

A Study on the Washu Problem from the Perspective of Comparative Chinese and Japanese Han Poetry: Taking “Setsugekka” (Snow, Moon, and Flowers) as an Example

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Abstract

Against the background of comparative studies of Chinese and Japanese Han poetry, this study focuses on the issue of Washu (Japanese stylistic idiosyncrasies in Chinese-language poetic composition) and takes the Setsugekka (Snow, Moon, and Flowers) imagery as its core analytical object. It examines the reception of Chinese classical poetry in Japanese Han poetry and the creative innovations that emerged alongside the process of localization. The study first clarifies that “Washu” refers to the phenomenon where Japanese literati integrated their native cultural norms, modes of thinking, and linguistic habits into their Chinese-language poetry creation. Its essence is not expressive deficiency or misinterpretation, but rather the active construction of cultural subjectivity and creative transformation by Japanese literati. In terms of research methodology, this paper comprehensively employs four approaches: textual analysis, historical textual criticism, cross-cultural comparison, and cultural interpretation. It conducts a comparative investigation into the usage patterns and differences of the “Setsugekka” imagery in representative poetic works from both China and Japan. The findings reveal that in Chinese Han poetry, “snow”, “moon”, and “flowers” are independent and scattered lyrical images with multiple functions. In contrast, in Japanese Han poetry, these three elements gradually merged and evolved into a holistic aesthetic symbol. Furthermore, the “Setsugekka” imagery in Japanese Han poetry embodies the connotations of traditional Japanese aesthetics represented by Mono no aware (the pathos of transience) and Yugen (profound subtlety and mystery), achieving a qualitative transformation from “functional imagery” to “essential symbol”. Based on the above analysis, this study demonstrates that “Washu” embodies Japan’s cultural strategy of Wakon Kansai (Japanese spirit with Chinese learning) and

constitutes a conscious creative innovation in the localization process of Japanese Han poetry. The research findings provide a new analytical framework of “Imagery-Washu-Cultural Subjectivity” for cross-cultural literary studies. Meanwhile, they offer practically valuable insights into the significance of “locality” and the mechanisms of localization in the international dissemination of Chinese culture.

Keywords

Comparative Study of Chinese and Japanese Literature, Japanese Han Poetry, Washu, Setsugekka, Cultural Reception

1. Introduction

The study of Japanese Chinese poetry is a key topic in the field of comparative literature between China and Japan, with its primary focus on how Japanese Chinese poetry has assimilated and adapted classical Chinese poetry. As research perspectives have broadened, the phenomenon of “Washu” has gradually shifted from being viewed as a linguistic flaw—the so-called “Washu”—to being understood as a creative transformation that highlights cultural subjectivity, thereby becoming a crucial clue for understanding the process of localization in Japanese Chinese poetry.

Against this backdrop, the “Setsugekka” motif—an aesthetic symbol shared by Chinese and Japanese poetry that has undergone a significant evolutionary trajectory—provides a prime example for examining how “Washu” (the process of cultural assimilation) has driven the transformation of this motif from a functional to an ontological entity within Sino-Japanese cultural interaction. This study takes this imagery as its specific subject, aiming to reveal the mechanisms and value of “Washu” in the formation of Japanese Han poetry through its evolutionary process—from its origins in China, through its reception in Japan, to its final localization—thereby deepening our understanding of literary localization and innovation in cross-cultural transmission.

This study takes the “Setsugekka” imagery as its specific subject of analysis. By tracing the origins of this imagery within China and its entire evolutionary process in Japan—from reception to localization and final crystallization—it elucidates the mechanisms through which “Washu” functions in the formation of Japanese Chinese poetry and its academic value. Ultimately, the overarching goal of this study is to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms of textual localization and creative innovation in cross-cultural literary transmission.

“Washu” refers to the phenomenon in which elements of local culture, thought, and linguistic habits—which diverge from “Han” (Chinese) norms—permeate the literary medium of “poetry” in the creative works of Japanese literati. While its origins ultimately stem from the study and application of Chinese poetry and prose, this process gave rise to a distinct evolution that diverged from its Chi-

nese counterpart.

Xiao Ruifeng (1998) points out that Japanese Chinese poetry represents a comprehensive and profound assimilation of classical Chinese poetry, as this artistic form itself was transplanted from China. Consequently, in terms of content, themes, and writing methods, every aspect reflects the study and adaptation of classical Chinese poetry, and all allusions and cultural contexts naturally derive primarily from Chinese culture. However, over a long period of creative practice, Japanese literati—whether due to a lack of proficiency in Chinese culture or a conscious desire to increase the presence of Japanese cultural elements—ultimately achieved a result of “localization”. Liu Yanru (2018) also noted that Japanese Han poetry drew upon Tang poetry in terms of form, content, and emotion, while developing certain national characteristics. This constitutes the cultural foundation for the emergence of “Washu”.

Second, as a tonal language, Chinese phonetic rules form the foundation of classical Chinese poetry; Japanese, however, is a syllabic language, and Japanese poets were unable to fully grasp and apply the phonetic variations inherent in classical Chinese poetry. Consequently, their creative work relied on the mechanical memorization of Chinese rhyme books to determine rhyme schemes. However, Cui Meng and Zhang Weijia (2015) point out that the use of rhyme in Japanese Chinese poetry during this process exhibited instances of “variation”. This is because Japanese literati faced fundamental linguistic differences while adopting Chinese poetry, with both vocabulary and phonetics being significantly influenced by the Chinese language. Although a small portion of these variations may have been due to misuse, the majority were intentional attempts to adapt the phonetics of the foreign language to the phonological system of their native tongue. This constitutes the linguistic foundation of “harmonization”.

In addition to linguistic factors, intellectual affinity also influenced the reception of Chinese poetry. During the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism spread widely throughout East Asia, and many poets incorporated Chan Buddhism into their work, creating new sources of inspiration and a new intellectual core; Wang Wei and Bai Juyi are representative examples. Japan, in particular, was deeply influenced by Buddhist thought, and Buddhism flourished there. Furthermore, as Xu Zhen (2015) noted, Kūkai’s journey to Tang China played a significant role in promoting the dissemination of Chinese poetry. Whether in the transmission of poetic works or the standardization of phonetics and rhyme, the immense contributions made by Buddhist figures to the development of Chinese poetry cannot be overlooked; indeed, it was Kūkai who spearheaded the transformation of Japanese poetic style. Ao Yunmei and Zhao Yuanyun (2013) also noted that during the late Ming dynasty, the monk Xin Yue directly incorporated Zen concepts into his poetry to disseminate them, demonstrating that the symbiotic relationship between Zen and poetry has captivated literati for over a century. Viewed in this light, it is no wonder that the poetic styles and imagery of Wang Wei and Bai Juyi have been widely emulated due to their Zen-inspired qualities. Research by Shang

Yongliang and Huang Chao (2009) and Liu Kedi (2018) indicates that the Japanese particularly appreciate the “leisurely ease” found in Bai Juyi’s poetry and the “emptiness, stillness, and profundity” found in Wang Wei’s poetry. This is clearly a distinctive feature of how the two poets incorporated Zen into their poetry; however, while this trend’s popularity in Japan originated from Zen, it did not stop there but has since fused with the philosophical concept of impermanence—a uniquely Japanese concept. This fusion serves as the ideological foundation for the emergence of “Washu”.

Wu Yuping (2010) noted that during the early stages of the reception of Chinese poetry, poets often committed errors such as inverted word order, disharmonious rhyme, and the use of words not found in Chinese—that is, Chinese poetry bore traces of Japanese, a phenomenon termed “Washu” (This is another example of a homophone—a word that sounds the same but is spelled differently—which conveys the same meaning but has a negative connotation). Consequently, poetry exhibiting Washu was viewed as the result of the poet’s immaturity, deemed unworthy of high literary circles, and regarded as a flaw to be avoided. However, as Japanese Han poetry continued to evolve, it became necessary to broaden our perspective. When this phenomenon became evident across the entire Japanese literary community, and the definition expanded to encompass “traces of Japanese” at the levels of imagery, artistic conception, and even culture, it gradually came to be accepted—and even, to some extent, regarded as a distinctive feature of Japanese Han poetry that set it apart from poetry in other countries. Consequently, the term used to describe this phenomenon shifted from the distinctly pejorative “Washu” to a concept with new meaning (This article focuses on this concept of “Washu”, which has progressive overtones). Looking back, during Japan’s ancient period (from the Heian to the Edo periods), “Washu” remained the core term for this concept; the Edo-period poetry treatise “Bunkō Hifu Ron” even advocated for the elimination of Washu, clearly treating it as an “impurity”. However, from the 20th century to the present, “Washu” has replaced “Washu” as the term for this concept. This contrast reflects a shift in scholars’ perceptions, as they now regard it as the result of cultural filtration and creative transformation.

From the perspective of cultural filtration, Wu Yuping (2022) notes that Tang poetry represents the “other”, while the Japanese style represents the “self”; the contradiction between the two drove literati to explore a path of fusion and innovation. Qi Xiaoming (2012) points out that Japanese poets of Chinese verse had already consciously drawn inspiration from waka, even fostering mutual exchange to break down the barriers between Japanese and Chinese traditions—a manifestation of Japanese cultural subjectivity. This study argues that while the emergence of this phenomenon certainly stems from inevitable compromises in creative practice, it is more fundamentally rooted in the awakening of Japanese national cultural consciousness. Wang Xiyu (2017) points out that the development of Han poetry, during a certain period, was no longer merely a conscious process but also reflected cultural and even political functions.

Japanese scholars have also explored this topic. [Kojima Noriyuki \(1968\)](#), in “Literature of the Dark Age of Kokufu”, indirectly analyzed the “Washu” phenomenon from the perspectives of kun-yomi rules and the adaptation of prosodic rhythms; [Matsuura Tomohisa \(1981\)](#), in “Aspects of Poetic Language: Notes on Tang Poetry”, conducted a preliminary exploration of the differences in the reception of imagery between China and Japan; while [Kanda Kiichiro \(1965\)](#), in “Chinese Literature in Japan”, [Suzuki Shuji \(1981\)](#) in “Japanese Chinese and China: The Modernization of the Sinographic Cultural Sphere” offered a critique of the traditional evaluation of “Washu”, arguing that it overlooks its own creativity; this also reflects a shift in the Japanese academic community’s perspective on “Washu”.

In fact, existing research in China on the “Setsugekka” motif exhibits a certain bias in its analytical perspective. [Zang Yunfa’s \(2018\)](#) “The Establishment of the ‘Setsugekka’ Aesthetic Tradition in Japanese Waka” focuses on examining the motif from the perspective of aesthetic paradigms; while [Chen Yongqi’s \(2021\)](#) “The Dissemination and Influence of Bai Juyi’s ‘Letter to Yin Xielü’ in Japan” focuses on the dissemination pathways of the “Setsugekka” imagery. However, neither study has adopted “Washu” as a central analytical perspective to systematically discuss the evolution of the “Setsugekka” imagery, thus lacking an analysis of the connection between the two.

On the other hand, turning to Japanese scholarship, in pioneering studies such as [Nakanishi Susumu \(1963\)](#) “A Comparative Literary Study of the Man’yōshū”, the “Setsugekka” imagery is typically situated within the broader framework of comparative literary studies of Chinese poetry, discussed as part of the interaction between the imagery of the “Man’yōshū” and that of Chinese poetry. Studies that independently propose and conduct detailed analyses of “Setsugekka” as a paradigmatic manifestation of “Washu” are extremely rare. Furthermore, the perspective that the evolution of this imagery has transcended the realm of mere literary expression and ascended to the level of cultural values has yet to be fully explored.

Based on the shortcomings of previous research, this study takes the “Setsugekka” imagery as its central analytical focus, positioning it as a quintessential manifestation of “Washu”. From this starting point, the study aims to comprehensively examine the academic significance and positioning of “Washu” within the context of comparative research on Chinese poetry in Japan and China. Specifically, the ultimate goal of this study is to provide an answer, through empirical verification, to the fundamental question in this field: whether “Washu” should be regarded as an expressive “distinctive feature” formed by Japanese literati through active creative endeavors, or as an inescapable expressive “defect” in the composition of Chinese poetry.

The purpose of this study is to explore the essence of “Washu”—that it should no longer be simplistically viewed as a flaw in Japanese Chinese poetry or a mere cultural misinterpretation, but rather as a phenomenon actively constructed by Japanese literati, possessing cultural subjectivity and capable of innovative trans-

formation. It is precisely the significant achievement of Japanese literati in carrying out creative transformation and innovative development during the process of assimilating classical Chinese poetry. Taking “Setsugekka” as a point of entry, this study specifically compares the manifestations of “Washu” in Chinese and Japanese Han poetry at the levels of imagery and poetic atmosphere.

The significance of this study lies in its ability to contribute both theoretical and practical value to the field of comparative Chinese poetry studies between China and Japan. Theoretically, it offers a new perspective on the comparative study of Chinese poetry in both countries, deepens our understanding of localization mechanisms in cross-cultural communication, and further advances Lefevere’s theory of rewriting and Bassnett’s concept of cultural translation.

The practical significance lies in providing new practical approaches for the international dissemination of Chinese culture from the perspective of the recipient. Shifting the perspective to examine the reception and innovation of Chinese culture by Japanese cultural figures, “Washu” serves as clear evidence of Japanese literati actively promoting the localization of Chinese poetry.

This study is based on a framework of comparative research on Chinese poetry in China and Japan. It centers on textual analysis while organically integrating methods such as historical verification, cross-cultural comparison, and cultural interpretation. The scope of application and analytical perspectives of each method are as follows.

First, text analysis is employed. Representative poets from China and Japan who share similar styles or techniques, along with their representative works, are selected for comparison to analyze the similarities and differences in the use of imagery. Here, the texts of Bai Juyi, Wang Wei, Sugawara no Michizane, and Saigyō are primarily used to compare the variations in the application of the “Setsugekka” imagery.

Second, historical research is integrated. Using a chronological framework, this method traces the dissemination of the “snow, moon, and flower” imagery—from its transmission from Tang Dynasty poetry to Japan, through its reception in Heian-period Japanese culture, to its final localization during the Kamakura and Edo periods—highlighting the distinct characteristics of each historical phase.

Finally, this study employs cross-cultural comparison and cultural interpretation. It deconstructs the “Japanese aesthetic” (Washu) across three dimensions: the forms in which these imageries appear, the emotional and philosophical concepts expressed through their artistic atmosphere, and the cultural and allusive practices involved. Furthermore, by integrating traditional Japanese aesthetic concepts such as “mono no aware” and “yugen”, the study analyzes the cultural motivations underlying the emergence of the “Japanese aesthetic” phenomenon, thereby establishing a connection between literature and culture.

In terms of corpus selection, this study examines classic works of Chinese and Japanese poetry, focusing on a comparative analysis of works by representative poets such as Bai Juyi from China and Sugawara no Michizane from Japan. In

particular, it conducts an in-depth exploration of the evolution of the core imagery cluster known as “Setsugekka”.

The comparison is based on the following three dimensions: First, a comparison of textual usage, where changes can be observed in their meanings, structures, and referents—for example, “Setsugekka” evolved from three distinct images into a single unified image. Second, changes in artistic connotations and aesthetics, with the expression of emotions and ideas taking on Japanese cultural nuances. Most importantly, changes in cultural strategies, as well as the proactive efforts of Japanese literati to reconstruct these images to express their own cultural identity.

2. The Historical Evolution and Analysis of “Washu”

2.1. The Transformation of Symbols from “Borrowing” to “Reconstruction” at the Level of Imagery

In this section, we will examine the innovation in the localization of Japanese Chinese poetry driven by “Washu” from the perspective of the symbolic transformation of imagery, systematically analyzing it under two categories: “internal transformation” and “transformation of the object of representation”.

The first category is the transformation of internal connotation, which refers to changes in the meaning and structure of the imagery itself. As [Chen Yongqi \(2021\)](#) points out, “Setsugekka” were originally three distinct and separate images in classical Chinese poetry. This imagery was distilled into a cohesive form in the poetry of Bai Juyi and introduced to Japan, where it gained widespread popularity due to its alignment with the Japanese aesthetic sensibility regarding the four seasons. Subsequent research by [Zang Yunfa \(2018\)](#) elucidated the process by which these three images—Setsugekka—gradually merged in Japanese literature and art, eventually evolving into a core aesthetic concept symbolizing the beauty of Japan’s four seasons.

The second type involves a shift in the represented object, that is, a transformation in which the function of an image is transferred to other objects. For example, [Yang Fenxia \(2005\)](#) points out that in classical Chinese poetry, plant images such as “plum blossoms”, “orchids”, and “chrysanthemums” were often imbued with ethical connotations symbolizing the character of the gentleman. Deeply influenced by ancient Chinese poetry, the Japanese Sino-Japanese poetry community, in its nascent stages, initially focused on depicting the plum blossom as the representative image of “flowers”. However, in the process of establishing its own cultural identity, Japan gradually positioned the cherry blossom as the central symbol of flowers, entrusting it with the mission of embodying uniquely Japanese traditional aesthetic concepts such as “wabi-sabi” and “yugen”.

The image of the “moon” also underwent a similar transformation. [Shao Nan \(2018\)](#) points out that in Chinese poetry, the “moon” is widely employed as an object of nostalgia and as an unchanging reference point transcending time and space to express reflections on the passage of time; it is one of the most frequently appearing foundational images in landscape descriptions. Furthermore, in the de-

piction of scenery in Chinese poetry, there is often a tendency to use the clear and bright “bright moon”.

On the other hand, in Japanese Han poetry, some of the functions previously associated with the moon have been separated and transferred to other imagery. As Tang Qianyou (2011) points out, the role of the moon as a “symbol of home and nation” in Chinese poetry has been assumed by “Mount Fuji” in Japanese Han poetry. Furthermore, Shao Nan (2018) notes that in Japanese Han poetry, the lyrical function retained by the moon is often limited to the delicate depiction of emotions between lovers, while in landscape description, a style has been established that employs a hazy moon to express a subtle, ethereal beauty.

Among the symbolic transformations of the imagery discussed above, the most systematic and significant is the case of “Setsugekka”: what began as a collection of disparate, individual images in Chinese poetry was innovatively transformed in Japanese Han poetry into an integrated, indivisible composite image. Through this metamorphosis, “Setsugekka” gradually established itself as a representative aesthetic symbol embodying the Japanese people’s inherent sense of beauty.

2.2. The Aesthetic Shift from “Expressing Aspirations and Emotions” to “The Subtle Beauty of the World” at the Level of Artistic Connotation

This section will analyze the shift in the aesthetic system brought about by the “Washu” movement from the perspective of “Yijing” (poetic atmosphere), which serves as the core value standard of both Chinese and Japanese classical poetry. While the poetic atmosphere of Chinese classical poetry is rooted in the fundamental values of “expressing one’s aspirations and emotions”, that of Japanese classical poetry has been reconfigured into a uniquely Japanese aesthetic consciousness centered on “mono no aware” and “yugen”. This illustrates the essence of the aesthetic transformation brought about by the “Washu” movement.

First, the yijing of Chinese Han poetry was deeply influenced by Confucian secular ethical thought and developed with “expressing one’s aspirations” as its core function. This value orientation directly facilitated the development of “petitionary poetry”—poems intended to demonstrate one’s talents and ambitions to those in power. In these poems, poets expressed their lofty political aspirations and the sorrow of being denied opportunities for official advancement, hoping thereby to gain the recognition and patronage of high-ranking officials and influential figures. It is worth noting that even in these utilitarian courtly poems, Chinese Han poetry did not lose the grand, majestic spirit often described as “powerful and expansive”. The most iconic example is Li Bai’s line from “To Li Yong”: “One day the great peng soars with the wind, rising straight up to nine thousand miles”. Without understanding the context in which this poem was composed—namely, as a means of seeking employment—it is difficult to imagine that the majestic grandeur contained in these lines could stem from the same spiritual world as Li Bai’s anti-authoritarian stance expressed in “A Song of a Dream Journey to Mount

Tianmu”: “How could I bow my head and bend my back to serve the powerful?”.

On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, Japanese culture has been deeply influenced by imported Buddhist thought, and the Chinese Han poetry particularly favored by Japanese literati often contains “Zen-like” elements or otherworldly ideas that transcend the mundane. The concept of “*tiwu*” (describing the essence of things) in Japanese Han poetry—that is, the expressive ideal of capturing the true nature of an object—is precisely the product of the aesthetic consciousness of “*mono no aware*” (the pathos of things), nurtured by long immersion in such Buddhist thought. This Japanese poetic sensibility finds its most vivid expression in the tranquility embodied by Matsuo Bashō’s haiku, “An old pond; a frog jumps in”, which represents the ideal form of poetry long revered by Japanese literati. In this haiku, the frog is unconcerned with the pond’s history or antiquity; it simply performs the act of leaping into the water. In contrast, the poet keenly captures the profound passage of time embedded in the ancient pond, deliberately choosing the “ancient” pond as the subject of his poem, and focusing all his attention on the instantaneous act of the frog leaping into the water and the accompanying splash, thereby capturing the poetic realm of that fleeting moment.

In comparison, the depiction of frogs in Chinese Han poetry presents a striking contrast. The line “Sitting alone by the pond, it crouches like a tiger” vividly embodies the “expressing one’s aspirations” tradition in Chinese Han poetry, in which poets project their political ambitions and heroic spirit onto the image of the frog.

In summary, Chinese Han poetry, which idealized a “majestic and expansive” aesthetic realm, underwent a fundamental transformation upon its transmission to Japan and under the influence of the “*Wafu*” style, evolving into a delicate poetic realm centered on “subtlety and profundity”. As a result, the grand spirit epitomized by Du Fu’s line “The nation is ruined, but the mountains and rivers remain” (from “Spring View”), which juxtaposes the rise and fall of the state with the enduring constancy of nature, gradually vanished from the mainstream of Japanese Han poetry. Considering that Du Fu composed this line during the late Tang Dynasty, a period of national chaos caused by the An Lushan Rebellion, it is evident that this form of expression—transcending personal circumstances and entrusting the rise and fall of the nation and the world to poetry—had long been deeply internalized within the creative foundation of Chinese literati.

2.3. The Underlying Logic of Cultural Strategies

Building on the previous analysis of imagery and poetic atmosphere, this section will elucidate the underlying logic of “*Washu*” as a cultural strategy. Through “*Washu*”, Japanese literati reconstructed the Chinese classical poetry tradition, transforming it into a localized literary form capable of expressing the unique emotions and aesthetic sensibilities of the Japanese people. This series of transformations did not remain confined to superficial literary forms but evolved into a deliberate cultural innovation strategy at the levels of cultural norms and identity.

In this process, the “Setsugekka” imagery took on the task of embodying “mono no aware”, thereby accomplishing the construction of cultural subjectivity—that is, the poetic practice of the “Japanese spirit, Chinese talent” philosophy. Its essence lies in using “Chinese talent” (the form of Chinese poetry) as a vehicle to convey the “Japanese spirit” (the spirit of Japanese culture). This aligns with Lefevere’s theory of rewriting and Bassnett’s theory of cultural translation.

Furthermore, the integration of “Washu” with traditional Japanese aesthetics is characterized by the formation of a two-way interactive mechanism rather than unilateral adoption. In other words, guided by the traditional Japanese aesthetic system centered on “mono no aware” and “yugen”, “Washu” selects and reconstructs the imagery it adopts. At the same time, reconstructed imagery—led by “Setsugekka”—has enriched the breadth and depth of “yugen”’s expression, thereby promoting the development of the traditional Japanese aesthetic system itself.

It is precisely this two-way mechanism that constitutes the core characteristic of “Washu”. From the localization of imagery to the subtlety of poetic mood, this series of transformations spanned the entire developmental history of Japanese Chinese poetry from the Heian to the Edo periods, ultimately elevating Japanese Chinese poetry to a symbol that embodies a unique cultural identity distinguishing it from other poetic forms within the East Asian Sinitic cultural sphere.

3. The Cross-Cultural Evolution of the “Setsugekka” Motif and Its Manifestations of “Washu”

Since the transmission of literature between China and Japan is inevitably hindered by geographical barriers, a temporal lag is inevitable. To prevent the comparative evidence from being influenced by the pace of literary reception, we have allowed a time buffer of one to two centuries for the selected Japanese Han poetry texts, ensuring that Japanese Han poetry from this period had already been fully exposed to the newly emerging poetic theories and styles from China. This approach aims to rule out the possibility that differences in textual comparisons between China and Japan result from interference caused by temporal and spatial barriers. Consequently, it ensures the independence of my argument—namely, that the practice of “Washu” (adapting Chinese poetry) was a spontaneous and proactive act of innovation by the Japanese, driven by various literary concepts and cultural strategies. The comparisons between the Tang and Song dynasties in China and the Heian to Edo periods in Japan mentioned below meet this requirement for a temporal interval.

3.1. Chinese Literary Traditions: Dispersed Imagery and Lyrical Functions (with a Focus on the Tang and Song Dynasty)

In order to elucidate the process of reconstructing poetic imagery through “Washu” from a diachronic perspective, this chapter first traces the historical development of “Setsugekka” in China, as well as the fundamental characteristics of

Tang Dynasty imagery.

In classical Chinese poetry, when “snow”, “moon”, and “flower” first appeared, they functioned as independent, disparate imagery elements within poems, simultaneously suggesting different temporal contexts and serving as lyrical vehicles for diverse emotions. Although these three imagery elements were sometimes used in combination, as demonstrated by the line “Setsugekka—at such times I miss you most” in Bai Juyi’s “Letter to Yin Xielü”, this was merely a “brocade-like” description layering imagery to express the changing seasons; it had not yet been established as a specific, fixed symbol unifying the three.

The defining characteristic of these imagery elements in the Tang Dynasty lies in their use as fluid symbols possessing multiple lyrical functions. For example, the “snow” in the famous line “Suddenly, as if a spring breeze had blown overnight, thousands upon thousands of pear trees blossom” from Cen Shen’s “Song of the White Snow: A Farewell to Magistrate Wu Returning to the Capital” not only establishes the temporal and spatial context of a harsh winter at the frontier but also instantly sets the emotional tone of the entire poem—namely, finding a sense of majestic expansiveness amidst a desolate landscape. The “flowers” in Wang Wei’s “On the Ninth Day of the Ninth Month, Thinking of My Brothers in Shandong”—“I know from afar where my brothers stand on high, with dogwood sprigs in their hair, yet one is missing”—and in Du Fu’s “Spring View”—“Moved by the times, flowers shed tears; grieved by parting, birds startle the heart”—have respectively become the central lyrical vehicles for expressing longing for family and anxiety over national turmoil. The “moon” in Li Bai’s “Contemplating the Quiet Night”—“I raise my head to gaze at the bright moon; I lower my head and think of my hometown”—serves as a representative image evoking homesickness and is also a typical example of how imagery was employed in the Tang Dynasty.

As the above analysis demonstrates, the imagery of “snow”, “moon”, and “flower” in Tang Dynasty Chinese poetry does not maintain a fixed, one-to-one correspondence between their surface forms as literary symbols and their cultural connotations. Their connotations and functions vary flexibly according to the author’s expressive intent and descriptive techniques, exhibiting fluidity; this relationship depends largely on how the author crafts them. This very aspect became a crucial prerequisite for the reconstruction of these imagery elements through “Washu” (Japanese-style adaptation) after their introduction to Japan.

3.2. Japanese Aesthetics: The Sublimation of Coexisting Dispersion and Integration (Heian to Edo Periods)

This section will trace the developmental trajectory from the Heian to the Edo periods, analyzing how the disparate Tang Dynasty Chinese imagery of “snow”, “moon”, and “flowers”—as discussed in the previous section—underwent transformation upon being introduced to Japan under the influence of “Washu” (Japanese cultural traditions).

As Bai Juyi’s poetry was introduced to Japan, it garnered widespread acclaim

and rapidly gained popularity, particularly among the Heian aristocracy. Consequently, Japanese literati, led by Sugawara no Michizane, began to widely emulate and study “Rakuten poetry”. In this process, with the introduction of the line “Setsugekka—these are the times I miss you most” from the “Collected Poems of Bai Juyi from the Changqing Era”, the “Setsugekka” imagery entered the perspective of Japanese literati. The manner of its reception in Japan underwent a qualitative shift from the Chinese practice of “borrowing individual images in isolation” to the uniquely Japanese approach of “constructing a comprehensive symbolic system”.

The key to this transformation lay in Kiki no Tsurayuki’s treatment of “Setsugekka” in the kana preface to the “Kokin Wakashū”, where he listed them as representatives of “the scenery of the four seasons”. Consequently, their original functions as metonyms for the three distinct seasons—winter, autumn, and spring—were integrated into a single concept. Thus, “Setsugekka” became established in Japan as a synonym for the cyclical changes of the “four seasons” as a whole, and their cultural and aesthetic status became firmly entrenched.

At the same time, however, the individual imagery of “snow”, “moon”, and “flower”—even after being integrated into a unified whole—did not lose their independent lyrical functions or existential significance. On the contrary, in their distinct forms, they remained closely intertwined with Japanese cultural concepts and aesthetic values centered on “mono no aware” and “yugen”, maintaining a powerful vitality well into the Edo period. For instance, the subtle ambiguity of “yugen” embodied in Saigyō’s waka poem “On a snowy night, the moonlight hides behind the clouds”, and the Japanese view of impermanence rooted in “mono no aware” conveyed by Izumi Shikibu’s “Flowers fade, the moon wanes”, are prime examples of how these independent imagery elements have fused with the Japanese aesthetic consciousness.

Of course, these are not direct comparative evidence for this article; they are merely supplementary references for aesthetic or cultural context. The specific comparison will be based on the textual analysis of the poems and prose presented later in this article.

3.3. A Textual Comparative Analysis of the “Setsugekka” Motifs in Chinese and Japanese Classical Poetry

3.3.1. A Comparison of “Snow”

The Chinese texts selected for comparison in this section are drawn from the works of Lu You and Liu Zongyuan, two representative poets of the Tang and Song dynasties whose poetic skills reached the pinnacle of their art. In addition, there is Lu Meipo, who, though not a literary giant, is renowned solely for a series of poems about snow; consequently, his work is also regarded as representative of Song Dynasty nature poetry.

The Japanese text is by Sugawara no Michizane, a leading figure in Japanese Sino-Japanese poetry. A particularly stylistically distinctive poem of his about

snow has been selected for comparison. Not only is he highly regarded among scholars of Japanese Sino-Japanese poetry, but he is also a quintessential example of a scholar deeply influenced by Chinese poets and poetic theories.

As a natural phenomenon, “snow” appears with great frequency in poetry. In Chinese poetry, it is generally used in two ways: first, to depict scenery and set the mood of the entire poem, as in Lu You’s verse:

The north wind blows snow across ten thousand miles;
At the third watch, it rustles against the paper windows.

The opening lines depict the biting cold of the wind and snow, setting a tone of hardship and providing ample groundwork for the subsequent descriptions of concern for the nation and its people, while also lending a sense of legitimacy to the expression of emotion.

The second usage, however, is to add charm to the characters. For example, Lu Meipo writes:

Plum blossoms and snow vie for spring, neither yielding;
The poet sets down his brush, at a loss for words.

The plum must yield to the snow in whiteness by three parts, yet the snow falls short of the plum in fragrance by one.

In this four-line poem, three lines describe the snow, yet the focal point lies precisely in the second line. The meticulous depiction of the plum and snow serves merely to highlight the “poet”—the contest between them for spring’s favor reveals not the snow’s purity or the plum’s resilience, but the literary scholar’s integrity.

There are also examples that combine both elements, such as Liu Zongyuan’s:

All birds have flown from the thousand mountains;
All paths are deserted of human tracks.
A lone fisherman in a straw hat and raincoat;
Fishes alone in the cold river’s snow.

The absence of people and birds across a thousand mountains and ten thousand paths is described plainly, yet it inevitably leaves the reader wondering: what exactly has happened? When the phrase “cold river in the snow” appears, it not only explains the cause but also allows the desolate and melancholic atmosphere of the solitary fisherman in his thatched hat to permeate the scene, highlighting his lofty and unyielding spirit. The poem concludes with a snowy landscape, presenting the reader with a slowly unfolding scroll of imagery, rich in lingering resonance.

In Japanese translations of Chinese poetry, however, the focus is not on this kind of “pointed symbolism”, but rather on the natural beauty of the snow itself, its mysterious and profound atmosphere, and the subtle emotions it evokes. Take, for example, Sugawara no Michizane’s poem:

The wind carries the sound of the palace’s dawn chimes;

On the road, snow falls thick and fast, urging me on.
 A three-foot-long fur coat wraps me snugly;
 A sip of warm wine warms my lips just right.
 I marvel at the children wrapped in soft down;
 I gaze in wonder as a lone horse treads through the drifting clouds.
 The court official has not rested for a moment,
 Blowing on his hands a thousand times as he writes his memorial.

Though the poem is titled “Early Court in the Snow”, the lines “warm wine” and “blowing on his hands” inevitably soften the biting cold of the snow. Even the repeated image of blowing on his hands elicits a knowing smile, as the poet’s leisurely and refined scholarly demeanor leaps off the page. Phrases like “a three-foot-long fur coat” and “wrapped in soft down” lend the poem a touch of bourgeois sentimentality. Consider the second line of the neck couplet: as the carriage rolls through the snow, it evokes a sense of “a horse’s hooves galloping swiftly in the spring breeze”, as if the snow were born solely to serve as a minor embellishment highlighting the refined tastes of the literati.

3.3.2. A Comparison of “Moon”

The Chinese texts selected for this section include one by Zhang Ruoxu, who is regarded as having literary achievements comparable to those of all Tang Dynasty poets combined based on this single masterpiece alone; the other is by Su Shi, a ci poem widely considered the greatest of all time. Coincidentally, both works depict the moon. Even setting aside the imagery of the moon, these two works are unquestionably pinnacles of Chinese poetry and ci poem.

The title of the Japanese text selected corresponds to Zhang Ruoxu’s masterpiece; this is no coincidence, but rather a deliberate choice of a comparable work, offering significant value for comparison in terms of both creative intent and purpose.

When speaking of the moon, one cannot help but mention Zhang Ruoxu, whose single poem overshadowed the entire High Tang period:

The spring river’s tide meets the sea in level expanse;
 The bright moon rises with the tide from the sea.
 ...
 River and sky blend into one hue, free from the slightest dust;
 A solitary moon hangs bright and clear in the void.
 Who was the first to see the moon by the river’s edge?
 In what year did the river moon first shine upon mankind?
 Generations of people come and go without end;
 Year after year, the river moon remains much the same.
 I know not whom the river moon awaits;
 I see only the Yangtze River sending forth its flowing waters.
 ...
 I know not how many return under the moon’s light;

As the moon sets, it stirs emotions that fill the trees along the river.

The poem “A Spring Night on the River with Flowers and the Moon” stands as the pinnacle of moon poetry. Through the moon and the act of moon-gazing, it poses the ultimate questions about the universe and human existence. Here, the moon is no longer merely a natural spectacle, but a witness to the fleeting nature of life and a participant in countless human experiences, imbued with a rich Daoist philosophical tone.

Most other works about the moon are associated with themes of homesickness and reunion. For example:

I lift my head to gaze at the bright moon;

I lower my head and think of my hometown.

This classic line has etched homesickness into the very bones of every Chinese person.

Then there is Du Fu’s:

Tonight, the moon over Fuzhou;

In my chamber, I alone gaze upon it.

A mere moon, through the phrase “alone gaze”, can bear such a heavy longing for family.

Su Shi is a master of this genre:

Since when has the bright moon been here?

I raise my cup to ask the vast sky.

I wonder if the palaces in the heavens

Know what year this night marks.

...

People have their joys and sorrows, partings and reunions;

The moon has its waxing and waning, its clarity and obscurity—

Such things have never been complete since ancient times.

May we all live long,

Sharing the moon’s beauty across a thousand miles.

The poignant and heartrending beauty of this “Shui Diao Ge Tou” brings tears to one’s eyes. Rich in philosophical depth, it also contains the author’s full range of emotions—longing for his younger brother, resentment toward life’s injustices, and reflections on fate. These complex feelings intertwine, making a single sheet of paper seem as heavy as a thousand pounds.

In the writings of Japanese literati, however, the moon is subtle. It neither preaches nor imparts wisdom, nor does it carry the intense emotion found in the passage above. Instead, it drifts quietly and serenely through the sky, like a serene and composed monk. Just as the Japanese poet Ogino Korai also composed a poem titled “Spring River, Flowers, and Moonlight”:

People say the spring river is beautiful; how much more so when the moon shines bright.

Forest flowers bloom upon the shore,

And the immortal cassia rises from the waves.
 As flowers and moon sway together,
 Their shadows and fragrance are clear and light.
 At first I mistook it for a beauty's face,
 Illuminating the flowers in her hair.

...

The river moon seems to rise,
 The river tide gradually subsides.
 The river trees grow ever more brilliant,
 Scattering jade-like blossoms like rain.
 At dusk I hear of the cassia in the moon,
 Its roots anchored in the City of White Jade.
 Ethereal, the immortal blossoms fly,
 Falling into the water in utter silence.

...

In this poem, the poet gazes upon the spring river and the spring moon, painting a scene of vibrant vitality. Using his imagination, he weaves a wondrous tale upon the canvas of heaven and earth. The moon serves both as an old man telling stories to the poet and as a patient listener, silently hearing the poet speak of the flowers along the shore and the goddesses in the Moon Palace... In the second stanza, as the moon rises higher, it is as if the listener is pressing for more details, and the story reaches its climax. The moon ascends and the cherry blossoms fall, seeming to transport us into a dreamlike world—the celestial capital of Jade.

3.3.3. A Comparison of “Flowers”

The Chinese text selected for this section is not a typical example; rather, through multiple examples, it illustrates how China's attitude and sentiment toward the image of flowers have remained constant, and as a whole, it is highly representative.

The Japanese text is a famous work describing Japan's national flower, the cherry blossom; stylistically, it is not a simple imitation of Chinese poetry, and here it is considered representative of works on flowers.

With autumn moons and winter snows already in place, spring blossoms are naturally a must. When it comes to the imagery of “flowers”, the differences in aesthetic culture and usage between China and Japan are most striking. In China, nearly every flower carries a specific symbolic meaning; as far back as Qu Yuan, orchids and fragrant herbs were used to represent a person's character. Later, Chinese literati went on to identify the “Four Gentlemen”—the plum blossom, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum. Beyond these, lotus, osmanthus, camellia, and narcissus each possess their own refined charm and are imbued with moral metaphors. Examples abound: “Picking chrysanthemums beneath the eastern fence, I gaze leisurely upon South Mountain”.

.....

“Scattered into mud and ground to dust, only the fragrance remains as before”.

.....

“I seek no praise for my beauty; I only wish to fill the universe with my pure fragrance”.

All of these are poets’ references to themselves or to the outstanding figures and noble virtues they aspire to.

Japanese literati, however, have linked flowers to life itself, developing their own philosophical insights into existence. Consequently, the flower that best represents this has become the cherry blossom, a symbol deeply rooted in Japanese culture. The “cherry blossom aesthetics” that emerged from this have become an integral part of Japanese literary traditions. By associating fleeting beauty with the impermanence of life, they have created a quintessential symbol of the aesthetics of *mono no aware*.

Hiroshi Hirose has a work that takes the cherry blossom as its direct subject:

A single, radiant glance captivates the city;
A faint blush drifts through the air, light and gentle.
Li, Du, Su, and Han—who has seen their true faces?
Pear, peach, plum, and apricot—all are but empty names.
Once these blossoms have fallen, spring loses its color;
From where does the wind blow, so full of feeling?
To the warblers I say: cherish your song,
And at the tips of the weeping willows, spare your voice.

This poem extols the beauty and iconic status of the cherry blossom, elevating it above pear, peach, plum, and apricot. Once the blossoms have fallen, spring loses its color—a perspective that reveals a stark divergence from the aesthetic sensibilities of Chinese literati.

Another representative work comes from the “Poet of Flowers and the Moon”, the monk Saigyō:

I wish to be beneath the cherry blossoms,
As spring passes like the full moon.

This expresses an aesthetic pursuit in which life, like the cherry blossom, withers at its most brilliant moment, taking the concept of “the splendor of life and the tranquility of death” to its ultimate expression.

3.3.4. A Comparison of “Setsugekka”

Yang Wanli said: “Spring flowers, autumn moon, and winter snow and ice—I heed not Chen Xuan, but only the heavens”. In China, Setsugekka have long been the most favored imagery, used to represent different seasons. This is also evident in Bai Juyi’s poetry: “My companions of qin, poetry, and wine have all forsaken me; during the seasons of Setsugekka, I miss you most”. These examples employ the technique of “listing and layering” to superimpose imagery, enriching the

meaning within a single line of verse, conveying the poet's deeper thoughts, or simply serving as a metaphor for the unchanging cycle from spring to winter.

Japanese literati, however, have transformed the phrase "Setsugekka" into a synonym for elegance and refinement. Kamo no Chomei once proposed the concept of the "heart of Setsugekka".

Later, Shaku An wrote in his poem "Contemplating Falling Flowers While Touring Dongshan":

"A thousand trees of flowers stand as screens in the clouds;
Ten thousand homes of snow grace the pavilions by the lake".

These adaptations of the Chinese imagery of Setsugekka should have remained distinct and independent, yet they coexist in the scene of "thousand trees of flowers" and "ten thousand homes of snow". This is clearly not a literal depiction but reflects how, in the aesthetic sensibilities of Japanese literati, these three elements have become inseparable, evolving into an artistic symbol. The line "The hues of flowers and the shadows of the moon are all after the snow" captures this unique sense of impermanence to the fullest.

4. Conclusion and Outlook

4.1. Key Findings

The main conclusions drawn from this study can be summarized as follows.

First, in classical Chinese poetry, "snow", "moon", and "flower" function as independent, discrete imagery, serving as instrumental symbols that fulfill the poet's expressive needs. Whether appearing alone or occasionally in combination, the functions they perform are diverse and fluid, with their meanings ultimately determined by the poet's expressive intent.

Second, after being introduced to Japan and undergoing localization, "Setsugekka" underwent a qualitative transformation into an essential, comprehensive symbol embodying the Japanese people's inherent aesthetic perspective. In sharp contrast to their fragmented usage in China, in Japan, the combination of these three images has not only become the norm but has also integrated traditional Japanese aesthetics—centered on "mono no aware" and "yugen"—into various forms of expression; this process of transformation is the most typical manifestation of "Washu".

Third, the above analysis makes it clear that the essence of "Washu" lies in the deliberate cultural strategy adopted by Japanese literati to actively absorb the culture of Chinese poetry transmitted from China and reconstruct it in accordance with their own national culture. "Washu" is by no means merely a deliberate deviation or an incomplete "bias" resulting from insufficient expressive ability. The process by which "Setsugekka" evolved from disparate lyrical images into comprehensive aesthetic symbols vividly reflects the full scope of the creative transformation brought about by "Washu". Viewing the overall process of the localization of Chinese poetry in Japan, this cultural reconstruction based on "Washu"

is precisely the poetic embodiment of the concept of “Japanese spirit, Chinese talent”, reflecting the high degree of cultural autonomy inherent in “Washu”.

4.2. Academic and Practical Implications of This Study

The findings of this study offer significant insights at both the academic-theoretical level and the practical level of cultural communication.

At the academic level, this paper provides a new analytical framework for cross-cultural literary studies: “phenomenon (imagery)—essence (customs)—strategy (cultural subjectivity)”. This framework not only aids in analyzing the process of cross-cultural reception within the Chinese poetry cultural sphere but also offers valuable insights and theoretical guidance for elucidating the mechanisms of cross-cultural literary transmission and transformation.

On the practical level, this study highlights the importance of prioritizing the concept of “localization” in the practice of China’s cultural outreach. In other words, in the context of cultural dissemination abroad, it is essential to correctly recognize and actively guide localization innovations within the cultural context of the target audience. If one merely pursues the “absolute authenticity” of the sender while denying the audience’s localization process, it will not only severely undermine the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication but also fundamentally deviate from the original intent of cultural communication, which is to respect cultural diversity and promote mutual understanding.

4.3. Limitations of the Study and Future Directions

This study currently focuses on the comparative analysis of Chinese and Japanese poetry, primarily using the imagery of “Setsugekka” as a starting point. The research has not yet expanded to areas such as meter or poetic forms (such as regulated verse and quatrains) to conduct a comprehensive examination of differences in “harmonization and adaptation”, nor has it incorporated cross-references based on Japanese poetic theory and poetry criticism for a multidimensional analysis.

As is well known, “Setsugekka” became a symbol of Japanese national character at an early stage. While integrating into Japanese aesthetic values, this motif has continued to spread, and to this day, the phenomenon of “Washu” remains widespread across various aspects of Japanese culture. The influence of “Setsugekka” can be observed in everything from the refined realms of meter and literary genres to non-literary fields such as ukiyo-e. In terms of research methodology, studies could be deepened by integrating theories of waka from sources such as the “Kokin Wakashū” and the “Man’yōshū” to explore aesthetic intertextuality. These areas could build upon the foundation of this paper to further advance our understanding of this topic.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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