

The Literary Imagery in Japanese Enka

Yunzhu He

Sichuan International Studies University, School of Japanese Language and Literature, Chongqing, 400031, China

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the images found in Enka(Japanese ballad)from a literary perspective, and further compares them with the typical seasonal scenes and seasonal words used in Chinese poetry, Haiku or Waka, and studies the literary images of Enka through examples. Based on this, the goal of this research is to uncover the literary value of Enka, deepen the understanding of Japanese culture and society, and contribute to the revival of Enka and the communication of people and culture between China and Japan.

KEYWORDS

Japanese Enka; Lyrics; Literary imagery; Literary value

1 Introduction

As previously expounded in the introduction, Enka encompasses three key elements, with lyrics playing a pivotal role. Beyond the enchanting melodies, the lyrics of Enka are indeed a crucial aspect for in - depth appreciation. It is no overstatement to assert that comprehending the lyrics serves as the wellspring of emotional resonance with Enka.

2 The origins and contemporary situation of Enka

The origin of Enka can be traced to the "oratorical songs" that emerged during the Freedom and People's Rights Movement in the 1880s of the Meiji era.

The developmental history of Enka over the past century or so can be broadly categorized into three distinct phases: the emergence period, the heyday, and the decline period. During the era of the Meiji Restoration, politicians who were actively involved in the Freedom and People's Rights Movement utilized the Enka format as an alternative to traditional speeches. Through Enka, they criticized the existing feudal oligarchy politics and advocated for their own political ideologies.

In recent years, numerous once-prominent Enka artists have either passed away or advanced into their senior years. While young and talented singers such as Kiyoshi Hikawa and Fuyumi Sakamoto continue to showcase their prowess on stage, it is an undeniable fact that the Enka landscape has become less vibrant.

Despite the current challenges, Enka undeniably possesses both latent potential and significant value that cannot be overlooked. It can be argued that Enka is currently at a crucial juncture where it is striving to stage a revival.

3 Literary images commonly seen in Enka lyrics

3.1 Defining literary images

In the field of Chinese aesthetics or art, there has always been a fixed term, "yixiang" (image in the context of Chinese aesthetics), which has complex connotations. Fundamentally speaking, it has a philosophical definition that it is an artistic image created by an objective object under the influence of unique subjective emotional impulses. In this thesis, the literary "yixiang", that is, the literary image, is the particular object of study.

When it comes to using literary images, there are fundamentally two purposes: the transmission of concepts and the explication of philosophical principles. Moreover, by frequently adopting "symbolism" as a staple method, a distinctive realm is often achieved.

There exist disparities in geography, culture, history, etc. Additionally, the life experiences of each ethnic group throughout history vary. Thus, in literary domains across different countries, both ancient and modern, and from the East to the West, there are unique images. Here, an illustrative example will be presented. For instance, when depicting the conflicts or bonds between men and women, in East Asia, the concepts of "the red string of fate" and "the red string of the matchmaker under the moon" are employed. In contrast, in Europe and America, it is generally regarded as common knowledge that the "golden arrow" is typically used. Based on this, religious and cultural differences can be discerned.

Originally, religion and culture are closely intertwined with the general public. Moreover, these images have already

become established elements within art and literature, making them relatively easy to comprehend for the audience. Therefore, it can be argued that literary images possess a popular dimension and belong to the general public. On the other hand, they are also the key factors enabling literary works and songs of aesthetic value to endure over the long term. In this regard, literary images evidently play a significant role in enhancing the aesthetic value of a work, thereby making them particularly worthy of attention.

3.2 Literary images frequently appearing in Enka lyrics

3.2.1 Regarding the literary images of modern Enka

(1) "Tears," "rain," and "sake" in modern Enka

Previous research has shown that in Enka (Japanese ballads), sentimental words such as "tears," "alcohol," "rain," "love," and "dream" are used with a relatively high frequency. These words establish a sentimental mood and further convey the protagonist's grief and pain. In this thesis, typical Enka songs will be selected for in - depth analysis.

The first aspect involves "tears," "rain," and "sake" as presented in modern love - themed Enka. The main themes of Enka songs that sing of tragic love revolve around pitiful and tumultuous love affairs, along with the delicate emotions of daily life, thus having already distanced themselves from political themes.

"Tears" serve as a manifestation of sentimentality and often appear in conjunction with the concept of "woman." Rain, on the other hand, intensifies the sentiment of lovelornness. Similarly, "sake" is a recurring and sentimental element within Enka. For instance, in Kaori Kanzaki's **Ame Sakaba** (Rainy Bar), the lyrics state, "Sake is the lure of nostalgia." In Misora Hibari's **Kanashii Sake** (Sad Sake), it is sung, "The sake drunk alone in the bar tastes like the tears of separation. Drinking it, the memories I wish to discard surface again in the glass." These songs illustrate how lovelorn women seek solace in sake, only to find their feelings of nostalgia and distress grow deeper. Here, "sake" can be regarded as a catalyst for evoking emotions.

Furthermore, there is a significant number of Enka songs centered around the theme of "rain," such as **Osaka Shigure** (Osaka's Drizzle), **Shinobu Ame** (Enduring Rain), and **Hiu** (Freezing Rain). Notably, when lovers part ways without their love being reciprocated, rain becomes a powerful symbol that heightens the sense of sentimentality. In Teresa Teng's **Kūkō** (Airport), the lyrics contain the line, "Holding back tears, I say goodbye from the misty jet window in the rain." Through the imagery of rain, the song constructs the image of a woman reluctantly parting from her lover at the airport, filled with lingering attachments. It appears that tears, rain, and sake have come to symbolize the sentimentality associated with love.

(2) Enka of homesickness and wanderlust

The second category encompasses Enka that express homesickness and the experience of traveling. Imagery such as wharves, lighthouses, ferries, beaches, the flow of rivers, capes, and straits are frequently employed to convey the sentiment of "homesickness." Despite some of these terms having fallen into disuse, words like "wharf," "port," "ship," "seagull," and "wave" remain among the most frequently used vocabulary to depict natural scenery in Enka.

For the Japanese people, the sea embodies a sense of transience and impermanence, evoking both the gentle nurturing of motherhood and the lurking danger of self - destruction. It also elicits associations with the unknown destiny, as well as the recurring cycle of encounters and partings. When individuals embark on a journey away from home and bid farewell to their relatives at the port, the mournful cries of seagulls and the prolonged blasts of ship horns are likely to intensify their feelings of sentimentality. Consequently, these elements have naturally evolved into literary images representing a life of wandering and traveling.

With the advancement of transportation, new Enka songs often feature elements such as "trains," "unmanned stations," "airports," and "jets." These not only reflect the fact that separation has become more common in modern life but also hint at the age - old perception of impermanence, which has been a recurring theme in literature throughout history.

(3) Enka depicting natural scenery

The third category focuses on Enka that depict natural scenery. The Japanese possess a delicate and sensitive perception of nature, constantly seeking to harmonize their inner emotions with the natural landscape. A prime example is the renowned song **Kita no Haru** (Spring in the North). This song incorporates numerous literary images related to nature, including "white birch," "blue sky," "melting snow," "babbling brooks," "morning mist," "azalea," and "southern breeze," effectively harmonizing the spring scenery of the north with the traveler's longing for home.

In Enka, elements such as "flowing water" and "bubbles" symbolize impermanence and the fleeting nature of youth. The "moon" often represents feelings of longing for relatives, homesickness, and regret. "Smoke" implies ambiguous emotions and the uncertainty of the future. "Clouds" are associated with the restlessness of a wandering life, loneliness, and the inexpressible sorrow of travelers. Additionally, "night mist," "dusk," "sunset," and "twilight" typically suggest feelings of disappointment and sentimentality, or may symbolize the end of life, thus conveying the grandeur of life and

the Buddhist concept of impermanence.

3.2.2 The concept of "Mono No Aware" evident in Enka

In "jinseimono" (songs themed around life), which often touch upon themes such as social obligations, human relationships, and the nature of life, imagery such as "floating clouds," "drifting cherry blossoms," "floating weeds," "the transient world," "ephemeral dreams," "falling flowers," "withered leaves," and "cherry blossom petals fluttering like snow" frequently appears. All of these convey a sense of pathos.

"Floating clouds" and "floating weeds" symbolize the loneliness and sense of isolation experienced by travelers during their wanderings, as well as the impermanence of the world, the unpredictability of fate, and the emptiness of life. "Falling flowers," "petals," "withered leaves," and "cherry blossom petals fluttering like snow" are used to sing of the fleeting nature of spring. They convey the harsh reality that beautiful things are often fragile, reflecting the desolation of the world. All of these images are imbued with a sentimental quality.

For example, in Kiyoshi Hikawa's **Kiyoshi no Zundoko Bushi**, which expresses a man's passion, the opening lyrics state, "Flowers scatter when blown by the wind, they scatter even when drenched by the rain. Any flower that blooms will eventually scatter; such is the fate of the flower of love." This imagery of "scattering flowers" serves to subtly suggest the "unrequited love" of a protagonist who is working in a big city while pursuing his dreams. It also exemplifies the fragility of love, evoking a sense of lamentation among the listeners.

In essence, the lyrics of Enka reflect the Japanese aesthetic of regarding pathos as a form of beauty. However, this pursuit of aesthetics is deeply rooted in emotion and sentiment. Even the most ordinary elements, such as a cold wind, rain, withered flowers, and grass, can easily evoke a sense of sentimentality among the Japanese.

This shares similarities with the delicate and refined Japanese literature. A central concept in Japanese literary aesthetics is "Mono no Aware" (the pathos of things). As previous research has shown, "Mono no Aware" refers to the emotions of admiration, affection, sympathy, resonance, sentimentality, and emotional arousal that people experience in response to external phenomena. This concept has held a dominant position in Japanese literature, and numerous works have been significantly influenced by it.

Since the 1950s, Enka has predominantly focused on poignant narratives. As a result, Enka is sometimes referred to as "love songs" or "lamentations." Thus, it can be argued that the concept of "Mono no Aware" has been passed down and further expressed through Enka.

Particularly worthy of attention is the image of cherry blossoms in Enka. It is not the blooming cherry blossoms that are often celebrated, but rather the beauty of their falling. That is, the moment when cherry blossoms start to wither is considered the most poignant, and the sentiment and melancholy associated with this process are highly praised. While cherry blossoms in full bloom evoke a sense of vibrant vitality, the tragic beauty of their petals gently floating to the ground, along with the idea that a vibrant life can fade away so spectacularly, is deeply cherished.

For instance, in Fuyumi Sakamoto's **Yozakura Oshichi**, the lyrics repeatedly chant, "Sakura, sakura, petals fluttering like snow," vividly depicting the mournful scene of cherry blossoms in decline. Through this imagery of "petals fluttering like snow," the song conveys the resentment and sentiment of a woman parting from her lover while being deeply involved in a forbidden love. Here, the emotions are projected onto the falling cherry blossoms, emphasizing the impermanence of both nature and life.

Through numerous Enka songs that celebrate the falling of cherry blossoms, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the unique Japanese aesthetic of "Mono no Aware." The beauty of decline and the subdued elegance of transience are highly cherished by the Japanese people. It can be inferred that the appreciation for finding beauty in pathos has reached a rather profound level within Japanese culture.

4 Comparison between Enka and other literary genres

4.1 Enka, Haiku, and Waka

When discussing Japanese literature, concepts such as "Mono no Aware" (the pathos of things), "yūgen" (alluring depth and mystery), and "wabi" (understated simplicity) are particularly highly regarded. In domestic academic circles, there has been a substantial amount of research on waka and haiku within the realm of Japanese literature, with many studies delving into great detail. However, it appears that research on the literary elements contained within Enka and the associated aesthetic consciousness remains relatively scarce.

Although Japanese language enthusiasts and scholars in the country have engaged in the translation of Enka lyrics and the appreciation of famous Enka songs, there are still aspects that merit further exploration. Specifically, from the perspective of literary imagery, it can be argued that Enka shares commonalities with waka and haiku. This thesis will provide illustrative examples to elaborate on this point.

Enka and haiku, as significant forms within the realm of Japanese traditional literature and art, each carry distinct cultural connotations and aesthetic values. This Subsection undertakes an in - depth exploration from a literary perspective to analyze the commonalities in literary imagery between Enka and haiku. By presenting specific examples, it showcases the similarities in aspects such as natural imagery and emotional imagery, thereby revealing the underlying connections and cultural characteristics embedded within different manifestations of Japanese traditional literature and art.

4.2 Enka and Chinese poetry

Geographically, China and Japan are neighboring countries separated by a narrow stretch of water. Historically, Chinese culture has exerted a profound influence on the formation and development of Japanese culture. As significant representatives of the East Asian cultural sphere, Chinese and Japanese cultures share numerous commonalities.

Nevertheless, while both China and Japan pursue certain literary imagery, lingering sentiments, and artistic realms, there are also notable differences to some extent.

First, let's examine the differences through the example of the "plum blossom."

In Chinese literature, the plum blossom is often depicted in conjunction with snow, symbolizing "aloofness" and tenacious vitality. It represents an image of noble virtue or justice. However, in the Enka song *Yushima no Hakubai* (White Plum Blossoms in Yushima), the protagonist associates the image of white plum blossoms fluttering down and being mercilessly trampled upon with the scene of parting from a lover. This portrays a tragic and unrequited love, creating a mournful and profound artistic realm. The white plum blossoms in this context convey the impermanence of life and serve as a flower that expresses the pathos of things.

Furthermore, let us examine the commonalities. First, let's present some examples.

You should be like a rock, and I'll be like a rush. The rush is as tough as silk, and the rock will never change.

My beloved one, if your love remains as unshakable as a boulder, then I vow that my resolve shall be like that of a reed. The reed is as resilient as silk and will not break, and the boulder is stable and immovable. [Translated by the author]

The foregoing is a celebrated passage excerpted from *The Peacock Flies to the Southeast*, the earliest narrative poem in Chinese literature. This passage represents a vow made by a woman whose marital union with the man she deeply loved was thwarted by her mother - in - law and elder brother. Despite the profound suffering, she courageously rose up to safeguard her own happiness.

By employing the symbolic imagery of the "unwavering boulder" and the "resilient cattail reed", this poem expounds upon the magnificent love of a couple who ultimately chose to end their lives together. It also vividly showcases the unshakable resolve and unyielding tenacity of a woman in the face of numerous hardships on the path of love.

There are also Enka songs that give voice to the intense emotions of such women. For example, *Over the Amagi*, a song that remains highly popular even to this day. This song accentuates the arduousness of the mountain path while expressing a love that is both heart - rending and passionate. Through a series of vivid images such as "The winding road", "Joren Waterfall", "Kanten Bridge", "the secluded path", and "the blazing mountain", it meticulously depicts the treacherous route of over the Amagi Mountain. In so doing, it constructs an image of a woman who endeavors to pursue her beloved, traversing the most perilous mountain trails.

It is important to note that these elements of "The winding road", "mountains", "waterfalls", and "bridges" are not simply descriptions of the natural environment. Instead, they serve to convey the woman's anguished and desperate thoughts as she wanders lost on the forlorn path of unrequited love. They also serve as a manifestation of her inner torment and her indomitable will. The passion thus conveyed and the atmosphere created bear a striking resemblance to the legend of Meng Jiangnu, who, through her sorrowful weeping, caused the collapse of the Great Wall.

In addition, elements such as "the flow of a river" and "swallows" can also be cited. In classical Chinese poetry, "the flow of a river" frequently serves as a symbol of the journey of life and the passage of youth. The renowned Enka song, *Like the Flow of a River*, directly incorporates "river" as its thematic core. Through the imagery of a flowing river, it vividly portrays the vicissitudes of the times and the progression of life, thus conveying a sense of grandeur and historical change.

In classical Chinese poetry, "swallows" carry multiple connotations, among which they are also emblematic of love. This is because the sight of two swallows in flight often evokes associations with affectionate lovers or a harmonious married couple. In the Enka song *Showa Dream Swallows* performed by Yoshiko Ishikawa, the couple is metaphorically likened to swallows, expressing heartfelt wishes for their enduring happiness. Consider the following excerpted lyrics:

"Even in the back alleys of this metropolis,
If we live side by side, the cold will not touch us.
Showa, Showa, the twenties, the dream of swallows,
I will follow closely behind you.

Even if happiness seems distant."

In these lyrics, "swallows" symbolize a couple who have transitioned from the Showa era to the Heisei era. The song vividly depicts the image of a couple who, in the aftermath of an economic crisis, support and console each other amidst the challenges of urban life. It effectively conveys their unwavering determination to persevere, look optimistically towards the future, and strive wholeheartedly for the realization of their shared dreams of happiness.

Within the East Asian cultural circle, Japanese Enka and Chinese classical poetry, despite belonging to different eras and art forms, display notable similarities in emotional expression and the utilization of imagery.

This resemblance is rooted in a common cultural foundation and aesthetic awareness, especially in the symbolic employment of natural imagery. As a representative genre of modern Japanese popular music, Enka has inherited the lyrical characteristics of traditional Japanese poetry forms such as waka and haiku. Meanwhile, Chinese classical poetry, as the quintessence of Chinese classical literature, has evolved a sophisticated imagery system.

Despite the temporal gap of a millennium, both Japanese Enka and Chinese classical poetry demonstrate a striking consistency in the artistic technique of "expressing emotions by means of scenery description".

5 Conclusion

The literary imagery of Japanese Enka has formed a unique and coherent aesthetic system from the classical to the modern era. This system takes natural imagery as its core, seasonal changes as its thread, and momentary experiences as its focus, reflecting the distinctive aesthetic consciousness and emotional structure of the Japanese nation. Throughout different historical periods, literary imagery has maintained the continuity of tradition while constantly absorbing new cultural elements, demonstrating strong adaptability and creativity.

About the Author

Yunzhu He, female, postgraduate graduation, research direction: japanese culture and literature.

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