

Meaning Behind Words: Enhancing the Comprehension of Imagery in Classical Chinese Poetry for Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL)

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Abstract—Classical Chinese poetry, steeped in cultural heritage, represents a distinguished facet of Chinese literature. As a core element, imagery conveys profound cultural significance and holds considerable educational value. This paper delves into the cognitive mechanisms behind imagery and examines teaching strategies for classical Chinese poetry in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL). Using semiotic theory, it explores the interplay between literal words (signifier: Xiang/象) and deeper emotional and cultural meanings (signified: Yi/意). The study applies Image Schemas theory, focusing on Spatial, Force, and Balance Image-Schemas, to offer a multidimensional perspective for comprehending poetic imagery. Through cultural memory theory, the paper highlights collective cultural traits inherent in classical Chinese poetic imagery and identifies common meanings and emotionally expressive patterns to support effective teaching. Advocating a multimodal approach, the paper integrates visual, auditory, and situational methods to enrich students' aesthetic experiences, helping them visualize scenes, appreciate rhythm, and connect with the poetry's cultural and emotional depth. By combining theoretical insights and textual analysis, this paper aims to enhance the integration of classical Chinese poetry into TCSL, fostering multicultural awareness and deepening cross-cultural understanding among learners, while also providing practical teaching recommendations for educators.

Index Terms—teaching Chinese as a second language (TCSL), classical Chinese poetry imagery, cultural cognition, teaching strategies, semiotics

I. INTRODUCTION

With the continuous development of economic globalization and cultural diversification, the role of language education in promoting personnel exchanges and international communication has become increasingly significant. Chinese culture, with its rich and extensive heritage, boasts numerous exemplary traditional cultural elements worth sharing with the world. Among these, the literary achievements and cultural depth of classical Chinese poetry stand out as exceptional in Chinese literature and hold substantial educational value. Imagery is a core component of classical Chinese poetry and is an essential means of expression and emotion, carrying profound cultural connotations (Yuan, 2009). Chinese poetic imagery is rooted in Chinese philosophical concepts and has flourished in the literary domain, reflecting the intellectual awareness of scholars and the shared aesthetic sentiment of the Chinese nation. As a medium for conveying meaning, imagery possesses significant vitality and value (Song & Jiang, 2022). Over thousands of years of development in classical Chinese poetry, generations of poets have created a remarkably rich array of poetic imagery. These images convey contemporary realities, emotions, and desires, while also carrying deep cultural psychological content, constructing a vivid representation of the national psyche (Yan, 2003). Therefore, teaching poetic imagery in classical Chinese poetry is a crucial window for Chinese language learners to truly appreciate Chinese literature and gain a deeper understanding of Chinese culture.

However, research on the theory of cognitive understanding of Chinese poetic imagery within the field of Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL) is relatively scarce. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the cognitive mechanisms of Chinese poetic imagery by integrating semiotic theory, image schema theory, and cultural memory theory. It analyzes teaching models and methods using examples of poetic imagery and offers guidance on aesthetic teaching practice in TCSL from visual, auditory, and situational perspectives. Based on new perspectives in literary and cultural teaching within TCSL, this paper conducts theoretical analysis and practical research on the cognitive understanding of Chinese poetic imagery. The goal is to promote the integration of research on Chinese poetic imagery with International

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Chinese teaching, helping international Chinese learners better develop multicultural concepts and enhance their cross-cultural understanding.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

As a classical Chinese literary form, classical Chinese poetry often develops unique personal styles among poets. Consequently, some scholars have conducted thematic research on the teaching of poetry from different poets. Feng (2012) focused on the poetry of Li Bai (李白), explaining the reasons for this choice from the perspectives of Li Bai (李白)'s artistic achievements and poetic style. In exploring the teaching content, Feng selected aspects such as language, imagery, and cultural context, and provided detailed teaching designs. Zhang (2016) chose the poetry of Du Fu (杜甫), clarifying the reasons for selecting this subject and providing lesson plans for poems as well as miscellaneous verse, concluding with a reflection on the teaching experience. Fan (2014) designed a teaching plan by comparing Wang Wei (王维)'s poems with the works of Russian poet Sergei Yesenin. Zhang (2017) analyzed the characteristics of Li Qingzhao (李清照)'s works, a representative of the delicate style of poetry, and discussed the significance of incorporating classical Chinese poetry teaching into Chinese as a foreign language instruction.

Currently, research on specialized textbooks for teaching classical Chinese poetry as a foreign language is limited, with studies mainly focusing on an overall analysis of existing textbooks or in-depth analyses of specific ones. Zhong (2014) provided a balanced evaluation of the textbook *Recite classical poems and learn Chinese*. This book features sixteen poems, with appropriately selected content and moderate difficulty; each poem's appreciation is engaging and distinctive. It also includes modern Chinese translations and easily understandable English interpretations, cleverly integrating ancient and modern, Chinese and Western elements. The author also creatively included cultural background knowledge and anecdotes about the authors, enhancing the book's appeal. Wang (2015) analyzed seven existing textbooks for teaching classical Chinese poetry, examining each for strengths and weaknesses, then categorizing them based on poetry content selection, appreciation, exercises, and supplementary resources. Wang summarized the successes, shortcomings, and challenges in the compilation of these textbooks, offering valuable suggestions for textbook development. Yan (2017) suggested that schools could consider offering separate classes on classical Chinese poetry to guide teachers and students in understanding the importance of learning classical Chinese poetry. Yan's study, focusing on intermediate-level foreign language poetry textbooks, detailed the teaching objects, content, methods, and standards for poetry selection, and attempted to compile a textbook. Yang (2020) proposed selecting texts based on four aspects: "telling China's story well and spreading the Chinese spirit," historical development, poetic themes, and language cognition patterns. Annotation design should consider students' thinking patterns, cultural psychology, and religious beliefs. Exercise design should be logical, systematic, directional, and balanced. Wang (2021) analyzed two current textbooks for teaching classical Chinese poetry as a foreign language from the perspective of textbook analysis, examining their content selection, compilation methods, and structural arrangements. This analysis aimed to help teachers use the textbooks more effectively in teaching. Hao (2021) analyzed 136 current textbooks for teaching classical Chinese poetry from a global Chinese textbook database, examining the distribution of quantity, types, and difficulty levels, and summarized the arrangement of classical Chinese poetry texts in these textbooks from both content and form perspectives. Recommendations for the arrangement of classical Chinese poetry in comprehensive foreign language course textbooks were provided.

III. METHODS

This study takes a qualitative approach, blending semiotic analysis, cognitive theory, and case study methods to explore strategies for teaching classical Chinese poetry imagery in TCSL. Semiotic analysis focuses on the relationship between imagery (signifier: Xiang / 象) and its deeper meanings (signified: Yi / 意), revealing emotional and philosophical layers. Image Schema Theory is used to analyze spatial, force, and balance schemas that guide cognitive understanding of imagery. Cultural memory theory links poetic imagery to shared cultural history, enhancing cross-cultural comprehension. Case studies tested multimodal teaching, integrating visual, auditory, and interactive methods to improve learner engagement.

Semiotic Analysis dissects how imagery serves as a signifier, showing how words like "moon" or "river" evoke deeper meanings, transcending language barriers. Image Schema Theory categorizes cognitive structures like spatial, force, and balance schemas. For example, spatial schema highlights relationships in imagery (distance, direction), and force schema examines tension and change. Cultural Memory Framework identifies how poetic imageries reflect collective cultural traits and historical context, helping learners connect with the poetry on a deeper level. Case Studies in Multimodal Teaching incorporate visual aids, traditional music, and interactive activities to enhance learners' engagement with poetic scenes, rhythms, and cultural meanings. Classroom observations and educator discussions document the impact of these approaches.

IV. FINDINGS

A. *Integrating Classical Chinese Poetry Into TCSL*

(a). *Classical Chinese Poetry for Chinese Language Instruction*

In terms of phonetics, classical Chinese poetry features harmonious rhythms, parallelism, and attention to tonal patterns (rise and fall of tones), making it excellent material for practicing Chinese pronunciation. This is beneficial for foreign students in mastering Chinese tones. Therefore, using poetry to correct tonal pronunciation is quite necessary. For example, in Li Shen (李绅)'s *The Peasants* (悯农):

锄禾日当午 [wǔ] (At noon they hoe up weeds),
 汗滴禾下土 [tǔ] (Their sweat drips on the soil).
 谁知盘中餐 (Who knows the rice that feeds),
 粒粒皆辛苦 [kǔ] (Is the fruit of hard toil) (Xu, 1994)!

The final words of the first, second, and fourth lines, all pronounced with the third tone, can enhance the correct pronunciation of this tone, of this tone, which is often difficult for learners. The use of classical Chinese poetry can subtly aid to improve incorrect pronunciations.

Besides practicing and reinforcing the four tones, classical Chinese poetry teaching also aids in practicing initials (声母: initial consonants) and finals (韵母: final vowels). When practicing finals, teachers should choose classical Chinese poetry with strict rhyme schemes and simple content to help students practice. Students should aim for accurate pronunciation through the slightly exaggerated recitation of poems, such as Li Qingzhao (李清照)'s *One Blossoming Sprig of Plum* (一剪梅):

红藕香残玉簟秋。轻解罗裳，独上兰舟 [zhōu] (The scent of red lotus fades and my jade mat is cold as autumn. Gently I loosen my silk robe and enter the magnolia boat alone.).
 云中谁寄锦书来? 雁字回时，月满西楼 [lóu] (Who has sent an embroidered letter via clouds? Wild geese form a character in the sky: return. The west tower fills with moon.).
 花自飘零水自流。一种相思，两处闲愁 [chóu] (Blossoms drift and water flows where it will, but my heart is still sick, split between this place and where you are.).
 此情无计可消除，才下眉头，却上心头 [tóu] (I can't kill this desire. Even when my eyebrows relax, my heart flares up again.) (Barnstone & Ping, 2010).

The rhymes in the final two lines are all “ou”, making this poem suitable for practicing the “ou” final.

In terms of vocabulary, classical Chinese poetry employs a wealth of synonyms, near-synonyms, and antonyms, which not only enriches the rhythmic quality of the poetry but also ensures well-structured parallelism in the text, contributing to the creation of evocative imagery. This also aids in reviewing and consolidating modern Chinese knowledge.

Regarding grammar, Chinese grammar has developed steadily (Dai, 2007). Classical Chinese and modern Chinese share similar vocabulary and grammatical structures, with the “subject-verb-object”, “modifier-adverbial-complement” sentence structure remaining largely unchanged from ancient to modern times. This stability reduces the burden on foreign students learning classical Chinese poetry.

(b). *Classical Chinese Poetry for Chinese Culture Acquisition*

Classical Chinese poetry is a quintessential representation of classical Chinese literature. Studying classical Chinese poetry involves not only learning the language itself but also acquiring knowledge about ancient Chinese history, cultural customs, notable figures, and the expression of Chinese thoughts. It serves as a bridge for foreign students to engage with Chinese classical culture. The process of learning classical Chinese poetry for foreign students is also a process of understanding traditional Chinese culture. For example, classical Chinese poetry often depicts traditional Chinese festivals such as the Spring Festival, Tomb Sweeping Day, Mid-Autumn Festival, and Chongyang Festival, many of which are still celebrated today. For instance, in Du Mu (杜牧)'s *On Purebright Day* (清明):

清明时节雨纷纷 (Purebright Season comes with fine fast drizzle),
 路上行人欲断魂 (and travelers on the road feel their souls sliced off).
 借问酒家何处有 (Please tell me where I can find a wine shop)?
 牧童遥指杏花村 (A cowherd boy points to a distant Apricot Blooming Village) (Barnstone & Ping, 2010).

Du Mu vividly describes the Qingming Festival, also known as Tomb-Sweeping Day. The poem captures the somber atmosphere of the festival, when people visit ancestral graves to pay respects and clean tombstones. Du Mu's portrayal of the festival's rites and the melancholy of the season provides learners with a deeper appreciation of the cultural and historical significance of Qingming. Through such poetry, students can explore how these traditions are embedded in the fabric of Chinese life and understand the personal and communal aspects of remembering ancestors. Studying classical Chinese poetry like *On Purebright Day* enriches learners' knowledge of Chinese festivals and offers a poignant connection to the cultural values celebrated during these times.

B. *Semiotic Theory and the Emotional Significance of Imagery*

Saussure (2011) posits that signs consist of two basic components: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the form or physical representation of a sign. In language, it refers to the sequence of sounds or letters that form a word. In visual contexts, it could be an image or symbol. The signified, on the other hand, is the concept or meaning that the

signifier represents. It is the mental image or idea that arises when encountering the signifier. Thus, linguistic signs are a unity of the signifier (the phonetic form) and the signified (the meaning or content) (Saussure, 2011). The signifier is the form of expression, and the signified is the content of that expression. A signifier is a visual representation of a sign containing a picture. Signified is a mental concept known to be sign. Every sign is, on one hand, a material representation and, on the other hand, a reflection of the mind, representing the unity of subject and object (Fauzan, 2023). Signifier means a visual meaning of a sign, while the signified is the acknowledgment of a sign by its mental concept, which means the mental concept is shared by people from the same culture and speak the same language (Putri, 2021).

The signifier is the perceptible component of a sign, essential for conveying meaning but does not convey meaning by itself without the signified (Wang, 2016). The signified is the abstract concept conveyed by the signifier. It is intangible but understood through cultural and contextual interpretation. The “associative total” established by the signifier and the signified constitutes the sign (Volek, 2001). In the context of classical Chinese poetry, a signifier might be the written character “月” (moon) or a visual representation of the moon in a poem. For the signifier “月” (moon), the signified might include concepts such as solitude, the passage of time, or nostalgia in classical Chinese poetry.

In semiotics, the expression of word meaning is divided into two types: one is the reflection of concepts of objective things, known as the logical meaning of the word; the other is the subjective emotional evaluation of objective things, known as the emotional meaning of the word (Xin, 2007). Some words only have a logical meaning, such as “tool” or “chair,” while others have both logical and emotional meanings, such as “pet” or “hero.” In semiotics, the logical meaning of a word determines its referential function, appealing to reason and understanding, while the emotional meaning determines its symbolic emotional function, appealing to feelings and emotions (Bucci et al., 2016). Imagery is a specialized term in poetry analysis, and in the context of Chinese classical poetry, it translates to “意象” (Yi Xiang), which is a combination of two concepts. “Yi” (意) represents personal thoughts and emotions, while “Xiang” (象) refers to perceptions shaped by external objective elements. Therefore, imagery in this context is the projection of “Yi” onto “Xiang.” In line with the aforementioned semiotic research, “Yi” (意) corresponds to the signified, while “Xiang” (象) aligns more closely with the concept of the signifier. Imagery is an objective external object infused with subjective emotions, or subjective emotions expressed through objective images (Yuan, 2009). Based on the above understanding, this paper outlines the framework structure of the signified and the signifier and uses this to analyze the deeper meanings and emotions in classical Chinese poetry.

Signifier: “Xiang” (象) - Form - Concrete Concept - Logical Meaning - Referential Function

Signified: “Yi” (意) - Content - Abstract Concept - Emotional Meaning - Emotional Function

To illustrate the generation of imagery and the emotional meaning behind words, we can use examples from classical Chinese poetry, such as Li Bai (李白)’s *Thoughts on A Silent Night* (静夜思) (Xu, 1994) (Figure 1).

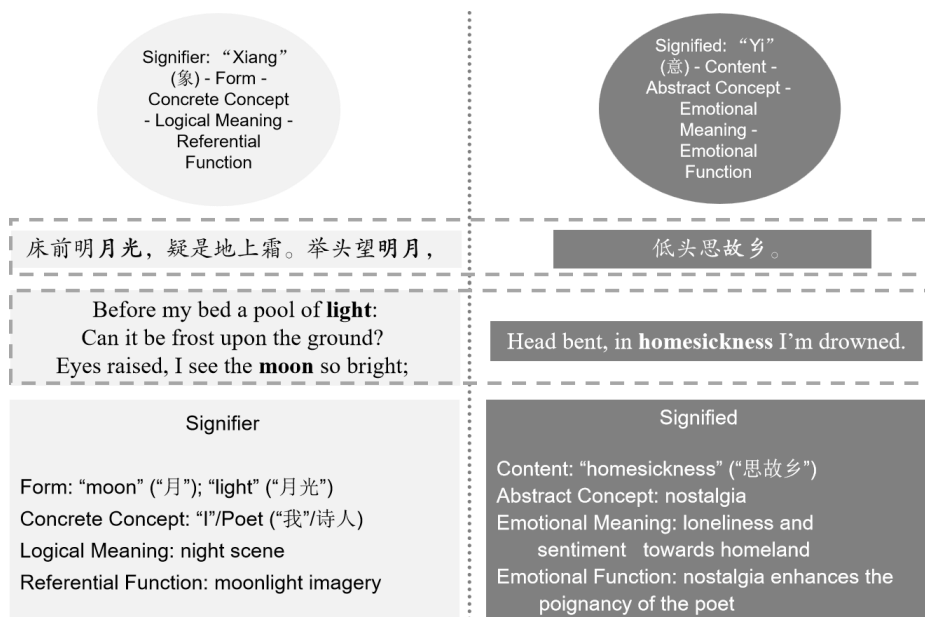


Figure 1. Semiotic Theory and the Emotional Significance of Imagery

Li Bai (李白)’s *Thoughts on A Silent Night* offers a profound insight into the poet’s inner solitude and nostalgia through the lens of semiotic analysis. In terms of signifier, the lines “Before my bed a pool of light” and “Eyes raised, I see the moon so bright” vividly depict the image of moonlight illuminating the poet’s bed. The form of these words provides a clear visual representation, allowing readers to experience the serenity of the night and the moonlight’s brilliance. The logical meaning of these descriptions conveys not just a simple night scene but the true essence of a quiet, reflective

evening. The referential function of the moonlight imagery engages readers, immersing them in the poet's experience of tranquility and solitude. Regarding the signified, the phrase "Head bent, in homesickness I'm drowned" goes beyond merely referring to the poet's actual place of origin. In this context, the content symbolizes the poet's deep nostalgia and yearning for his past and loved ones. This emotional meaning reflects the profound loneliness and longing experienced by the poet, emphasizing his sense of isolation. The emotional function of this nostalgia enhances the poignancy of the poet's sentiment towards his homeland (Qu, 2002; Zhang, 2010). Through this semiotic analysis, we gain a deeper understanding of Li Bai (李白)'s delicate depiction of the moonlit night and the underlying emotional currents of longing and solitude (Jia, 2013).

C. Image Schemas Theory and Thematic Recognition of Imagery

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) introduced the concept of "Image Schema" in their seminal work, *Metaphors We Live By*, where they combined the notions of "image" and "schema." They proposed that image schemas are abstract structures formed from sensory and perceptual experiences and interactions, existing between concepts and language. Rather than being specific images, image schemas are abstract forms derived from the domain of cognitive imagery. These schemas, originating from embodied human experiences, form the foundation for conceptualization, categorization, and abstract reasoning. From a psychological perspective, imagery represents mental constructs, while schemas are cognitive frameworks formed through the processing and organization of information and experiences (Gibbs & Colston, 1995). Schemas, stored in memory, facilitate the understanding of new experiences by comparing them with existing schemas (Wang, 2007). Image Schema is a crucial concept in cognitive linguistics, referring to the fundamental cognitive structures that arise from human interactions with the external world. Cognitive linguistics emphasizes the role of metaphor as a central feature of human thought processes, with our cognitive systems being predominantly structured by metaphors. This blending of seemingly unrelated elements to create mappings from source to target domains is a key aspect of how we perceive and understand phenomena (Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, 2003). Image schema is an abstract topological conceptualization that can be used to represent structures in various cognitive domains. Johnson (1987) provided a long list of basic image schemas, including Path, Container, Verticality, Force, etc.

In Classical Chinese poetry, image schemas are crucial for interpreting imagery, which often evokes natural scenes, emotions, and cultural symbols through vivid and intricate descriptions. These images are deeply embedded in cultural, emotional and cognitive schemas shared by both the poet and the reader. Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's research, as well as the specific characteristics of teaching Classical Chinese poetry, this study categorizes the various schemas into three groups: the Spatial Image-Schemas, the Force Image-Schemas, and the Balance Image-Schemas. This study explores the role of image schema in understanding poetic themes by analyzing three categories of poetry: Travel and Homesickness Poetry, Love and Sorrow Poetry, and Object-Praising Poetry. Analyzing these themes through the lens of the three classic image schema groups reveals how these schemas influence the imagery and emotional expressions within each category. For instance, Travel and Homesickness Poetry often utilizes the Spatial Image-Schemas to depict the distance and movement between the poet and their homeland. Love and Sorrow Poetry might employ the Force Image-Schemas to illustrate the dynamics of emotional interactions, while Object-Praising Poetry frequently reflects the Balance Image-Schemas through its depiction of natural harmony and equilibrium.

(a). Spatial Image-Schemas

Spatial metaphors typically map abstract concepts onto spatial ones, allowing abstract concepts to be interpreted and organized using spatial understanding. For example, the container metaphor views various entities as containers, with emotions, thoughts, and other abstract elements being seen as contents inside these containers (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Similarly, the direction metaphor views time as an object moving through space (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Spatial metaphors are universal across different languages and cultures because they are rooted in shared human physiological and perceptual experiences. Spatial Image-Schemas, fundamental for understanding physical movement and spatial relationships, involve the movement or positioning of entities within space, and are essential for conceptualizing paths, directions, and the interaction between center and periphery (Talmy, 2005). In Travel and Homesickness Poetry, imagery reflecting this schema can depict journeys, distances, and spatial arrangements, which help convey a sense of movement and placement within the poem's narrative. For instance, the portrayal of landscapes or emotional distances between characters can be analyzed through this schema. In Wang Wei (王维)'s *Thinking of My Brothers on Mountain-climbing Day* (九月九日忆山东兄弟) (Xu, 1994), spatial motion is central, as the physical distance from family during a festival is poignantly used to underscore feelings of isolation and homesickness. The poem's imagery evokes a powerful sense of emotional and cultural dislocation, enhancing the reader's empathy for the poet's longing (Figure 2).

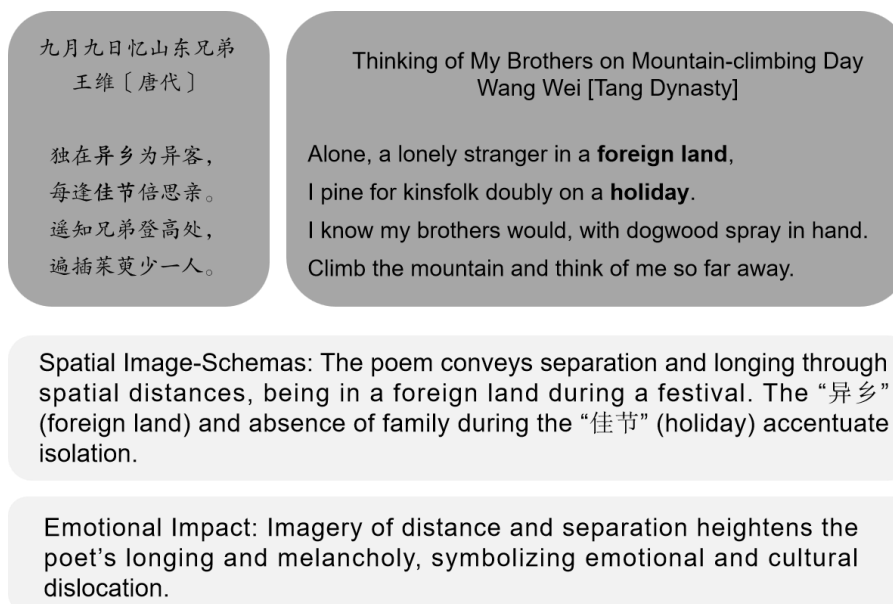


Figure 2. Analysis of Travel and Homesickness Poetry Through Spatial Image-Schemas

(b). Force Image-Schemas

Forces are experienced through interactions, have directional qualities, describe specific paths of motion, originate from sources and can be directed towards targets, vary in intensity, and are crucial for understanding causal sequences (Johnson, 1987). Johnson (1987) categorizes different types of forces into suppression, blockage, opposition, removal of restrictions, activation, displacement, attraction, and repulsion. Cervel (1999) offers a broader range of emotional analyses, suggesting that emotions can be perceived as opponents (e.g., wrestling with one’s emotions), animals (e.g., emotions running away), or living organisms (e.g., killing one’s emotions). In Object-Praising Poetry, the power of nature and the alternation of seasons, as well as the tumultuous fate and other subjective or objective forces are all reflected. The Force Image-Schemas are instrumental in expressing emotional intensity, conflict, and the interaction of various elements, including internal struggles, interpersonal conflicts, or the exertion of influence and control. Gong Zizhen (龚自珍)’s *Miscellanies of the Year 1839* (己亥杂诗) (Xu, 2013a) exemplifies the Force Image-Schemas, where fallen blossoms symbolize resilience and sacrifice. The transformation of “fallen blossoms” into “mud” in “spring” represents not only the cycle of renewal but also the poet’s unwavering commitment to societal progress despite personal loss, imbuing the poem with a profound philosophical significance (Figure 3).

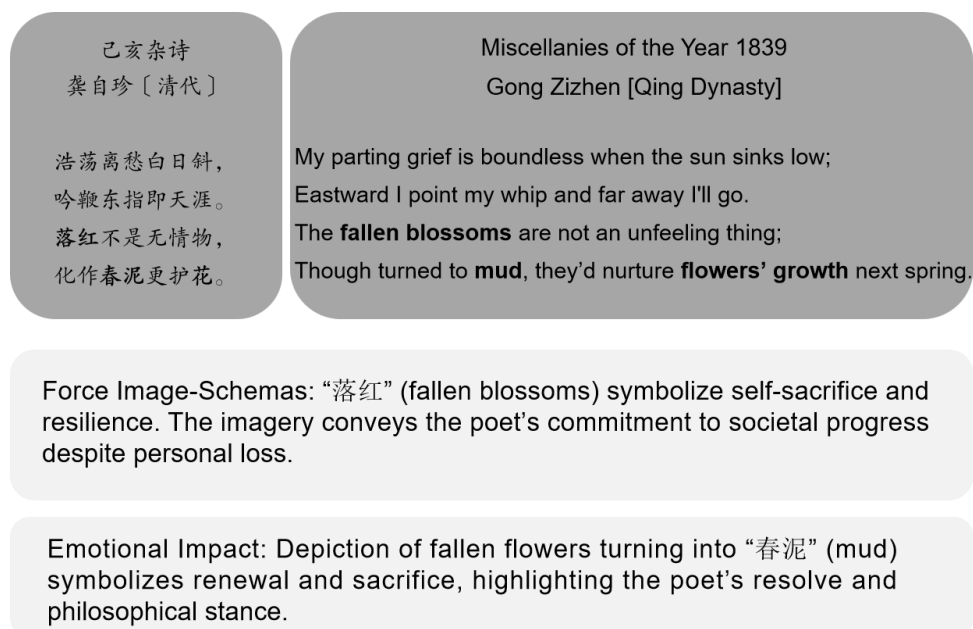


Figure 3. Analysis of Object-Praising Poetry Through Force Image-Schemas

(c). *Balance Image-Schemas*

The container metaphor is commonly used to express the symmetry of abstract concepts such as emotions and thoughts. The function of a container is to maintain the balance and stability of its contents, and this metaphor helps to describe the steadiness of emotions or the fixed state of thoughts (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For example, in poetry, a stable inner world is often represented through the container metaphor, where thoughts and emotions are “enclosed” in a seemingly stable psychological state. Johnson (1987) examines how bodily experiences of spatial stability contribute to cognitive stability. In classical Chinese poetry, this sense of stability can be conveyed through descriptions of natural landscapes, allowing readers to experience spatial stability and order psychologically. Talmy (2000) investigates how cognitive frameworks of spatial symmetry and stability affect our understanding. Balance schemas can illustrate the equilibrium of power, emotions, or authority when describing emotions or social relationships. In classical Chinese poetry, balance schemas are manifested through symmetrical descriptions and harmonious imagery, which help readers perceive internal balance and structural beauty in the poem. However, different forces or elements may be in a state of balance or imbalance (Sentis & Burnstein, 1979). When emotions, social relationships, or thoughts are out of balance or unstable, balance schemas can also highlight these imbalances. For instance, poets often express sentiments of longing or emotional instability caused by unfulfilled aspirations or societal turmoil. An example of disrupted balance is evident in Wang Changling (王昌龄)’s *Sorrow of A Young Bride in Her Boudoir* (闺怨) (Xu, 1994), where the balance schema is used to contrast the lively renewal of spring with inner sorrow. This juxtaposition accentuates the emotional turmoil, as the imagery of vitality and stagnation deepens the depiction of psychological conflict, making the poet’s personal suffering more tangible (Figure 4).

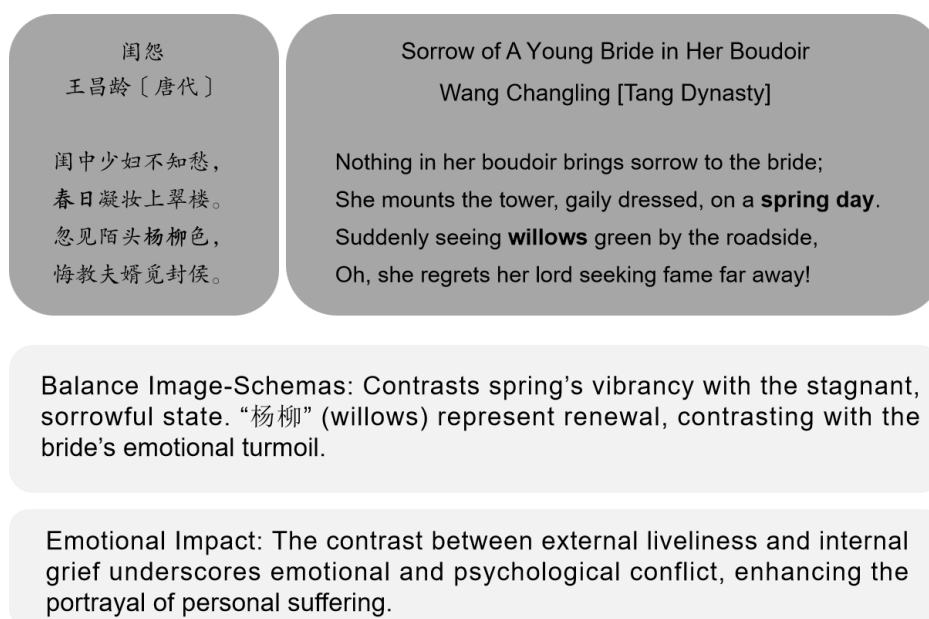


Figure 4. Analysis of Love and Sorrow Poetry Through Balance Image-Schemas

D. *Cultural Memory Theory and Imagery Expression Patterns*

Assmann (2011) argues that cultural memory is a form of collective memory that transcends individual memory and pertains to a group, such as the collective memory of a nation or state, holding long-term significance beyond individual lifespans. Cultural memory reflects on the patterns of civilization’s development through the lens of cultural transmission and focuses on the history of human cultural development. The content of this memory is the past of an ethnic group or cultural community, transcending the absolute time of generations. Assmann (2013) suggests that this memory is a diachronic identity constructed by society, serving a stabilizing and reproducing function, thus forming a consistent identity that remains intact through generational shifts and historical changes. Cultural memory primarily uses text and ritual as mediums, shared by several people, conveying collective cultural information that directly influences the formation of national subjectivity and identity. It centers around a value system akin to a collective soul, which, through the maintenance and handling by political and cultural elites, externalizes into texts and rituals (Assmann, 2011). In summary, its purpose is to establish cultural subjectivity and cultural identity.

From this perspective, classical Chinese poetry is not just a school subject but also a symbol representing the crystallization of traditional culture. Through its diachronic identity, it conveys cultural information carried by the Chinese poets through generations, transcending individual lifespans to become a symbol of the collective memory of China. It represents a collective identity of a people, maintained through generations, thereby promoting the formation of national subjectivity and identity. Chinese readers can understand the imagery infused with the poets’ subjective emotions in classical Chinese poetry and grasp the emotions subtly expressed by the poets because they share similar cultural

memories. Human experiences of the objective world are based on specific living and cultural environments, and the cognitive structures formed through these embodied experiences carry particular cultural connotations (Zhang, 2019). However, Chinese language learners come from different socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural environments. When reading classical Chinese poetry, they may unconsciously interpret it based on the imagery formed from their own cultural experiences, which can lead to misunderstandings of the poetry and prevent them from appreciating the “Signified (Abstract Concept / Emotional Function)” conveyed by the poet through “Signifier (Concrete Concept / Referential Function).” The reason for these misunderstandings is that foreign readers lack collective cultural memories similar to those of the poets. Therefore, in the process of learning classical Chinese poetry, it is essential to help learners fully understand the cultural context of the imagery, so that they can grasp the artistic conception and cultural connotations of the original poetry.

In classical Chinese poetry, the imagery used to convey emotions and meanings often follows similar patterns. For instance, the bright moon symbolizes longing, willows represent a reluctance to leave, wine is used to drown sorrows, chrysanthemums signify a desire for seclusion, and “a rare moon with stars” depicts a traveler’s loneliness, among others. By familiarizing ourselves with these images, learners can more easily categorize and summarize them when analyzing poetry, allowing the imagery to be applied flexibly rather than being restricted to textbook limitations. In light of the above analysis and referencing the commonly used imagery in classical Chinese poetry teaching in primary and secondary schools in China (Song & Gao, 2023), the common forms of imagery in classical Chinese poetry, along with examples, are outlined as follows (Table 1).

TABLE 1
IMAGERY EXPRESSION PATTERNS OF CLASSICAL CHINESE POETRY

No.	Themes	Typical Imagery of Classical Chinese Poetry			Representatives of Classical Chinese Poetry	
		Signifier - “Xiang” (象)	Signified - “Yi” (意)		Chinese Version	English Version
			Meaning	Emotional Impact		
1	Homesickness (Spatial Image-Schemas)	Moon	Longing for family, homesickness	Nostalgia for home, concern for loved ones	“露从今夜白，月是故乡明” (唐·杜甫)	“From this night on, dew will whiten to frost. The moon looks brighter at home.” — Du Fu (Tang) (Barnstone & Ping, 2010)
2		Wild Geese	The migration of wild geese in autumn evokes a sense of wandering and loneliness	Creates a sense of separation and homesickness	“孤雁不饮啄，飞鸣声念群。” (唐·杜甫)	“The lone wild goose doesn't peck or drink, just flies and cries out, seeking its flock.” — Du Fu (Tang) (Barnstone & Ping, 2010)
3		Double Carps	Letters in the shape of carps, symbolizing correspondence	Evokes longing for communication with a distant loved one	“隔水高楼，望断双鱼信。” (宋·赵令畤)	“I gaze from the waterside tower high, but no fish would bring letters here.” — Zhao Lingzhi (Song) (Xu, 2013b)
4	Farewell (Spatial Image-Schemas)	Willow Tree	The homophone of “willow” (柳/Liu) sounds like “to stay,” expressing reluctance to part	Expresses deep reluctance to part, conveys longing after separation	“春风知别苦，不遣柳条青。” (唐·李白)	“The wind of early spring knows parting grieves; It will not green the roadside willow leaves.” — Li Bai (Tang) (Xu, 1994)
5		Wine	Consolation, well-wishing, encouragement, and comfort	Serves as a medium to express emotions during parting	“劝君更尽一杯酒，西出阳关无故人。” (唐·王维)	“I invite you to drink a cup of wine again; West of the Sunny Pass no more friends will be seen.” — Wang Wei (Tang) (Xu, 1994)
6		Pavilion	Ancient roadside pavilions used for seeing off travelers or for resting	Sets a melancholic tone, reflecting sorrowful parting	“寒蝉凄切，对长亭晚。” (宋·柳永)	“Cold cicadas sing plaintively. In twilight I face a long pavilion after a brief rain.” — Liu Yong (Song) (Barnstone & Ping, 2010)
7	Aspirations (Force Image-Schemas)	Pine, Bamboo, Plum Blossom	Pine: Represents strength and resilience; Bamboo: Upright and graceful, symbolizing integrity; Plum Blossom: Blooms in the harsh winter, symbolizing unyielding spirit	Symbolizes high aspirations, noble character	“墙角数枝梅，凌寒独自开。” (宋·王安石)	“Where the wall turns, several branches of plum flowers unfold blossoms on their own against the cold.” — Wang Anshi (Song) (Barnstone & Ping, 2010)
8		Ice and Snow	Ice and snow are often metaphors for loyalty and purity	Represents loyalty, purity, and noble character	“洛阳亲友如相问，一片冰心在玉壶。” (唐·王昌龄)	“If my friends in the North should ask if I'm all right, my heart is free of stain as ice in crystal vase.” —

No.	Themes	Typical Imagery of Classical Chinese Poetry			Representatives of Classical Chinese Poetry	
		Signifier - "Xiang" (象)	Signified - "Yi" (意)		Chinese Version	English Version
			Meaning	Emotional Impact		Wang Changling (Tang) (Xu, 1994)
9		Chrysanthemum	Symbolizes strong character or noble temperament	Reflects strength of character and high moral standing	“采菊东篱下，悠然见南山。” (六朝·陶渊明)	“I pick fence-side chrysanthemums at will, and leisurely I see the southern hill.” — Tao Yuanming (Six Dynasties) (Xu, 1994)
10	Love (Balance Image-Schemas)	Bluebird	A mythical messenger bird of the Queen Mother of the West, conveying messages for separated lovers	Represents unfulfilled love, longing for a loved one	“蓬山此去无多路，青鸟殷勤为探看。” (唐·李商隐)	“It is not far from here to the Island of Fairies. Bluebird, please help me find my way” — Li Shangyin (Tang) (Barnstone & Ping, 2010)
11		Red Beans (Abrus precatorius is commonly known as jequirity, Crab's eye)	Represents yearning and longing	Symbolizes deep longing and affection	“红豆生南国，春来发几枝，愿君多采撷，此物最相思。” (唐·王维)	“Red berries (beans) grow in southern land, How many load in spring the trees! Gather them till full is your hand; They would revive fond memories.” — Wang Wei (Tang) (Xu, 1994)
12		Paired Birds, Intertwined Branches	Paired birds and intertwined branches symbolize eternal love	Symbolizes eternal, unbreakable love	“在天愿作比翼鸟，在地愿为连理枝。” (唐·白居易)	“On high, we'd be two lovebirds flying wing to wing; On earth, two trees with branches twined from spring to spring.” — Bai Juyi (Tang) (Xu, 1994)
13	Sorrow Balance Image-Schemas)	Cuckoo	In ancient mythology, the cuckoo's mournful cry is poignant and moving	Expresses sorrow and sadness, creating a melancholic atmosphere	“杜鹃啼血猿哀鸣” (唐·白居易)	“But gibbons' cry and cuckoo's homeward-going call?” — Bai Juyi (Tang) (Xu, 1994)
14		Parasol Tree, Banana Leaf	Parasol Tree: Represents sadness and sorrow, creating a melancholy atmosphere; Banana Leaf: Often associated with loneliness and sorrow, particularly in the context of parting	Intensifies the feeling of sorrow and loneliness	“春风桃李花开日，秋雨梧桐叶落时。” (唐·白居易)	“Or when in vernal breeze were peach and plum full-blown, or when in autumn rain parasol leaves were shed?” — Bai Juyi (Tang) (Xu, 1994)
15		Gibbons	The cry of the gibbons evokes a sense of desolation and sorrow	Creates a desolate, sorrowful atmosphere	“风急天高猿啸哀” (唐·杜甫)	“Gibbons wail into a high sky of wild wind.” — Du Fu (Tang) (Barnstone & Ping, 2010)

V. DISCUSSION

A. Multimodal Teaching to Foster Visual Aesthetics

Visual aesthetic experiences are grounded in the vivid imagery depicted in classical Chinese poetry (Ye, 2010). In teaching Chinese as a foreign language, poetry with strong aesthetic potential can offer a highly visual experience due to its rich imagery. Classical Chinese poetry not only creates a static picture but also provides readers with a dynamic visual feast. The learning process, combining visual elements, imagination, and creativity, can offer students a visually rich aesthetic experience. By integrating poetry with visual art, whether through appreciation or creation, students can be guided to experience the “unity of poetry and painting” in classical Chinese poetry. For instance, Tang Dynasty poet Luo Binwang (骆宾王)'s poem *O Geese* (咏鹅) describes:

鹅，鹅，鹅 (O geese, O geese, O geese)!

曲项向天歌 (You crane your neck and sing to the sky your song sweet).

白毛浮绿水 (Your white feathers float on green water with ease),

红掌拨清波 (You swim through clear waters with your red-webbed feet) (Xu, 1994).

These few lines cover multiple descriptions of the goose's color, actions, and posture, vividly portraying the bright and vivid colors of white feathers, green water, red feet, and clear waves. The lively and flexible imagery of “crane,” “sing,” “float,” and “swim” creates a vivid picture of a goose playing in the water. Teachers can use images, physical objects, or videos to give students an initial understanding of the imagery in classical Chinese poetry, helping them visualize related scenes in their minds.

It is highly necessary to use visual materials such as films or images when teaching imagery in classical Chinese poetry. Another example is the imagery of the “red beans” in Chinese poetry (see Table 1, item no. 11). In botany, there are many

types of red beans. In ancient China, there were two common types: the edible red bean and the inedible but highly ornamental red bean. The scientific name of the former is Adzuki bean (Figure 5 right), and the latter is *Abrus precatorius* (Figure 5 left). During the Tang Dynasty, poets often used *Abrus precatorius* to express feelings of homesickness, which is why *Abrus precatorius* is also called the “lovesick bean” in China (Gao & Luo, 2021). In class, in addition to visually comparing and displaying these materials, teachers can further introduce more aspects of Chinese culture related to red beans. For example, there is a legend about the red bean: A long time ago, a man went off to war, and his wife waited at home, longing for his return every day, missing him so much that she wept constantly. When her tears ran dry, she began to cry blood, and this blood fell to the ground and became a seed, which gradually sprouted and grew into a plant that produced red beans. This is how the red bean came to be called the “lovesick bean.” Moreover, the bright red color of the red bean was often used as decoration in ancient China, such as in hairpins. Therefore, in ancient times, young men would often give red bean hairpins to women to express their love.



Figure 5. Images of Two Common Red Beans in China

B. Poetry Recitation to Develop Auditory Aesthetics

Auditory aesthetic experiences are based on the musicality of classical Chinese poetry (Li & Tang, 2013). Chinese poetry emphasizes tonal patterns and rhyming. During the Tang Dynasty, regulated verse poetry required specific tonal patterns and rhymes, while Han Yuefu, Song lyrics, and Yuan drama could be set to music (Zhu, 2013). Thus, the musicality and phonetic qualities of poetry are very prominent. A well-written classical poem features rhythmic variations and musicality, making it easy to read aloud with lingering resonance. Whilst teaching, the musicality of poetry can help students appreciate auditory beauty. Teachers can design rhyming games or encourage students to create their own poems set to music. The rhythmic and tonal variations in classical Chinese poetry can help correct students’ pronunciation issues in Chinese. Many students’ native languages do not have the tonal distinctions of Chinese, making it difficult to read classical Chinese poetry. However, through repetitive recitation, students’ pronunciation improves. Teachers can analyze imagery in depth, guide students in recitation, and incorporate expressions and actions to deeply experience and understand the atmosphere created by the imagery and the emotions conveyed by the poet. Teachers can also play classical Chinese poetry songs to enhance the classroom atmosphere. Music conveys the imagery of classical Chinese poetry, leading students to gradually enter the content of the poetry and feel the poet’s emotions. Many classical poems have been adapted into popular songs, such as “*Shui Diao Ge Tou* (水调歌头).” Teachers facilitate students to learn and sing these songs to appreciate the flavor of classical Chinese poetry.

VI. CONCLUSION

In today’s globalized world, language education is key to fostering international communication and understanding. Chinese culture, with its rich history, offers valuable insights, especially through classical poetry, which conveys deep cultural and philosophical ideas (Li, 2011). The imagery in Chinese poetry is not decorative but a critical medium for expressing emotions and values. This paper examines the cognitive mechanisms behind poetic imagery, using semiotic theory, image schema theory, and cultural memory theory to analyze how these elements operate in TCSL. Imagery in classical poetry is structured to convey significant cultural and emotional meanings, helping foreign students connect deeply with Chinese culture (Yuan, 2009).

This study applies semiotic theory to explore how poetic imagery functions beyond mere visuals, acting as carriers of cultural significance. By examining imagery through this lens, we understand how poets use multi-layered imagery to resonate emotionally with readers. Image schema theory further enhances this understanding by showing how cognitive structures shape perception. For example, recurring images like the “journey” metaphor often represent personal growth. Additionally, cultural memory theory emphasizes how collective memory shapes the interpretation of imagery in poetry, reinforcing cultural values and historical experiences.

The paper advocates multimodal teaching approaches, integrating visual, auditory, and situational methods to enhance students’ engagement with classical poetry. Visual aids, auditory recitations, and immersive activities deepen appreciation for the poetry’s cultural and aesthetic dimensions. Incorporating cultural context into TCSL fosters a holistic understanding of Chinese poetic imagery, aligning with the goal of promoting cross-cultural appreciation. The study contributes practical insights and theoretical perspectives for improving the teaching of classical Chinese poetry in TCSL, supporting multicultural understanding and cross-cultural competence.

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