

A Spatio-Temporal Cognition Perspective to the Sino-Western Conceptions of Poetry-Painting Relationship: “Painting in Poetry” vs. “Separation of Poetry and Painting”

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Abstract: *Western art advocates “the separation of poetry and painting”, whereas Chinese art pursues “painting-in-poetry”. This paper addresses three core questions: (1) Why are poetry and painting, as distinct art forms, separated and even opposed to each other in the Western cultural context, while they integrate harmoniously in Chinese culture, giving rise to the aesthetic ideal of “painting-in-poetry”? (2) What are the respective epistemological foundations underlying the divergent Chinese and Western conceptions of the poetry-painting relationship? (3) What is the constructive mechanism of Chinese Liejin verses, which exemplify the aesthetic effect of “painting-in-poetry”? Departing from previous scholarship, this paper offers an alternative interpretation of “the separation of poetry and painting” and “painting-in-poetry” through the dimension of spatio-temporal cognition. The study reveals that the notion of “the separation of poetry and painting” is rooted in the Western conception of time-space distinction, while “painting-in-poetry” derives from the Chinese conception of time-space conflation. These two spatio-temporal outlooks constitute the cognitive origins of realism in Western art and free-hand expressive aesthetics in Chinese art. Furthermore, the conception of time-space conflation provides a plausible account for the Liejin verses in classical Chinese poetry.*

Keywords: Separation of poetry and painting, Painting-in-poetry, Time-space distinction, Time-space conflation, Liejin verses.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of Chinese and Western arts, poetry and painting, as two major art forms, have long attracted the attention of artists and critics across generations. Nevertheless, due to divergences in social contexts, historical cultures and aesthetic tastes, Chinese and Western discourses on the relationship between poetry and painting exhibit striking differences. Western art advocates “the separation of poetry and painting”, whereas Chinese art upholds “painting-in-poetry”. In some sense, the interplay between poetry and painting reflects a nation’s understanding of the essence of art. Conceptions of the essence of art shape theories concerning poetry-painting relations. Accordingly, an examination of such relations grants us deep insight into the fundamental artistic ideas and spirit of a nation.

The notion of “painting-in-poetry” was put forward by Su Dongpo, a literary figure of the Song Dynasty. It encapsulates his aesthetic experience when appreciating Wang Wei’s poetry and paintings. Originally, “painting-in-poetry” served as a summary of the artistic features of Wang Wei’s works and applied exclusively to him. Yet through interpretation and elaboration by subsequent writers and critics, it has evolved into a widely-accepted tenet of Chinese *poetics*, acting as a touchstone for evaluating the artistic merit of poetry.

Nevertheless, distinct from the Chinese aesthetic orientation of “painting-in-poetry”, Western intellectual tradition dating back to ancient Greece strove to demarcate boundaries among different art forms and develop sophisticated artistic categorizations. This gave rise to the doctrine of “the separation of poetry and painting”, which dominated European aesthetics for thousands of years and reached its apex in the 18th-century German aesthetician Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Tracing its origins, one may detect embryonic forms of this doctrine in the writings of early Western philosophers. For instance, in *Poetics*, the first seminal text in European aesthetic history, Aristotle (384-322 BCE) opens by distinguishing poetry from visual arts such as painting and sculpture, stating that some people, by making likenesses, imitate many things through colours and shapes, while others do so through the voice [1]. The medial division between poetry and painting constructed by Lessing has sparked long-running debates in Western art scholarship. Mitchell argues that Lessing’s spatial/temporal division between painting and poetry is not a neutral aesthetic truth but an ideologically motivated “law of genre” that naturalizes a cultural

hierarchy [2]. Sternberg revisits Lessing's Laocoon to argue that the poetry-painting divide is not a fixed medial law but a historically contingent interface whose modern reinterpretations reveal ongoing projection rather than resolution [3]. Jiang reads Qian Zhongshu as both continuing Lessing's poetry-painting distinction and expanding it-adding sensory and philological dimensions-to assert the equal standing of Chinese and Western literature [4]. Zhang Guangkui rereads Lessing's Laocoon as grounding the poetry-painting divide in a space/time opposition-painting as spatial, poetry as temporal, while reopening that binary via Soja's "Third Space" to show both media also hold physical, mental, and open post-modern spatial dimensions [5]. Why, then, do poetry and painting, two major artistic categories, exhibit such dramatic divergences in Chinese-Western artistic histories? What underlies these disparities? These are the questions the present paper seeks to address.

Since its formulation, the idea of "painting-in-poetry" has drawn considerable attention from artists and critics, giving rise to abundant scholarly literature. A review of existing studies reveals that prior scholarship mainly focuses on defining its connotation, examining its historical evolution, and assessing its aesthetic significance. Jiang Yin has questioned the proposition itself and evaluated its rationality, arguing that attributing the achievements of Wang Wei's poetry merely to "painting-in-poetry" undermines its artistic value [6]. Zhao Kuiying argues that the fundamental divergence between Chinese integrated poetry-painting tradition and Western boundary theory originates from differing ancient Chinese and Western spatio-temporal awareness [7]. Xu Mei contrasts the Chinese tradition of "poetry-painting unity" (shihua yilü) with Lessing's "poetry-painting heterogeneity", arguing that after the 18th century the West shifted from fusion to medial separation while China sustained a continuous fusion view [8]. Gu Xuan argues that the concept of "painting-in-poetry" arises less from textual evidence in Wang Wei's poems than from his reputation as a painter, and that the different evaluative standards governing poetry and literati painting effectively created a hidden separation beneath the surface of fusion [9]. This paper sets aside the debate over whether "painting-in-poetry" should serve as a critical yardstick for judging Wang Wei's poetic merit. What remains undeniable is that "painting-in-poetry" has become a prominent feature in the development of Chinese poetic art. Although previous investigations have yielded valuable insights from multiple perspectives, certain fundamental questions remain insufficiently explained: How can poetry and painting, two discrete art forms, interpenetrate each other? How can "painting" emerge "within poetry"? Why does the culturally-rooted notion of "painting-in-poetry" appear incompatible within Western poetry-painting frameworks? Motivated by these gaps in existing research, this paper adopts an alternative perspective and offers a fresh interpretation of "the separation of poetry and painting" and "painting-in-poetry" from the dimension of spatio-temporal cognition. Before proceeding with detailed analyses, however, it is necessary to clarify the intrinsic connection between literary-artistic creation and spatio-temporal cognition.

2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPATIAL-TEMPORAL COGNITION AND LITERATURE-ART

According to the fundamental material-dialectical principle that social being determines social consciousness, philosophy, law, literature, art and other products of advanced human mental activities are ultimately grounded in material existence. Since material existence takes time and space as its fundamental dimensions, the relationship between literature-art and spatio-temporality is accordingly established. In the materialist view, the ideal is nothing more than the material world reproduced in the human brain and translated into mental categories. This clearly suggests that art, as a form of human spirit, is ideationally nothing other than material reality reworked within the human mind. Human free spirit does not arise out of nowhere; nor is art some mysterious purely spiritual entity. Genetically speaking, art originates from labour, which constitutes the fundamental mode sustaining humanity's mental life and its material-real-world engagement. A survey of Chinese-Western artistic histories reveals that literary-artistic representations are generally grounded in the real-world characteristics of their respective eras. For instance, Western Expressionism, which emerged in the twentieth century, drew theoretical sustenance from subject-centred philosophy represented by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The prevalence of such subject-centred philosophy arose amid massive upheaval and transformation across Europe, when war and crisis pervaded society and cast a heavy shadow over people's inner lives. Plagued by doubt, fear, anxiety and discontent toward external reality, people turned inward, seeking transformative and consolatory forces within mental space. It may therefore be argued that real-world existence shapes the basic forms of literature and art, while literature-art functions as their dynamic reflection.

Under the influence of logocentrism, Western civilization has long exhibited a tendency to privilege time over space. Within aesthetics, the flourishing of epic and tragedy alongside the prevalence of narratology both testify to Western emphasis on temporality. Nevertheless, compared with time, space has long been repressed and devalued, regarded as a homogeneous, empty, static and isolated container. Foucault comments on this tendency: "space was

treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic” [10]. It follows that concrete literary-artistic forms are conditioned by dominant modes of spatio-temporal cognition. In the twentieth century, advancing economic globalization and shifting world orders brought profound transformations in human spatial perception. Spatial awareness and spatial experience gained unprecedented prominence, and traditional interpretations of space ceased to satisfy intellectual demands. Against this social backdrop, the poetics of space came into being, and a powerful spatial turn swept across arts-and-humanities scholarship. The spatial turn stemmed from revised understandings of space: no longer viewed as a monotonous static container, space acquired ontological significance. The reconstruction of spatio-temporal consciousness directly gave rise to spatial narratology, which breaks the classical narratological paradigm centred on one-dimensional linear temporality and unfolds textual meaning along spatial axes. It is evident, then, that spatio-temporal cognition constitutes a decisive factor shaping literary-artistic representation. Studying literature and art from the dimension of spatio-temporal cognition proves to be a worthwhile scholarly endeavour.

3. DIFFERENCES IN SPATIO-TEMPORAL CONCEPTUALIZATION BETWEEN ENGLISH AND CHINESE: TIME-SPACE DISTINCTION VS. TIME-SPACE CONFLATION

Chinese civilisation has been an agrarian civilisation dominated by farming economy since ancient times, whereas Western civilisation is a commercial one built upon commodity exchange. Agrarian civilisation values harmony: harmony among human beings, and harmony between humanity and nature. By contrast, commercial civilisation pursues competition and confrontation—confrontation between individuals, and confrontation between humanity and nature. As the economic base determines the superstructure, Chinese and Western civilisations, rooted in distinct socio-cultural contexts, inevitably diverge sharply in spatio-temporal cognition. Specifically, time and space constitute two separate, mutually-opposed categories in Western civilisation. In Chinese civilisation, however, time and space are not set against each other; instead, they interpenetrate and conflate with each other. The following sections elaborate on these two modes of cognition respectively.

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, formal linguistic structures arise from human conceptualisation of the external world. Time and space, as fundamental dimensions of existence, occupy a prominent position in linguistic representation. On the one hand, human beings deploy language to interpret time and space; on the other hand, people’s cognition of time and space shapes their linguistic expressions. After systematically comparing structural differences between English and Chinese, Liu Zhengguang and Xu Haoqi put forward the hypothesis of time-space distinction in English based on cross-linguistic examination of spatio-temporal conceptualization [11]. In other words, time and space function as two independent, self-contained categorical systems within English.

The fundamental starting-point of time-space distinction lies in the fact that verbs and nouns, the two major categories within the English linguistic system, possess clear-cut, mutually-opposed boundaries as distinct word classes. When nouns and verbs enter a sentence, they adopt drastically different strategies for grounding (spatio-temporal anchoring). From the perspective of Cognitive Grammar, nouns designate spatial entities (THING), while verbs encode temporal processes or relations (PROCESS/RELATION) [12]. Within a sentence, nouns embody spatiality, whereas verbs embody temporality. Temporal distinctions must be grammatically realized on verbs and have no bearing on nouns; hence time and space become separated.

In actual language use, nominal elements denoting spatial entities are introduced into sentences mainly via two semantic strategies for spatial characterization: demonstration and quantification, marked linguistically by articles, pronouns and other grounding markers. Verbs, by contrast, employ three devices for grounding: tense, aspect and modality. Among them, tense is obligatory; without it, the sentence becomes ungrammatical. Take the following sentences for instance:

- 1) a. He likes reading the book every day.
- b. He liked reading the book when he was young.
- c. He would like to read the book when he has time.

Sentence (1a) depicts a habitual action. The predicate verb adopts the base form “like” with the third-person singular marker-s attached. Sentence (1b) describes an event that took place in the past, so the past tense marker-ed is added to the base form of the verb. Sentence (1c) refers to a future event, and the corresponding future

construction “would like” is used. Here, “would” expresses a weaker willingness than “will”. This indicates that in English, verbs as a linguistic category bear a direct correspondence with time.

It should be noted, then, that in English, time and space constitute two discrete, well-demarcated cognitive domains; linguistic forms cannot simultaneously encode both temporal and spatial meanings. Such distinction of time-space stands as a salient manifestation of Western analytical thinking.

While elaborating on English distinction of time-space, Liu Zhengguang and Xu Haoqi articulate in detail the hypothesis of Chinese time-space conflation from multiple dimensions including cultural origins, character-formation, and syntactic structures [13]. Culturally, for ancient Chinese people, the world formed an indivisible whole constituted by time and space, a point well illustrated by the ancient Chinese term *yuzhou*(cosmos). In modern Chinese, “*yuzhou*” largely functions as a spatial concept with little temporal connotation. In ancient usage, however, “*yu*” stood for space and “*zhou*” for time. As recorded in *Shizi*: “That which extends in all four directions and up-and-down is called *yu*(space); that which stretches from antiquity to the present is called *zhou*(time).” Accordingly, “*yuzhou*” originally denoted a world in which time and space are integrated and interwoven.

In terms of syntactic structure, Chinese abounds with verbless sentences. Even when verbs are present, most of them occur without any tense inflections, a scenario almost impossible in English. In English, verbs constitute one of the essential prerequisites for a well-formed sentence. When verbs enter a clause, they must carry tense markers for temporal grounding.

Does this imply, then, that temporality is an optional component in Chinese? Liu Zhengguang and Xu Haoqi argue that both time and space are indispensable prerequisites for sentence formation in Chinese as well as English. Unlike English, however, temporal meaning in Chinese may remain implicit, fused with spatial information, functioning as extrinsic temporality. Take the following sentences for instance:

- 2) a. 他喜欢看书。
tā xǐhuān kàn shū.
He likes reading.
b. 你女儿都博士了。
nǐ nǚ ér dōu bóshì le.
Your daughter is already a doctor.
c. 她漂亮。
tā piàoliang.
She is beautiful.

In Chinese, as illustrated in (2), predicates can be realised by verbs, as well as spatial categories such as nouns and adjectives. The presence of temporal markers for temporal anchoring on predicates is optional. Nevertheless, any sentence conveying a proposition inevitably carries temporal meaning. This constitutes a prominent manifestation of time-space conflation in Chinese, which accounts for the abundant special constructions in Chinese, including nominal predicate sentences, adjective predicate sentences and verbless sentences.

In (2b), the spatial element “doctor” metonymically conveys the process of academic promotion, and process inherently entails temporality. Sentence (2c) also delivers implicit temporality. When used as a predicate, the adjective “beautiful” describes a stable property or state, featuring temporal continuity and steadiness.

Liu Zhengguang and Li Yi further elaborate on the time-space conflation hypothesis by examining spatio-temporal semantics of Chinese localizers and classifiers [14], whose detailed arguments will not be reproduced here. To sum up, unlike speakers of English, the Chinese conceptual world does not treat time and space as sharply demarcated, mutually exclusive categories. Instead, the two dimensions interpenetrate—namely, they are “conflated”. This represents a concentrated manifestation of Chinese synthetic thinking. Precisely this cognitive orientation of conflation of time-space makes the artistic ideal of “painting-in-poetry” possible in Chinese poetry. The doctrine of “the separation of poetry and painting”, which dominated European aesthetics for millennia, is the literary-artistic embodiment of the Western time-space distinction. By contrast, the widely-known Chinese notion of “painting-in-poetry” offers a paradigmatic case of how the Chinese time-space conflation worldview manifests within literature and art.

4. TIME-SPACE DISTINCTION AND THE WESTERN TRADITION OF SEPARATION OF POETRY AND PAINTING

In *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Terence Hawkes proposes that signs can be broadly divided into temporal and spatial types. Temporally-oriented signs tend toward the symbolic mode and give rise to art forms such as music; spatially-oriented signs incline toward the iconic mode and generate visual arts including painting. Both categories of signs persist and possess indexical functions [15]. As auditory signs, musical works take time as their primary organizing principle and bear temporal qualities. Painting, by contrast, functions as a visual sign structured mainly by space and thus carries spatial attributes. Regarding poetic art, it is held that poetry imitates reality through the medium of sound. Like musical notes, sounds unfold in successive temporal sequence; poetry is therefore an art of time. Since poetry and painting belong respectively to temporally-configured and spatially-configured art forms, they are naturally separated from, and even opposed to, one another.

Hawkes's reasoning exemplifies a typical mode of Western analytical thinking, whose fundamental feature lies in binary opposition: subject versus object, humanity versus nature, form versus content, and time versus space. Under the influence of the time-space distinction view, time and space become independent categories, discrete and mutually impenetrable. At the linguistic level, the stronger the temporal and spatial properties encoded in a propositional sentence, the higher its degree of objectivity. Greater temporal-spatial salience means more precise temporal and spatial anchoring for the states-of-affairs described. In other words, time and space distinction facilitates accurate cognition of real-world objects. Rooted in time-space distinction premise, Western languages embody linguistic manifestations of objective and rational consciousness. When we examine Western art from this objective-rational perspective, it becomes understandable why Western art largely adheres to natural spatio-temporal laws and shows limited interest in breaking or transcending objective time-space.

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that time-space distinction embodies an objective, rational, analytical mode of thought. To clarify why poetry and painting are held apart, it is necessary to identify the spatio-temporal characteristics intrinsic to Western painting that prevent it from crossing its inherent boundaries and entering the domain of poetry.

Since ancient Greece, Western painting has taken mimesis as its artistic programme, judging artistic merit by the verisimilitude of imitation. In its spatial representation, traditional Western painting consistently strives for visual fidelity to real-world space. Painters construct pictorial space by constantly referencing the spatial configurations of nature, producing a convincing illusion of physical reality. To achieve such spatial verisimilitude, Western artists developed central-point perspective to imitate nature more faithfully. As art scholar Ralph Mayer explains: perspective is a method of representing three-dimensional objects and spatial relationships on a two-dimensional surface, so that they appear as they would to the eye from a single fixed viewpoint; the farther an object is from the observer, the smaller it appears, and parallel lines recede toward one or more vanishing points on the horizon line [16].

Pictorial space under central-point perspective records reality as perceived from one fixed vantage-point at one particular moment in time. Owing to the widespread adoption of central-point perspective and the aesthetic pursuit of objective truth, Western painting excludes temporal elements, freezing dynamic transformations of objects into a single instant. Pictorial space thus becomes a snapshot of physical space. On this point, Wu Jiafeng comments: "Western painting grounded in central-point perspective depicts a fixed scene within a single moment, pursuing absolute accuracy within the visual cone. This approach is legitimate, yet it adopts a static, Euclidean-geometric outlook—one that splits time from space" [17]. When examining canonical paintings such as Jean-François Millet's *The Angelus* and Claude Monet's *Haystacks*, one readily perceives the painters' endeavour to capture a fleeting moment within static imagery. Accordingly, painting possesses the unique capacity to freeze the spatial configuration of objects at one instant. It fully captures the co-presence of things in space, yielding a spatial effect premised on the distinction of time and space.

To sum up, time and space distinction facilitates objective, precise apprehension of objects in reality. This constitutes the cognitive origin of realism in Western painting. From the perspective of artistic dialectics, what then characterises poetry? Why cannot poetry and painting integrate harmoniously within the Western cultural context? Constrained by scope, this paper draws on *The Eagle*, a well-known poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson, Poet Laureate of Victorian-era Britain. Selected for its broadly realist theme comparable to Western painting, the full poem is quoted below:

3) **The Eagle**

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Closed to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watched from his mountain walls
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

In the first stanza, the poem initially constructs seemingly static spatial imagery that appears visually analogous to painting. The definite article “the” activates a fixed, prototypical spatial entity in the reader’s cognition, anchoring the referent as a specific eagle situated within a definite spatial field. A series of spatial attributive modifiers, including “crooked”, “azure”, and “ringed”, together with spatial nouns such as “crag” and “land”, jointly build a concrete, bounded spatial scene that seemingly conforms to the static visual attributes of painting. Nevertheless, superficial spatial description cannot be converted into a unified pictorial frame, precisely due to the implicit temporal movement generated by shifting visual perspective, a dimension fundamentally excluded from Western spatial art.

The stanza initiates with an ultra-close spatial perspective concentrated on the eagle’s physical detail: the crooked hands that “clasps” the crag. This foreground close-up fixes the viewer’s observation at a localized spatial point. Immediately afterward, the perspective rapidly expands outward, shifting from microscopic detail to macroscopic panorama: the eagle standing lonely on the lofty crag, under the blazing sun and encircled by boundless blue sky. Such continuous switching between close-shot and distant-shot perspectives does not exist synchronously in space; instead, it unfolds diachronically in reading sequence. Every shift of viewpoint constitutes a unique temporal segment. From the perspective of Western time-space distinction, painting freezes only one single spatial moment, while Western poetry unfolds across successive temporal moments. The dynamic scanning process embedded in poetic reading introduces irreversible temporal flow into the text, which breaks the static synchronous requirement of pictorial representation and renders the first stanza fundamentally unpaintable.

The second stanza further magnifies the absolute opposition between poetic temporality and painterly spatiality under the framework of Western time-space distinction. Different from the implicit temporality of perspective shifting in the first stanza, the second stanza carries explicit lexical temporality through process verbs. The verbs “crawl” and “fall” denote continuous, unfolding kinetic processes that rely entirely on temporal duration to be realized. Essentially, painting relies on static spatial media and can only present a “frozen privileged moment” without temporal extension; any sustained action, movement, or procedural change exceeds the expressive capacity of spatial visual art. The contrast between the slow crawling of the sea and the sudden, swift falling of the eagle constructs two different temporal rhythms, further enriching the diachronic temporal dimension that painting inherently lacks.

More importantly, the coexistence of present tense and past tense (“watched”) establishes discontinuous temporal strata within a single textual scene. As Xiong Muqing observes, tense plays a vital role in constructing the textual world of this poem and functions as one of the world-building elements [18]. In Western representational art, a single canvas can only record a unified, simultaneous spatial moment and cannot superimpose multiple asynchronous temporal points. The poem, however, freely arranges past recollection and present observation in one textual space, realizing the cross-temporal narration exclusive to temporal art.

In summary, Tennyson’s *The Eagle* fully embodies the Western cognitive tradition of absolute time-space distinction. Its layered perspective shifting, procedural dynamic verbs, and alternating tense structures all serve to prioritize temporal succession over spatial synchrony. Western poetry develops linearly through time, while Western painting expands statically in space. The rigid categorical boundary between temporal art and spatial art makes it impossible for Western poems to achieve the integrated spatio-temporal pictorial effect of Chinese “painting-in-poetry”. It is precisely this deep-rooted Western dualistic cognitive mode that generates the theoretical tradition of “the separation of poetry and painting”, standing in fundamental contrast to the Chinese holistic cognitive paradigm of time-space conflation.

Lessing observes that painting must content itself with actions that co-exist in space, or with mere bodies; and these bodies may suggest an action through their attitudes. Poetry, however, is not bound by such constraints... [19]. Lessing’s argument is undoubtedly of great value. In Western art, painting and poetry belong to separate artistic

categories owing to differences in mimetic media, modes of creation and aesthetic preferences. Each follows its own principles without interfering with the other. From a semiotic perspective, poetry functions as a temporal sign whose primary organizing force lies in successive temporal sequence. Painting, by contrast, operates as a spatial sign structured mainly by spatial simultaneity. This outcome stems from Western objective, rational and analytical modes of thinking. In a sense, the doctrine of “the separation of poetry and painting”—according to which poetic content cannot be translated into painting and pictorial themes cannot be fully rendered in poetry—offers the best illustration of how the Western time-space distinction outlook manifests in literature and art.

5. TIME-SPACE CONFLATION AND THE CHINESE TRADITION OF PAINTING-IN-POETRY

In the West, scholars keep drawing demarcations between poetry and painting; in China, by contrast, the fusion of poetry and painting has long served as a vital aesthetic criterion for evaluating poetic art. This fundamental divergence stems from distinct modes of Chinese-Western thinking. As argued above, Western advocacy for the separation of poetry and painting originates from the worldview of time-space distinction. When we turn to Chinese civilisation, which differs profoundly from its Western counterpart, the picture changes considerably. Boundaries between poetry and painting grow blurred, even dissolve: not only is there “painting-in-poetry”, but also “poetry-in-painting”. How, then, can poetry and painting, two distinct artistic categories, interpenetrate within the Chinese cultural context? What is its epistemological foundation? What distinctive traits distinguish the Chinese poetry-painting system from its Western counterpart?

As noted earlier, ancient Chinese people conceived the world as an integrated whole constituted by time and space. Time and space were inseparable rather than mutually opposed; instead, they interpenetrate, namely, conflation of time-space. This conflation provides the epistemological ground for “painting-in-poetry” and “poetry-in-painting”, embodying a mode of synthetic thinking. The key to such fruitful interpenetration lies in the isomorphism between poetry and painting, manifested in two interrelated qualities: spatio-temporal unity and imaginative-expressive (free-hand expressive) aesthetics. These two features will be elaborated respectively in the following sections. Ultimately, artistic forms are conditioned by philosophical epistemology. The traits of spatio-temporal unity and expressive aesthetics within Chinese poetry-painting derive from the Chinese worldview of time-space conflation.

Traditional Chinese and Western painting gradually developed divergent modes of spatial representation in their historical evolution. In its spatial rendering, traditional Chinese painting does not pursue the illusionistic reproduction of physical space. Its pictorial space is imagistic, with expressive forces taking precedence. Such imagistic space constitutes an aesthetic realm marked by profound subject-object integration, emotional richness, and dynamic vitality. Aesthetician Zong Baihua insightfully observes: “What the painter seeks to convey on the canvas is not merely *yu*—architecturally-inflected space, but equally *zhou*—temporality infused with musical rhythm. A universe imbued with musical sentiment, a spatio-temporal unity, constitutes the artistic vision of Chinese painters and poets” [20].

Zong Baihua’s insight undoubtedly captures the fundamental feature of Chinese painting, namely the spatio-temporal unity. From an epistemological perspective, such unity within painting serves as a typical artistic manifestation of time-space conflation. How, then, does traditional Chinese painting achieve this spatio-temporal unity?

Another salient feature of Chinese painting lies in its compositional freedom from the constraints of central-point perspective. It largely adopts cavalier perspective (mobile-distance perspective), which broadens the visual field, allows flexible composition, and transcends the limitations of physical time and space. Cavalier perspective dissolves the static quality produced by Western central-point perspective. Instead of fixing the painter’s vantage-point, observation unfolds in a temporal process of observing from above and surveying below, endowing vision with mobility. Mobility implies temporality. Far from excluding temporal elements, traditional Chinese painting treats time as a vital constructive force of pictorial space—this is precisely what is meant by spatio-temporal unity. The deployment of cavalier perspective integrates time and space on the picture plane and shapes the distinctive imaginative quality of traditional Chinese painting.

Discussing observational modes in Chinese painting, Chen Zhaofu notes that Chinese painters do not always observe and depict objects within a given visual field from one fixed viewpoint. Frequently they walk, look, and reflect. After examining subjects from multiple angles, they depart from the actual scene and mostly create from visual memory [21]. This stands in sharp contrast to Western realist painting. Creation based on memory loosens

precise temporal-spatial anchoring of concrete situations, weakening both temporal and spatial specificity. Pictorial space may even expand freely according to the artist's subjective expressive demands. Shen Kuo, a polymath of the Northern Song Dynasty, summarised this imaginative trait with the phrase "viewing the small through the large". The concept describes how, when painting landscapes, the painter imaginatively adopts a standpoint greater than the mountains, looking down upon smaller scenes much as one views a miniature rockery garden. It represents an all-embracing, bird's-eye mode of observation. Such a comprehensive vantage-point does not exist in physical reality and is therefore imaginative.

Epistemologically, time-space conflation offers a cogent cognitive account for the imaginative character of traditional Chinese painting. Within linguistic systems, The stronger the temporal and spatial properties encoded in a propositional sentence, the higher its degree of objectivity. Weakened temporality and spatiality facilitate the speaker's shift from the realis discourse-world toward the irrealis discourse-world. This constitutes the virtuality of thought and language. Virtuality enables speakers to articulate their perceptions and understandings of the world more adequately. In some sense, virtuality is equivalent to imagination, or expressive free-hand aesthetics, and relates intrinsically to the subject's cognition. Art originates from reality yet abounds with imagination. If the realis discourse-world corresponds to artistic realism, the irrealis discourse-world corresponds to expressive aesthetics. Time-space conflation facilitates the transition from objective mimesis to subjective expressive representation. This claim holds not only for linguistic systems but also within artistic contexts.

Gu Kaizhi of the Eastern-Jin Dynasty advanced "Chuanshen Lun" (theory of spirit conveying) as the aesthetic ideal of painting. Xie He of the Southern Dynasties put forward "Qiyun Shengdong" (rhythmic vitality) as the supreme criterion for pictorial representation. Both concepts emphasize the expressive-free-hand quality inherent in traditional Chinese painting. While existing scholarship has widely acknowledged this feature, few studies have explored why Chinese painting can operate in such an expressive mode. Drawing on previous discussions, we may argue that time-space conflation provides the epistemological foundation for the expressive aesthetics of traditional Chinese painting. It plausibly accounts for the pronounced subjective imprint of such art; expressive aesthetics constitutes the aesthetic manifestation of time-space conflation view.

Precisely because traditional Chinese painting pursues expressive-free-hand ideals rather than objective, accurate spatial representation, it paves the way for "painting-in-poetry". Classical Chinese poetry consists largely of lyric verse devoted to conveying subjective personality, emotion and temperament. Lyric-oriented creation follows the maxim that writing gives utterance to the heart; painting accommodates the inner intention. Classical Chinese poetry constantly tends to project tangible objects and intangible thoughts, ethereal moods and profound emotions onto visible spatial scenes or visual imagery. Notably, such space is not purely static; it is temporalized space where motion resides within stillness and stillness permeates motion—in other words, space as spatio-temporal unity. To illustrate how the artistic effect of "painting-in-poetry" is achieved, this paper takes Wang Wei's well-known poem *Boating on the River Han* as a case in point. The original poem is quoted below:

4) 汉江临泛

王维作

Boating on the River Han

By Wang Wei

楚塞三湘接，荆门九派通。

Chǔ sài sān xiāng jiē, jīng mén jiǔ pài tōng.

It flows back to Three Hsiangs from Ch'u

And through Chastegate to the Nine blue.

江流天地外，山色有无中。

Jiāng liú tiān dì wài, shān sè yǒu wú zhōng.

The waters outrun earth and sky;

The misty hills heave low and high.

郡邑浮前浦，波澜动远空。

Jùn yì fú qián pǔ, bō lán dòng yuǎn kōng.

The town ashore seems there to drown;

The dome shakes as if to fall down.

襄阳好风日，留醉与山翁。

Xiāng yáng hǎo fēng rì, liú zuì yǔ shān wēng.

O Sowshine's good sights do please me;

I will drink with Hillman, care-free. (Translated by Zhao yanchun [22])

The full poem presents a boundless river-and-mountain landscape without explicit tense markers, temporal adverbs, or process predicates that dominate English temporal expression. At the spatial level, the poem constructs a multi-layered, panoramic pictorial structure consistent with the composition principles of traditional Chinese landscape painting. The first two couplets establish an open macroscopic spatial framework. The geographical images of “Chu borders”, “Three Hsiangs”, and “Chastegate, Nine blue” outline the vast, interconnected spatial pattern of regional mountains and rivers, breaking the narrow perspective of localized scenery and building an unbounded horizontal spatial field. Such spatial presentation corresponds exactly to the “distant perspective” technique in Chinese landscape painting, which pursues grandeur, openness, and spatial continuity rather than the fixed focal perspective of Western oil painting. The middle lines further expand the spatial dimension from tangible geographical entities to the fuzzy integration of sky, earth, hills and waters. The river stretching beyond the physical boundary of heaven and earth, together with the illusory, misty mountain hues between visibility and invisibility, constructs a typical Chinese aesthetic space of virtual-reality fusion. This static spatial layering provides the indispensable visual foundation for the pictorial quality of the poem.

Nevertheless, the mere stacking of spatial imagery cannot fully account for the vivid, flowing, and immersive aesthetic experience of “painting-in-poetry”. The essential vitality of Wang Wei’s landscape poetry originates from the implicit temporality naturally generated by spatial arrangement, which is the core linguistic manifestation of time-space conflation. In English and Western poetic discourse, space and time belong to independent categorical domains: spatial nouns describe static existence, while temporal verbs, tenses, and adverbs must be additionally invoked to narrate dynamic processes. By sharp contrast, Chinese poetic syntax predicates on conflated spatio-temporal cognition, allowing sequential spatial scanning to inherently produce temporal progression. In *Boating on the River Han*, no single grammatical marker explicitly indicates time passage; instead, temporality is embodied in the reader’s embodied cognitive journey of viewing and perceiving.

The poem’s scenic presentation follows a rigorous dynamic scanning path. It begins with the overall geographical pattern of distant hills and rivers, then shifts to the boundless vertical extension between sky and earth, and finally focuses on the subtle interaction between human settlements and rolling river waves. This ordered shift of visual perspective constitutes a continuous cognitive process. As readers mentally traverse from macroscopic panorama to microscopic detail, the static spatial frame is dynamically activated. The spatial sequence of imagery reading is internalized as temporal experience, realizing the cognitive transformation from “static spatial picture” to “flowing spatio-temporal scene”. This mechanism perfectly reflects the Chinese cognitive characteristic that time inheres in space and space unfolds time.

Furthermore, the subtle employment of weak dynamic predicates further deepens the conflation of time and space and enhances the poem’s painterly vitality. The two core verbs “fu” (float) and “dong” (stir) do not denote absolute physical movement or objective temporal changes; instead, they manifest the subjective temporal perception derived from the poet’s mobile viewing position. Floating on the river boat, the poet’s perspective continuously shifts. Consequently, the static towns along the bank visually appear to “float”, and the rolling billows seem to “stir” the remote sky. These subtle dynamic senses are neither pure spatial description nor independent temporal narration, but the synchronic integration of spatial position and temporal perception. Static scenery obtains temporal fluidity, while temporal perception is anchored in concrete spatial scenes, completely eliminating the Western dichotomy of static space versus dynamic time.

Cognitively speaking, the formation of “painting-in-poetry” in *Boating on the River Han* is a two-layered realization of time-space conflation. At the superficial aesthetic level, the ordered arrangement of multi-layered distant-near, virtual-reality scenery constructs a complete visual picture consistent with Chinese painting aesthetics, fulfilling the spatial visualization requirement of poetic painting. At the deep cognitive level, embodied scanning of spatial sequences generates implicit temporal flow, endowing the static pictorial frame with continuous dynamic vitality and realizing the temporal activation of spatial imagery. The integration of these two layers enables Chinese poetry to simultaneously possess the spatial intuitiveness of painting and the temporal fluidity of poetry, breaking the Western disciplinary boundary between temporal art and spatial art proposed by Lessing.

Ultimately, Wang Wei’s “painting-in-poetry” is not a superficial similarity between poetry and painting in imagery, but a profound artistic manifestation of the Chinese synthetic spatio-temporal cognitive mode. Under the mechanism of time-space conflation, Chinese classical poetry naturally fuses spatial composition and temporal

rhythm. It is precisely this unique cognitive and linguistic advantage that enables landscape poems such as *Boating on the River Han* to present scroll-like visual immersion and dynamic poetic vitality, constituting the fundamental cognitive essence of the traditional Chinese aesthetic proposition of “painting-in-poetry”.

6. TIME-SPACE CONFLATION AND THE CHINESE LIEJIN VERSES

For a sentence to be well-formed in both English and Chinese, time and space constitute two indispensable components. Likewise, poetry necessarily entails both temporality and spatiality. Whether in language or literature, artistic constructions are ultimately grounded in real-world existence, which is measured fundamentally by time and space. At the linguistic level, nouns encode spatial entities, whereas verbs encode temporality. Ideally, poetry, built from linguistic elements, should therefore display the co-occurrence of nouns and verbs. Nevertheless, numerous lines in classical Chinese poetry consist purely of juxtaposed nouns or noun phrases, without verbs or other word classes. A well-known illustration is Bai Pu’s *Sky Pure Sand: The Spring*:

(5) 天净沙·春

白朴作

Sky Pure Sand: The Spring

By Bai Pu

春山暖日和风，

Chūn shān nuǎn rì hé fēng,

Vernal mountains, the warm sun, and gentle breeze.

阑干楼阁帘栊，

Lán gān lóu gé lián lóng,

Balustrades, towers, and curtained windows.

杨柳秋千院中。

Yáng liǔ qiū qiān yuàn zhōng.

A swing, poplars, and willows, are in the courtyard.

啼莺舞燕，

Tí yīng wǔ yàn,

Singing orioles and dancing swallows,

小桥流水飞红。

Xiǎo qiáo liú shuǐ fēi hóng.

A little bridge, running water and flying flower petals. (Translated by Wu Siyuan [23])

Noun juxtaposition, known rhetorically as *Liejin*, represents a distinctive Chinese poetic figure of speech. Its peculiar syntactic pattern has attracted attention from poets and scholars. Existing studies on *Liejin* verses largely focus on rhetorical dimensions, while few investigations approach the phenomenon from the cognitive perspective of time-space conceptualization.

Wang Wenbin and Cui Liang take *Liejin* lines from Li Bai’s *Eight Poems on Palace Entertainment*: No. 2 and He Zhu’s *Green Jade Table* as examples to illustrate the spatial quality of Chinese language and its homogeneity with Chinese painting. They observe: “Much like Chinese painting, Chinese language shows a distinctive preference for concrete nouns. By means of nouns, scenes, images, objects and events in space are depicted and arranged, generating the visual effect of spatialized nominal imagery and producing a vivid pictorial impression upon readers” [24]. Their account, however, captures only the spatial dimension of Chinese painting. As argued above, the space of traditional Chinese painting is an expressive space where time and space interpenetrate as an integrated whole. In *Liejin* verses, both temporality and spatiality are present, yet spatiality is overt while temporality remains implicit. Linguistically, noun phrases in *Liejin* constructions are largely bare-noun phrases without modifiers or determiners. In other words, they lack precise spatio-temporal anchoring within a specific context and remain non-individuated, hence conveying generic-class meaning. Noun phrases functioning at the generic-class level omit trivial details of entities and outline scenes in broad, holistic strokes, paving the way for the expressive aesthetics of *Liejin* poetry.

The expressive character of Chinese poetry-painting lies precisely in capturing essential features of objects and events rather than rendering fine-grained details. It dispels straightforward descriptive devices such as plain depiction and simile. Instead, it adopts strategies including narrating events through scenes, grasping spirit beyond outward form, softening outlines and downplaying particulars to achieve overall expressive effects. From a

cognitive perspective, Liu Zhengguang argues that Liejin verses in Chinese poetry are made possible by the decategorization of nouns. As a result, the referential force of nouns weakens while their descriptive meaning grows; enhanced descriptive meaning strengthens the pictorial quality of poetic lines [25]. Liu's interpretation is empirically sound. From the perspective of time-space cognition, nevertheless, Chinese Liejin verses manifest time-space conflation. Here noun phrases encode spatial meaning, whereas temporality emerges from the sequential arrangement of noun phrases, brought about by sequential scanning.

Bai Pu's *Sky Pure Sand: The Spring* serves as a typical paradigm to illustrate how Liejin syntax actualizes the conflation of time and space and further achieves the visual aesthetic of painting-in-poetry. In this typical Liejin quatrain, all poetic units are static spatial nouns representing independent visual entities, including natural landscapes ("vernal mountains", "warm sun", "gentle breeze") and human architectural scenes ("balustrades", "towers", "swings", "little bridges"). On the static spatial level, these categorized images construct layered distant and near views: the broad mountain and solar scenery constitutes the panoramic background, while balustrades, courtyards and running water form the delicate foreground composition, fully conforming to the plane layout and perspective logic of traditional Chinese landscape painting. This static spatial stacking provides the pictorial foundation for "painting-in-poetry".

Crucially, the temporality of the verse does not rely on verbal tense markers but arises entirely from the sequential arrangement and cognitive scanning of spatial images, which is the core embodiment of Chinese time-space conflation cognition. The linear presentation of discrete spatial scenes guides readers' embodied visual scanning process: from distant mountains and sunlight to nearby architectural courtyards, then to lively water and dwelling scenes. The shift of viewing perspective in spatial reading naturally produces continuous temporal flow. Static spatial images no longer exist in frozen isolation but unfold dynamically in the cognitive process, realizing the infiltration of time into space.

Furthermore, the metonymic activation of situational meaning deepens the spatio-temporal conflation effect. The recurring scenic symbols of towers, curtained windows and swings are typical spring-viewing settings in ancient Chinese context, metonymically implying the behavioral process of maidens wandering and admiring spring scenery. The implied human activities endow static spatial scenes with subjective temporal experience, transforming physical spatial stacking into a continuous temporal process of perceiving spring vitality.

In cognitive terms, Liejin poetry realizes an organic unity of static spatial framing and dynamic temporal flow under the cognitive mechanism of time-space conflation. Spatial nouns undertake the pictorial shaping function, while sequence-based cognitive scanning generates implicit temporality. The mutual penetration and inseparability of space and time break the Western dichotomy of temporal art and spatial art. It is precisely this cognitive conflation of time and space that enables Chinese Liejin verses to present vivid, scroll-like visual effects, ultimately completing the internal cognitive generation of the traditional Chinese aesthetic proposition "painting-in-poetry".

7. CONCLUSION

Humboldt elaborated insightfully on the affinity between national language and national spirit [26]. From our perspective, literary-artistic works, like language, are products of national spirit: a nation's art embodies its spirit, and its spirit manifests itself in its art. On this basis, proceeding from Chinese-Western spatio-temporal cognition, this paper demonstrates in detail that the Western doctrine of "the separation of poetry and painting" and the Chinese notion of "painting-in-poetry" are aesthetic manifestations in literature and art of the Western worldview of time-space distinction and the Chinese worldview of time-space conflation respectively. It further explores the cognitive construction of Liejin verses, which exemplify the canonical aesthetic effect of "painting-in-poetry", thus lending strong support to Humboldt's proposition. In sum, this study reveals a close correlation between spatio-temporal cognition, literature and art. Research into literature and art from the dimension of spatio-temporal cognition promises further valuable findings.

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