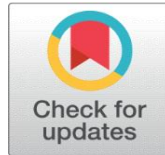
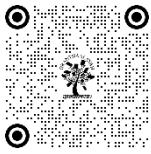


# UNIQUE SYMBOLISMS ON NATURE IN AI QING'S POETRY: A SELECT ANALYSIS

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## ABSTRACT

Ai Qing is a celebrated Chinese poet in the history of modern Chinese literature, known for his distinctive way of using symbolism in poetry. His poems often intertwine nature and its elements with profound human emotions and social realities. His entire life is marked by political upheavals and personal tribulations that shaped his poetic narratives. Through the selected poems like “Tree,” “Bonsai,” “Fish Fossil,” and “Water Pond,” Ai Qing explored the themes of resilience, solidarity and the human condition under adversity. His poetry bridges the tangible with the intangible, reflecting deeper meaning that echoes universal struggle and endurance. This article deals with Ai Qing’s creative work on nature and symbolism, exemplifying his poetic legacy amidst the socio-political hardships.

**Keywords:** Ai Qing, Modern Poetry, Nature, Symbolism, Resilience.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ai Qing (1910-1996) was a renowned poet of modern China, marking a unique feature in the history of Chinese literature. His poetry-writing was an accidental occurrence following his imprisonment after his return from France, at the age of 22. His primary passion for painting could not be pursued due to long incarceration. Many literary analysts, both in China and abroad, have been engaged in translating and exploring the profound connotations in Ai Qing’s poems since long. Among them was an Indian scholar, Professor Priyadarsi Mukherji, who undertook the significant task of interviewing Ai Qing at the latter’s residence in Beijing on 03 July 1990. It was a cordial interaction during which Ai Qing opened his heart to reveal the inner connotations behind the subjects he had chosen for his poems. Ai Qing was 80 years old during this interview. By then, he had already undergone immense tribulations due to the extreme policies of the CPC. Firstly, he endured humiliation during the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957-58). He was sent to toil in the farmlands of Heilongjiang. Intellectuals, like teachers, poets, and others, had to suffer mortification during the “Cultural Revolution” (1966-1976). Ai Qing had to clean fifteen toilets a day in the far-flung areas of Xinjiang. He lost his precious 21 years in exile amidst hardship within China.

Ai Qing realized the value of life, firstly while in imprisonment, secondly while enduring indignity amidst different political campaigns whipped up by mob frenzy under the command of Mao Zedong and "the Gang of Four". The decade-long turmoil could not debilitate the poet but destroyed the potential with which he could have composed greater works in his lifetime.

Ai Qing nurtured an intense passion for the Nature, and various natural elements around him. Besides the common themes like the Sun, fire, and dawn, which he often used as symbols of optimism, Ai Qing adopted an unusual or rather a unique perspective while dealing with Nature and natural elements. He combined the tangibility of an element with its intangible spirit that in all probability escape the attention of general readers or human eyes. Time and again, readers find the aesthetic approach of Ai Qing quite unique. The symbolisms that he used to depict the living elements— illustrate them in an unconventional manner.

In the spring of 1940, Ai Qing wrote a poem titled 《树》 (Tree)<sup>1</sup>, in which he did not restrict himself in viewing the trees superficially. Rather, he made use of his inner eyes to realize an in-depth correlation between trees and humans, especially in a do-or-die war scenario. He wrote—

One tree, another tree,  
Standing isolated from each other.  
Wind and air tell their distance,  
But under the cover of soil, their roots stretch out.  
In the invisible depths,  
They tangle their roots together.

A poem, apparently talking about trees, actually spoke about human existence. While imparting language training in the south China town of Guilin since 1939, Ai Qing could hardly keep himself aloof from the blazing fire of the Sino-Japanese War. Even while residing amidst the scenic beauty of Guilin, the poet's mind filled with distress as he realized a sense of solidarity with the patriotic warriors who were sacrificing their lives for the salvation of their motherland. Therefore, through the tree, the poet has said that in the invisible depths, he has connected the roots of his mind with the people who are struggling in the vast wilderness in different parts of the country. Although there seems to be a gap between man and man, in fact their spiritual connection runs deep. People were united with the great goal of defending the country.<sup>2</sup>

Ai Qing had been a patron of 朦胧诗 (the Misty Poetry) school of thought. The contemporary Chinese poetess Shu Ting (b. 1952) was profoundly influenced by the imageries depicted in Ai Qing's poetry. The most pronounced influence has been noticed in Shu Ting's poem titled 《致橡树》 (To an Oak Tree) in which she brought forth the invisible solidarity among people suffering a life of indignity in the chaotic years of "Cultural Revolution".<sup>3</sup>

In the poem titled 《盆景》 (Bonsai)<sup>4</sup>, composed on 23 February 1979, Ai Qing depicted the inner essence obscured from ordinary human consideration while appreciating the aesthetics of Bonsai. The Japanese word *Bonsai* (盆栽) essentially means— "potted plants", or "miniature trees". This connotes "cultivating trees in a pot". The Chinese equivalent however means— "potted landscape", or "miniature landscape".<sup>5</sup>

The poet, with his insight, discovered a different kind of poetry in an unconventional outlook of the seemingly ordinary objects, or even art forms. The poet found his old self in shackling a tree and forcing it into a state of fragility and miniature existence. Ai Qing lost all his rights of expression during the long chaotic years of the "Cultural Revolution". Those years brought about unprecedented catastrophe in the economic, cultural, familial, as well as personal spheres of life in China. No matter how intricate and fine the art of Bonsai is, the poet deeply felt the pain of plants in this so-called

<sup>1</sup>Ai Qing, *The Complete Works of Ai Qing*, Volume 1, Shijiazhuang: Huashan Literature and Art Publishing House, 1991, p.317.

<sup>2</sup>Priyadarsi Mukherji, *Poems and Fables of Ai Ch'ing: An Anthology* (in Bengali). Kolkata: Baulmon Prakashan, 2000, p.37.[ISBN 81-86552-22-7]

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, pp.37-38.

<sup>4</sup>Ai Qing, *The Complete Works of Ai Qing*, Volume 2, Shijiazhuang: Huashan Literature and Art Publishing House, 1991, pp.486-488.

<sup>5</sup>Priyadarsi Mukherji, *Poems and Fables of Ai Ch'ing: An Anthology* (in Bengali). Kolkata: Baulmon Prakashan, 2000, pp.100-102.[ISBN 81-86552-22-7]

sophisticated aesthetics. Just as the poet was tortured physically and mentally by curbing his talent, by stopping the flow of his genius, in the same way the plants are being tortured in the name of aesthetics by stopping their natural growth. All throughout the poem, the poet has written about Bonsai. No specific person is mentioned therein. However, in every line, the reflection of those ten years of misery has emerged, wrapped in a veil with subtlety.<sup>6</sup>

By the end of 1970s, when the political turmoil had ended, Ai Qing composed a poem titled 《鱼化石》 (Fish Fossil)<sup>7</sup> in 1978. The poet created his narrative in the form of a dialogue between a fish and himself, and subsequently shifted his focus on a lifeless fish fossil, thereby drawing a comparison with his own predicaments that hindered his prospect as a freedom-loving human being. The poet drew the simile thus—

“...But you are now silent,  
Without even a sigh.  
Your scales and fins are intact  
But you are motionless...”

The fossil's complete immobility and the poet's absolute silence underscored the cataclysms that befell on both. One was a natural disaster, but the other a political turmoil. In both these processes, the subjects— the fish and the poet, both were silenced. Ai Qing equated his life without expression with a lifeless fossil. The poet had to endure injustice and suppression amidst a series of political chaos— that deprived him from all basic rights of livelihood as well as rights to compose verses and even publishing them. His poetic compositions and his exposure to his readers were systematically relegated to oblivion by the then political class under the redundant tag of “class struggle”. The famous poetess Ding Ling had remarked at this poem as an autobiographic illustration of Ai Qing's life. The last few lines of his poem is more of a lesson than poetry that the poet wanted to impart to his readers:

To live is to struggle,  
And advance in the struggle;  
Even if death is not at our doorstep,  
We should use our energy to the fullest.<sup>8</sup>

On 11 January 1940, Ai Qing composed a poem titled 《冬天的池沼》 (Winter Pond)<sup>9</sup> in which there are four types of similes and metaphors that are symbolic in nature— A lonely heart, dry eyes, rough hair, and a mind heavy with melancholy. The poet compared a winter pond with an old man. The pond frozen under the winter snow looks lonely like an old man's heart. It appears dry like an old man's eyes. It resembles a wasteland, with wild weeds, just as an old man's disheveled hairs. It looks somber like a distressed old man bent forward under the gloomy wintry sky. When there is no human footstep around the frozen winter pond, nor the sound of a bird, the pond becomes as deserted as an old man. People become lonely in old age. The mind fills with pain. There is no water flow in the snow covered pond. Dryness all around. In old age, people's vision becomes weak, everything seems blurry in cataract-affected eyes. So the old man's eyes are dry. Grass, leaves, or flowers do not grow on the banks of ponds covered with ice. Winter pond is barren and desolate. All resemble a haggard look of an old man. The poem is a symbol of the immense misery that the rampage of the Japanese army on Chinese soil caused in people's survival. The harsh, dry ponds in the vast gray wilderness of winter evoke the life of the poverty-stricken peasants.<sup>10</sup>

Sometime in 1980s, Ai Qing wrote a poem titled 《水牛》 (Buffalo)<sup>11</sup>, in which he entered into a conversation with a buffalo. He drew metaphors through imageries. He wrote—

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, pp. 101-102.

<sup>7</sup>Ai Qing, *The Complete Works of Ai Qing*, Volume 2, Shijiazhuang: Huashan Literature and Art Publishing House, 1991, pp.395-396.

<sup>8</sup> Eugene Chen Eoyang (Ed.), *Ai Qing: Selected Poems*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1982, p.143.

<sup>9</sup>Ai Qing, *The Complete Works of Ai Qing*, Volume 2, Shijiazhuang: Huashan Literature and Art Publishing House, 1991, p.316.

<sup>10</sup>Priyadarsi Mukherji, *Poems and Fables of Ai Ch'ing: An Anthology* (in Bengali). Kolkata: Baulmon Prakashan, 2000, p.36. [ISBN 81-86552-22-7]

<sup>11</sup>Ai Qing, *The Complete Works of Ai Qing*, Volume 2, Shijiazhuang: Huashan Literature and Art Publishing House, 1991, p.696.

"You have such a good temper,  
You are not afraid of water or mud.  
You walk calmly and plow the earth with your head down.

All you see is mud,  
And you always get whipped on your back.  
You live to endure hardship,  
No matter how hard it is, you won't utter a word..."

Through the imagery of a buffalo, the poet illustrates the common people's livelihood filled with hardship, but without any remonstrance. This poem, like many others, is once again a reflection of his own tribulations during the political upheaval stretching across two decades. The degradation of human life has been depicted through their leading a life worse than animals amidst deprivations of human existence. The buffalo here represents the human society that is perennially subjected to inequality and injustice.

In 1979, after his rehabilitation, Ai Qing wrote a poem titled 《仙人掌》 (Cactus)<sup>12</sup>. The poet chose cactus as his point of attraction. He wrote thus—

"You love tulip, I love cactus,  
Growing up in the tropics, the desert is its abode.  
Facing the wind and sand,  
It's surprisingly tenacious.  
Even in drought, flowers still bloom as before.  
Keep it on the windowsill,  
And dream about the ocean."

Generally, people love colorful flowers. But the poet chose cactus. Cactus represents tenacity, a spirit of endurance, and the capacity to withstand extreme weather like drought. The poet's preference for cactus also underlines his humble background, modest aspirations, and his spirit of hardship.

In the autumn of 1979, Ai Qing wrote a poem during his stay in Harbin. The poem 《知了歌》 (The Chirping Cicada)<sup>13</sup> is a reflection of his hardship and pain, living under the tyrannical oppression of "The Gang of Four" during the "Cultural Revolution". The monotonous chirping of a cicada reminded him of a repressive atmosphere wherein creation had taken a backseat. Ai Qing composed the poem in a satirical note—

"Cicada, cicada,  
Shouting louder and louder,  
Standing taller.  
Screaming loudly all day long.  
Not afraid of fatigue, not afraid of monotony.  
Everyone heard it, and hated it so much...  
A hundred schools of thought contend, a hundred flowers bloom,  
It's too hard for you to take care of everything.  
After hearing this,  
The cicada laughed out loud,  
I understand your point.  
You sing and I set the tone.

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<sup>12</sup>Ai Qing, *The Complete Works of Ai Qing*, Volume 2, Shijiazhuang: Huashan Literature and Art Publishing House, 1991, p.494.

<sup>13</sup>Ai Qing, *The Complete Works of Ai Qing*, Volume 2, Shijiazhuang: Huashan Literature and Art Publishing House, 1991, pp.623-625.

If you don't listen, I'll knock you down.  
A child brought a bamboo pole,  
A little bit of gum to catch cicadas.  
Every summer you scream indiscriminately,  
With the same tune, which annoys people.  
He lifted it high, touched it lightly,  
The cicada got stuck, couldn't escape.  
When everyone saw it, they laughed...  
What's there in eulogizing morality! It's all immoral!  
All nonsense!"

This poem is a complete satire against the diktats of the "Gang of Four" who played havoc with the lives of millions of people in China during the ten years of turmoil, bringing an unprecedented catastrophe to all walks of life. The word 知了 is a pun, meaning Cicada, as well as "I have understood". Here, the cicada symbolizes a tyrant whose diktats must be followed unquestioningly. Mao's launching of a "Hundred Flowers" campaign brought tragedy and devastation in the life of the Chinese people in the late 1950s. The stereotyped communist party jargon (党八股) or drab and monotonous sloganeering destroyed creative potential among the young writers under the communist regime. The poet ridiculed such trends and launched a scathing attack on such demagogues who gagged budding writers.

Thus, in many such poetic compositions, Ai Qing left his unique marks of symbolism while dealing with nature. His approach often encompasses his own sorrow, pain and distress. Different phases in his life brought about different kinds of distress, which he sought to depict in his poems.

## CONCLUSION

Ai Qing's poetry demonstrates a profound connection between human resilience and natural symbolism and reflects his life adversities and triumphs. His poems, rooted in personal and collective struggle, reveal a nuanced understanding of solidarity, endurance, and human dignity. His spirit of perseverance inspires the readers to find strength in adversities and beauty in life's struggles. His poetic legacy continues to influence generation after generation by blending natural imagery with enduring humanistic themes.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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