zhang Ziqian. There is white dew in front of the court, and it is full of chrysanthemum balls - a study on the image of vegetation in Du Fu's creation from Qinchuan to Chengdu [J]. Chinese Character Culture, 2019, (S2): 119-120. DOI:10.14014/j.cnki.cn11-2597/g2.2019.s2.048.
- [10] Ren Wanning. The value of poetry and education of vegetation image in the Book of Songs and its realisation in middle school Chinese teaching [D]. Hunan Normal University, 2019.
- [11] Yan Hao. Plants and trees have their own hearts, why do they want to be beautiful? - A brief analysis of the image of plants in Lu Xun's old style poems [J]. Youth, 2017, (11): 26.
- [12] Li Jieling. The expansion of humanistic ecological teaching ideas from the perspective of poetry and coquettish vegetation images [J]. Journal of Guangdong Second Normal University, 2015, 35 (02): 84-89.
- [13] Qiao Xiaopei. Analysis of Grass and Wood Images in The Book of Songs [J]. Modern Chinese (Academic Comprehensive Edition), 2014, (09): 6-8.
- [14] Zhang Caihua. Shangbo Jian (VIII) A preliminary exploration of the image of vegetation in Chu Ci works - centred on "Li Song" and "Lan Fu" [J]. Journal of Handan College, 2013, 23 (03): 59-62.
- [15] Wang Jiyun. Research on the Intention of Grass and Trees in the Book of Songs [D]. Chongqing Normal University, 2013.
- [16] Cai Hongyan. Grass and trees are also affectionate - Qu Sao's "Vanilla" image prototype micro-meaning [J]. Journal of Hunan Industrial Vocational and Technical College, 2007, (04): 82-84.