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**PROBING INTO THE MYTHOLOGICAL IMAGES IN  
MAO ZEDONG'S POEM "IMMORTALS: REPLY TO LI SHUYI"**

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**Abstract.** Mythological images play an important role in literary works and are ingeniously applied in Mao Zedong's poetry. By studying the various aspects of the mythological images in his poem, we can gain a deeper insight into the compressed meanings of the poetic art that are unheeded before. This paper will discuss the different dimensions in the mythological images in Mao Zedong's poem, *Die Lian Hua: Reply to Li Shuyi*, probing into the different layers of depth in meaning from cultural, psychological and spiritual perspectives.

**Key words:** mythological images; Mao Zedong's poetry; *Die Lian Hua*; mythological and archetypal approaches.

**INTRODUCTION**

*The Immortals: Reply to Li Shuyi* is written by Mao Zedong in memory of his deceased wife Yang Kaihui, as a reply to the poem written by Li Shuyi, a teacher of Chinese in No. 10 Middle School of Changsha, an intimate friend and classmate of Yang Kaihui. In 1924, through Yang's introduction, Li Shuyi got to know, and later on married Liu Zhixun, then one of Mao's comrades-in-arms. In the summer of 1933, word came that Liu was killed in a battle. Weighed down with sorrow and sadness, Li Shuyi later on wrote a poem *To the Tune of Buddhist Dancers* (《菩萨蛮》) in memory of her husband. It was not until the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 that Li Shuyi acquired the exact information about the death of her husband. On January 17, 1950, Li wrote to Mao, informing him details of Yang Kaihui's death, and Mao replied to her on April 18, in the form of this poem. In January 1957, Mao's poems (18 in all) were published in the first issue of the

magazine *Poetry* in Peking, and it had been 28 years since his wife devoted her life to the revolutionary cause [14: 183-184]

The poem is written in the form of Ci (词). As an offshoot of Shi (诗) "poetry", Ci was evolved in the second half of the cosmopolitan Tang Dynasty (618-907), when Shi had become stereotyped, and poets sought liberty in prosody and diversion by adjusting their verses to folk airs and newly imported foreign melodies [9: 288]. This kind of poem is characterized by delicate expressions of various length, and number of lines to suit the musical mode, which became rigid patterns with more exacting rhyme scheme and tonal sequence for the aspirant to fill in word for word. Ci reached its summit in the Song Dynasty (960-1279), becoming one of the major vehicles for much of China's best poetry. Ci was less frequently set to music, although the original "tune patterns" continued to be applied in setting the form of the poems. Furthermore, the precise

tonal pattern for each sound in the sequence is also specifically prescribed, and all first-class poets adhere faithfully to these rigid requirements.

This poem is of peculiar significance in Mao Zedong's poetry, for it concerned with his personal feelings and innermost sentiments. Furthermore, as a poet, Mao Zedong occupied a unique position, hailed as the official Muse of the Arts in the People's Republic [7: 61], whose poetry bespeaks not only his own emotions and talents, but also loaded with memories and remembrances of the collective consciousness and unconscious sentiments of Chinese people.

## MAIN PART

### 1. Literal Interpretation of the Poem "Immortals: Reply to Li Shuyi"

The original poem is quoted here:

#### 蝶恋花·答李淑一

我失骄杨君失柳，  
杨柳轻飏直上重霄九。  
问讯吴刚何所有，  
吴刚捧出桂花酒。  
寂寞嫦娥舒广袖，  
万里长空且为忠魂舞。  
忽报人间曾伏虎，  
泪飞顿作倾盆雨。 [13: 183]

The Translation (Xu Yuanchong's version)

#### Tune: Butterflies Linger over Flowers

#### The Immortals: Reply to Li Shuyi

You've lost your Willow and I've lost my Poplar proud,

Their souls ascend the highest heaven, light as cloud.

The Woodman, asked what he has for wine,

Brings out a nectar of laurels divine.

The lonely Goddess of the Moon, large sleeves outspread,

Dances up endless skies for these immortal dead.

From the earth comes the news of the tiger o'erthrown,

In a sudden shower their tears fly down. [13: 83]

The poem consists of eight lines, which can be divided into two stanzas, with 60 Chinese characters. In the first line, “我失骄杨君失柳”. Xu Yuanchong has translated this line as “I lost my proud Poplar and you your Willow”. In merely seven words, “失” “lost”) is repeated twice, expressed a very strong feeling of sorrow and sadness, indicating the inconsolable “loss” in life, since both the poet and Li Shuyi lost their dearest, and most beloved person in life. Notably, here is a pun ingeniously used: the Chinese family name “杨” and “柳” (“Yang” and “Liu”) and have the same pronunciation and the same form of writing as “poplar” and “willow”, which are two kinds of trees, commonly loved and cherished by Chinese people, which are also frequently applied images in classical Chinese poems to express remembrances and reluctance for departure.

The second line: “杨柳轻飏直上重霄九”, “杨柳”(Yang+Liu) thus is a pun, with the double meaning “Yang Kaihui and Liu Zhixun” and the trees, Polar and Willow, translated as “Their souls ascend the highest heaven, light as cloud.” This line describes the branches of polar and willow uplifted swiftly by gentle winds, (their flowers and seeds) soaring to the celestial paradise. This is the poet direct answer to Li Shuyi's question in her poem

“Where had our martyrs gone?” That is their pilgrim souls, like the flowers and seeds of the Polar and Willow trees, soaring upwards to the highest heaven, i.e. the celestial paradise eternally remembered and revered by the living people. Furthermore, the poet envisages a captivating beautiful scenes in heaven describing how the heroic souls of Yang Kaihui and Liu Zhixun, directed by waving branches to the highest, infinite celestial heaven, like the winged seeds of poplar and willow, “ascend the highest heaven, light as cloud.”

The third line and fourth line: “问询吴刚何所有？吴刚捧出桂花酒”。

Translated as: “**The Woodman**, asked what he has for wine, /Brings out a nectar of laurels divine”. The Woodsman refers to the mythological figure, **Wu Gang**. Arriving at the Moon Palace, they meet Wu Gang, the god of the Moon, the man who had been continuously cutting the osmanthus tree. Asked what he could offer for their entertainment, Wu Gang provided his dearly cherished **Wine**, that is, “a nectar of the laurels divine” made from osmanthus blossoms. The translated version adopted the domestication strategy to make is easily acceptable to the western readers by translating the osmanthus wine into “a nectar of laurels divine”. “桂花”(“Gui Hua”) has the same or similar pronunciation with “(高)贵”(Gao Gui)“sublimity”, “Nobleness” or “dignity”. This image has the connotation of admiration, worship or high esteem.

In the second stanza, the fifth and sixth lines: “寂寞嫦娥舒广袖，万里长空且为忠魂舞”。“The lonely Goddess of the Moon, large sleeves outspread, / Dances up endless skies for these immortal dead”. The lonely moon goddess spreads her ample sleeves, and dance for these loyal

souls in infinite space. Here the lonely and solitary Moon Goddess, Change'E, came out and danced for them, extending her wide sleeves over the sky for thousands of Li (a measurement of length in Chinese, one Li is 500 meters in length) to show her reverence for them. The last two lines: “忽报人间曾伏虎，泪飞顿作倾盆雨”。

“From the earth comes the news of the tiger o'erthrown / In a sudden shower their tears fly down.” Suddenly when they heard the tidings that the Chinese people had won victory of the revolutionary cause, then their tears of joy pour forth as rain-flood flying from heaven to earth.

## 2. Mythological Images and the Cultural Implications

Northrop Frye, the preeminent advocate of archetypal criticism, defined archetype as “the recurring use of certain images or image clusters” in literature [3: 24]. Mythological images strike some very deep cord in the human heart when they can take us beyond the historical oldest beliefs and deep into our individual unconscious mind. According to Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), in the collective and in our individual unconscious are universal images, patterns, and forms of human experiences or archetypes. These archetypes can never be known directly, but they surface in art in an imperfect, shadowy way, taking the form of archetypal images. Jung argued that a part of the unconscious is linked by historical associations and communal “memories” to the unconscious minds of all people. The charm of poetry lies not only in its poetical ideas, but in the vivid mythological images appealing to the imagination [15: 57-59]. In the following part, the Chinese mythological or archetypal images are analyzed as follows:

### 2.1 *Die Lian Hua: Butterfly Linger-ing Over Flowers*

As an archetypal image, butterfly has two forms in the Chinese culture. One form is the lyric tonal pattern, "*Die Lian Hua*" (蝶恋花): literarily, meaning *Butterfly Linger-ing Over Flowers* or "*Butterfly Loves Flowers*". It not only indicates the structure of the poetic form, but also reminds the readers of the intimate relation between butterflies and flowers. Furthermore, there is another mythological image connected with the theme of love, entitled *Liang Zhu* (梁祝), which tell the story of the Chinese *Romeo and Juliet*, in which young lovers devoted to each other but died of family feuds, and they transformed themselves into paired butterflies flying together eternally, symbolizing eternal love. The "Hua Die" (化蝶, the transformation into butterflies) story, therefore reinforced the images of butterflies, which frequently appear in Chinese literary works to represent the idealized immortal love between lovers, and this concept is deeply embedded in Chinese culture. Mao Zedong, as a poet, is good at applying the verse form of *Ci*, and *Die Lian Hua* (蝶恋花) as a lyric pattern of tune, evidently is a deliberate choice to express personal sentiments and remembrances in an elegiac or mourning poem for his deceased wife, Yang Kaihui.

### 2.2 *Wu Gang: Cutting the Fragrant Osmanthus*

Chinese mythology held that a fragrant osmanthus grows on the moon, which is continuously cut by Wu Gang (吴刚). According to the folk tale, Wu Gang is obsessed with the idea of seeking to become immortal god, which enraged the Emperor in heaven to such an extent that Wu Gang is punished to cut the osmanthus on the moon. The Emperor

said that if he could fell the fragrant osmanthus, he would obtain the magic arts of attaining immortality. But, the osmanthus on the moon is actually a magic giant tree; it is as high as five hundred Zhang (a measurement of length, approximately equal to 3.3 meters). And sadly enough, the giant tree is self-healing, every chop Wu Gang cuts in the tree, the tree healed itself immediately. In this way he was condemned to the Sisyphean labor. Some other versions held that he was forced to cut it every 1,000 years lest its luxuriant growth overshadow the moon itself, others that he was obliged to cut it constantly only to see it regrow an equal amount every day. Whichever is the case, up to now Wu Gang is still cutting in the Moon Palace, and you could see the shade of the fragrant Osmanthus when there is bright and full moon, especially in the Mid-Autumn Festival. [11]

Wu Gang, as an ordinary human being, dream of becoming an Immortal, but punished by the Celestial Emperor to do endless Sisyphean labor. In this way, he attains his immortality, and sadly enough, at the price losing personal freedom and his family.

### 2.3 *The Osmanthus Wine*

The story of Wu Gang is closely connected with the osmanthus wine, which is nectar, intended for gods and goddess in Chinese mythology. The Chinese believe the full moon symbolizes family reunion, and hence, the Mid-Autumn Day, August 15, is set as a holiday for family members to get together and revere the full moon—a propitious token of abundance, concordance, and fortune. Also, the fragrant osmanthus is also closely associated with the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival. Osmanthus wine is a traditional choice for this occasion as the "reunion

wine”, together with one’s family, and osmanthus-flavored confections and teas may also be consumed on this special occasion.

It is not difficult for us to understand from the mythological images of Wu Gang, the god of moon and osmanthus, extended both hands to serve the osmanthus wine, to show his reverence for Yang and Liu. Thus our heroes never departed from us, never very far from us, whenever we see the moon, we can feel that they are still with us, esp. on the occasions of the Moon Festival, when we are celebrating the family reunion. Their spirits have been sublimated to eternal spirits in the minds of people.

#### 2.4 Chang'E Flies to the Moon

At the center of the poem is the mythological image of Chang'E (嫦娥), which is one of the four major myths in China. In ancient time, the Earth once had ten suns circling it, each taking turns to light up the Earth. But one fatal day, all ten suns came out together, searing the Earth with their heat. The Earth was redeemed by a strong miraculous archer named Hou Yi, who succeeded in shooting down nine of the suns. Hou Yi (后羿) in his greed stole the elixir of life from the Western Goddess (西王母) to continue and spread his despotic rule. However, his beautiful wife Chang'E imbibed the elixir of life to save the people from her husband's oppressive rule. After consuming the elixir, she was transformed into a fairy and she floated all the way to the Moon. Hou Yi was enchanted by his divinely beautiful wife so much that he refused to shoot down the Moon, thus making it her permanent abode. [15]

The mythological image of moon goddess is also mingled with sadness and melancholy. Chang'E, detached, separated, cut off from her family,

estranged and distanced from her husband, lives in the Moon Palace lonely and solitarily, although immortal. The goddess of the moon of Chinese people symbolizes double meaning, because of its waxes and wanes, for Loss and Frustration as well as Reunion and Regeneration [12]. In the poem, the lonely and solitary goddess of Moon extends her long sleeves in the vast heaven, dancing for these loyal souls in the infinite sky, showing her reverence for them. Their spirit will eternally inspiring the Chinese people, consoling them in their time of loss and despair, provide them with courage and determination, just like the moon shining beautifully and solitary in the dark night.

#### 2.5 Taming the Tiger

In Chinese culture, there are many stories in Daoism, Buddhism, folklore and literature about “taming the tiger” and it is often coordinated with “subdue the dragon”, with the metaphorical implication meaning to subdue and conquer the demons and evil spirits or to vanquish them. This archetypal image is applied here to indicate overpowering formidable or surmounting great obstacles or adversaries. In this poem, “tiger subdued”, alludes to the ultimate overthrow of the Kuomintang (KMT国民党) rule in 1949. “Tiger” is used to express the cruel tyranny of KMT and the ferocity of reactionaries. From the context of the poem, the meaning of “taming the tiger” is not hard to get for anyone who knows the history of Chinese revolution, i.e. to win the victory of the Chinese revolutionary cause, for which our heroes and martyrs had been fighting for. This mythological image is the most significant in the whole poem, which deserves pondering again and again, because it links the mythological world with the real world, past and present, and suggesting

that they did not die but was rather truly victorious heroes, they are part of us and still together with us.

### 3. Aesthetic Values Achieved by Applying Mythological Images

What aesthetic values do the mythological and archetypal images impart to this poem? These perspectives are listed here to be considered:

#### 3.1 Infusing New Spirit into the Mythological and Archetypal Framework

According to Frye, the task of archetypal critic is to help readers to see the "structures" of what they read by identifying literature's "organizing patterns of convention, genre and archetype". [3: 24] Mao Zedong in this poem managed to create a new Chinese national imagery by renewing traditional and ancient mythological and archetypal images of *Die Lian Hua*, *Wu Gang Cutting the Osmanthus*, *Chang'E Flies to the Moon*, etc. infused with the new spirit of sublimity and majesty of the poet's great mentality.

As is pointed out by Frazer, in *Golden Bough*, that death- rebirth myth is present in almost all cultural mythology, and is acted out in terms of growing seasons and vegetables [1]. In this poem, too, the mythological images are all connected with the death-rebirth and death-immortality. The imagery of seeds of poplar and willow spread themselves everywhere in the spring (1<sup>st</sup> stanza), mellowed and brewed osmanthus wine in autumn (2nd stanza) permeated the whole poem. The life of the revolutionary martyrs turned into "tears of happiness of victory" pour down as rain on earth (last two lines). Therefore, the mythological images on earth, in heaven and on the moon are connected, interacted and interwoven with each other. Such high

attainment is achieved by applying the mythological and archetypal images, which connecting man and nature, heart and soul, the material and the spirit, the finite and the infinite, mortal and immortal, which are fused into one unity and become indivisible. The past, present and future are reunited. Ordinary human beings and immortal gods and goddess are one in perfect fusion.

#### 3.2. The Sublimation of the Unconscious Experience into Conscious Awareness

From the instances discussed above, it not difficult to find that the archetypal and mythological images are links connecting the traditional culture, psychological experience, emotions, wishes and needs, with real-life situations and collective conscious and unconsciousness. Thus the application of the mythological and archetypal images congregates the complex factors with power and strength, appealing to millions of readers, activating the mythologies that create resonance subliminally and emotionally in the readers' mind. People become more aware of what the revolutionary martyrs sacrificed for the Chinese people's freedom, extolled their noble spirit, and inspiring those who fighting for the sublime ideals of human beings.

#### 3.3. Regeneration the Latent Power of the Mind

If the myths and archetypes in relation to the unconsciousness prove to be resources with contents of the deepest recesses of the human psyche, the same is true with the mythological images in poetry. When the latent potential of the mythological images is reawakened and activated they will sparkle splendidly with magic power to our imagination with vivid details and complicated associations. They will reawaken very mixed feelings

and emotions latent inaccessible elsewhere.

Most of the mythological images in this poem are associated with the moon, which is regarded as the most typical mythological symbol in Chinese culture. The Moon is the most visible symbol of Yin (阴, e.g. the moon), the feminine energy, the sign of sustaining and mothering, as opposed to the Yang (阳, e.g. the sun), the masculine energy, the sign of life and activity. Traditional Chinese culture conceived the Moon as a bearer of human emotions. Ancient Chinese myth and philosophy depict that the waxing and waning of moon greatly influenced the Chinese lunar calendar and Chinese philosophy regarding the quest for immortal life and occult wisdom.

### 3.4. Increasing the Spirituality of Poetry

Edward Hirsch claims that the defining characteristic of poetry is its spirituality. Poetry, which originated in prehistoric religious worship, has never lost "its sense of sacred mystery" [4:107]. The vocation of poets is thus "Orphic" (that is, mystical; associated with the miraculous gift for music manifested by Orpheus, a figure from mythology). Mythological images in poetry are like embedded stories with magic power, which are highly charged with spiritual values, associated with the past, present, and future.

### CONCLUSION

Poetry is a verbal statement of emotional values; a poem is an emotional value verbally stated. Of course, the poet's feelings are not stated directly in prosaic language but by means of artistic mechanisms, including mythological images, loaded with complicated emotions accumulated from ancient times. *The*

*Immortals – Reply to Li Shuyi* shows the difference between Mao and other poets in treating the love theme, that is, Mao often have made great efforts to avoid overindulgence in love's romantic feelings bordering on sentimentality, and the employment of mythological images has attributed a lot in achieving this end. In addition, he often makes his poems end in a spirited tone and cheerful mood for loftier aspirations.

The poem stands as a sample instance for the poet's imaginative skill of compressing classical myths into modern poetry, in which the combination of personal sentiments and revolutionist dignity reaches a rare height of dynamic balance. The application of mythological images can help to achieve the following aesthetic values in the following perspectives:

- 1) To infuse new spirit into the mythological and archetypal framework;
- 2) To sublimate of the unconscious experience into conscious awareness;
- 3) To regenerate the latent power of the mind;
- 4) To increase the spirituality of poetry;

Published in 1958, a contemporary poem in date, this poem retains the essential aesthetic qualities of Chinese classic poetry. By applying the traditional form of Ci and adopting various mythological images in the poem, Mao Zedong retained the essential aesthetic qualities of the classical Chinese poem:

- 1) Sharp vivid images;
- 2) Conciseness of expressions;
- 3) Rhythmical and flexible cadences;
- 4) Compactness of contents.
- 5) Flexibility of sentence structures;

[10]

For the younger generation of readers, however, the verses offer a source of new

insights into the personality, sentiments and historical ambitions of twentieth-century China's most influential leader. Many of Mao's poems, especially this "The Immortals: Reply to Li Shuyi" and his creative use of the mythological images, provide us useful data for such an inquiry.

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