

On the “Plantain” Imagery in Tang Poetry

Haijing Huang

Shenzhen Polytechnic, Shenzhen, China

Abstract

The “plantain” in Tang poetry is a richly integrated system of ideograms, which poets used either to depict the landscape, to bring out the poetic feelings of misery and loneliness, of high spirits, of despair, or to symbolise the sadness of the mind and the Buddhist doctrine of the emptiness of the world, by means of false images. It is also a multi-layered aesthetic, combining form, sound and meaning, bridging many artistic disciplines such as poetry, painting and music, and giving people a comprehensive aesthetic experience. The rich poetic connotations and aesthetic characteristics of the “plantain” imagery have been developed in Tang poetry, and have been deepened in later artistic development, becoming an enduring artistic image.

Keywords

Tang Poetry; Plantain; Imagery.

1. Introduction

The plantain is a perennial herb native to tropical Asia, also known as Ganjiao and Bayi. Its graceful form is not only ornamental but also of practical value - its broad, green leaves provide shade and coolness in the summer; its fruit is edible and its flowers, juice, seeds, leaves and roots are all of medicinal value.

It has a long history of cultivation in the south of China, and was much appreciated by the literati in ancient China, as were plums, orchids, bamboo, chrysanthemums, pines and lotus. It can be found in ancient poetry, painting, music and many other artistic disciplines.

The plantain was already included in poetry during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, for example in Yu Xin's poem “A Poem for a Summer Meeting”, with the line “The air of plantain leaves is in the shirt, and the fan of bamboo flowers is cool”, but it was not common, and became the subject of a large number of poems during the Tang Dynasty. Its introduction into painting began around the South Song period, and its introduction into music came even later. As an artistic image, the plantain in poetry was not only the earliest to appear, but also brought together the aesthetic characteristics of the plantain in painting and the plantain in music. This paper takes the imagery of the plantain in Tang poetry as an object of study and explores its aesthetic characteristics through an analysis of the levels of meaning, revealing its charm as a bridge between poetry, painting and music.

2. A System of Imagery Rich in Expression and Meaning

Imagery is the image of representation, which conveys the meaning of a poem in a certain image. According to the different ways of expression, imagery can be divided into the category of describing the scene and setting up the poetic mood, and the category of symbolising the meaning of the poem. In the former case, the expression is conveyed through direct sensation, requiring a sensual taste; in the latter case, the meaning is conveyed through allusion, requiring more rational thought. Such a division is certainly not absolute, but it is no less important as a way of classifying imagery. The following is a multi-layered analysis of the imagery of plantain in Tang poetry, in terms of both “image” and “meaning”.

2.1. Scene Description for a Setting of the Poem

In this category of imagery, the meaning changes with the image, and the image is born out of the meaning, and the expression of the poetic mood of the image depends on the characteristics of the image. In terms of the “image”, plantain imagery is most often found in the following three contexts.

(1) Cool and secluded growing environment

The plantain is a hot and humid plant and is found in southeast, southern and south-western China. During the Tang Dynasty, most of these areas were far-flung and sparsely populated, and the main reason for the poets to travel there was to send off, relegate and return home. The poet's feelings of desolation and despondency are expressed in the poems: “The plantains are still in the garrison, the bamboo in the temple reflects the king of Hunan” (Sigong Shu, “Sending Shi Ze to Changsha”), “The plantains on the mountain bridge are dark at dawn, and the taro grass is yellow at the water shop on a clear day” (Zhang Ji, “Sending Li Yu back to Shu after his Graduation”). The plantains here express the poet's inner misery and loneliness.

Plantains are common in secluded places, especially in Buddhist temples or monks' dwellings: “The rocks are eminently walkable, and bats fly in the temple at dusk. The new rain foot on the steps of the sitting hall, the plantain leaves are big and the branches fat” (Han Yu, “Mountain Stone”), “plantain frost after the stone bar deserted, no one under the forest closed bamboo room” (Lu Guimeng, “Missed Fangji Shangren”). Although the plantain here is still silent, a kind of pure meaning emerges. The true meaning of this would rather be kept away from the outsiders.

The plantain is not only a scene in a secluded place, but can also create an elegant and tranquil environment on its own: “The moon shines in the shadows of the banana bushes. The leaves are as big as a wall, a screen for my door. I can hear and see little, and my ears are quiet” (Yao He, “Nine Poems on the Western Garden of Jinzhou - Plantain Screen”). The plantain leaves are so wide and green that they isolate the world from mundane affairs. The wide, turquoise plantain leaves isolate people from mundane affairs, and the plantain here is refreshing, tranquil and peaceful.

(2) Plantain Book

The plantain leaves are so wide and flat that they can be used as a substitute for writing on paper, which is called “plantain calligraphy”. According to legend, the Tang monk Huai Su, who was poor and had no paper, planted more than 10,000 plantain plants so that he could practise his calligraphy on plantain leaves, as described in Bai Juyi's poem “Spring Arrival”, which reads: “When I have nothing to do, I can write poems on plantain leaves, and when I am bored, I can drink wine from vine branches”. In the Qing Dynasty, Li Yu's “A Leisurely Sentiment” speaks of the benefits of writing on plantain leaves: “You can write on the plantain leaves and make a change anytime. You change and try several topics a day. And if sometimes it is not bothered to wash itself, the rain master can wipe it on behalf of the person who has been given the name of the paper by heaven, and it should not be used for Huai Su alone.” It is clear that writing on plantain leaves was a great ritual for the literati.

There are many references to “plantain books” in Tang poetry, and three cases are the most. The first is the poem inscribed on a plantain leaf ---- “A poem inscribed with a plantain is slippery, and a glass of wine is fragrant with brown flowers ” (Cen Shen, “A Retrospective on the Return to the East Inscribed in Xu Qing's Cottage in Tai Chang”), “The poem is inscribed on a plantain leaf, while the vine flowers fall into the cup of wine when I am drunk” (Fang Gan, “The Pavilion of Yuan Xucai in Yuezhou”), which is quite elegant. The second is that plantain leaves were used to write a letter---- “Borrowing water to wash away idle looks, sending plantains to write about their fame (Meng Jiao, “Rewarding Lu Yin's Young Prefect with Cong Shujian”), “It is a warm day in the south of the country and the plantains are on display, so the

beauty folded a plantain leaf and cut it by herself. A short letter is written and sent to my lover after I pet it gently" (Xu Min, "Magnolia"). Beyond the fun and excitement, there's the love. The third is the writing of a scripture on plantain leaves --- "Turning the scripture on plantain leaves, hanging a cassock and falling vine flowers" (Zhang Ji, "A Gift to a Monk in the Mountains"), "When I return to hang my cassock under the high forest, I cut my own plantain to write the sutras" (Dai Shulun, "A Gift to the Monk Helin"). Where monks live, plantains are often planted and the plantain leaves are used to copy the sutras. The plantain here adds a touch of worldliness to its elegance.

(3) Listening to plantain

In summer and autumn, the plantain leaves are in full bloom. The rain drops fall onto the plantain leaves and make some sounds. Listening to plantain means listening to the sound out of rain drops falling onto the plantain leaves. The beauty of listening to the sound of the rain hitting the plantain leaves is not only in the acoustic beauty of the sound: "the sound of the rain beating on the plantain leaves is like a monk's sarcasm, a fisherman's hammer, a pearl's tumble, and a horse's gallop", but also in the fact that the plantain leaves appear greener in the rain, swaying in the wind and rain, helping people to think about their sorrow. "The night rain is known by the window, but the plantain makes a sound first (Bai Juyi, "Night Rain), "The plantain was moved by the rain, so it was planted in front of the window. The sound of dripping pity for the drains keeps the dream of returning to one's hometown" (Du Mu, "Plantain"), "The autumn night is full of plantain rain, and the jungle comes into my dreams again (Wang Zun, "Two Songs on Wine"). The autumn rain is lingering, the autumn wind is sluggish, and the plantain leaves seen from the autumn window also play a poignant sound. "The plantain was moved by the rain, so it was planted in front of the window. I pity the sound of the dripping drains, so that I can dream of returning home (Du Mu, "The Plantain"). The night rain at the plantain window strikes at the heart of the pedestrian, striking out infinite travel sorrow. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, listening to plantains became a great pleasure, but in Tang poetry it is still mostly poignant and despairing, shrouded in sentimentality.

The plantains in the remote and secluded places of the Tang poems are a reflection of the lonely and miserable state of mind, the plantain books are a reflection of the elegance of the high and the low, and listening to the plantains is a reflection of the mood of desolation and despair. As part of the external environment, the image of the plantain in the poem directly reflects the poet's emotional state of mind and gives the reader a similar feeling.

2.2. Symbolic Poetry with Imagery

The other type of imagery is formed through "false imagery to see meaning". The poet first has an idea and then uses an image to compare it to the poem, and the expression of the poetic mood and meaning of the image depends largely on the poet's idea. In terms of "meaning", there are two typical metaphors for plantain imagery.

(1) A worried mind unable to be relieved

Plantains are not very hardy and bloom slowly in the early spring when it is still cold, and their leaves are often curled up. The poets of the Tang Dynasty often used the image of curled plantain leaves as a metaphor for the sadness of a young girl. For example, Li Shangyin's "Two Songs on Behalf of the Plantain": "Upstairs, at dusk, the desire to rest is restless. The plantain does not unfold, the lilacs are knotted, and the spring breeze makes each girl sad." The plantain leaves and the lilac blossoms in bud in spring symbolize the unexpanded heart and the tightened brow. The use of imagery is a beautiful and gentle way to describe "a kind of love for each other, two places of leisurely sorrow". In "One Hundred Lyrics from the Palace", He Ning writes: "The fragrant duck heats the water in light smoke, the cloudy maiden idly drops the phoenix rhinoceros hairpin. The pearl curtain is half-rolled to open the flowering rain, and I see the plantain spreading its half-heart." The first two lines are about the splendour of the

apartment and its decorations, which shows the beauty of the person. In the second two lines, the red rain of falling flowers and the half-spread plantain suggest that the person's heart is still intact even though her years are passing. The two lines contrast with each other, and the two lines are a reflection of the sorrow and grievances of a woman in a palace. In "The Plantain is not yet Displayed", Qian Cheng writes: "The candle is cold, the wax is dry, and the heart is still curled up in the cold of spring. What is hidden in a letter, which will be secretly opened by the east wind?" The plantain leaves are tightly curled up, as if they were green candles that have not yet been burned; they are also like a young girl's heart, timidly hiding many tangled and sorrowful feelings; they are also like a scroll full of a young girl's heart, both looking forward to and afraid of being seen by the east wind. The beauty of the object can be seen in the metaphor of the plantain with the person, and the beauty of the human emotion with the plantain.

(2) The world being nothing in essence

The plantain resembles a tree, but is not woody. The pseudostem, which resembles a tree trunk, is made up of overlapping sheaths of leaves, one wrapped around the other, with the centre empty, and if the petiole is peeled off, it too becomes empty. Such a characteristic of growth is quite close to the Buddhist idea of the impermanence of all actions and the emptiness of the world. In his "Analysis of the Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Verses of Zen Buddhism", Mr. Chen Yinque points out, "Examining Indian Zen Buddhism, we find that its method of viewing the body is often compared to that of plantains and other plants that can be easily peeled off, in order to illustrate the idea that the Yang are all empty and the flesh is detestable." The plantain as a metaphor is often found in Buddhist texts, "the Mahabodhi Sutra" says: "All dharmas are like plantains, because they are not real." "The Dhammapada Sutra" says: "Seeing colour as foam, receiving as a water bubble, thinking as a hot flame, acting as a plantain, and knowing as an illusion."

Because of the special significance of the plantain in Buddhism, there are many types of plantain in Buddhist temples, and plantain leaves are often used to copy Buddhist scriptures. In addition, the Tang people also transferred the imagery of the plantain, a symbol of Buddhism, into poetry to refer to the essential emptiness of all things in the world: "The mind knows where meditation is, the stone room is facing the plantain" (Zhu Qingyu, "Sending the Supreme Master Pin to Qin"), "Sitting in bed at midnight, the shadow of the plantain moves the lamp of the dojo" (Zheng Gu, "Short He Clothe"). The seemingly empty plantain often becomes a bit of an opportunity for the poet to realize the path. In the face of the plantain, the poets often realise the emptiness of life: "In the south, there is no need to collect coix, but in the end it is a plantain" (Pi Rixiu, "My illness prevents me from pursuing my travels, so I send a message to Lu Wang"), "There is nothing to do in my floating life, but it is a plantain" (Lu Lun, "The Courtyard of the Supreme Master of Nianji Temple"), and so on.

In these verses, the plantain is not only an image of a plant, but also an embodiment of the most important truth in the world. A connection is made between the natural object and a certain abstract consciousness, which contains a rational thought that cannot be written or understood without thoughtful arrangement. Similarly, the image of the plantain in spring, which is about to unfold, initially establishes a link between the similarly associative mechanism of thought and the closed door of the heart, the sadness of the mind, which is later established and fixed by successful poetic examples, becoming a pattern of analogy. Thus, the implication of Buddhist philosophies and the expression of sorrowful thoughts are both realised through the idea that the image comes before the meaning.

It is clear from the above analysis that the "plantain" in Tang poetry actually constitutes a system of imagery, that is, a structural whole containing a variety of combinations of meaning and imagery and multiple meanings. They are not isolated from each other, but are interlinked and integrated, forming at least three basic contexts: 1) the mood of bleakness and coldness, melancholy and despair; 2) the state of mind of elegance and solitude; 3) the spiritual state of

the impermanence of all actions and the emptiness of the world. And there are some overlapping between them. For example, the poem "In the quiet of the night, I suddenly suspect that I am a dream, and I hear the cold rain dripping plantains" (an anonymous poem by Zhu Changwen, in Jiao Ran's "Poetic Style"), is based on the background of the cold rain and plantains, which instantly makes one feel that one's body is not real, and reveals a cold and lonely mood. "I have nothing to do but to send my heart to the willow, and I have nothing to do but to write to the plantain. If there is a letter from the east, I will send it to Yangzhou near the post bridge." (Li Yi, "A Letter of Return"), shows how easy it is to miss one's hometown when one has nothing to do, and how the writing of plantains is both an emotional support and an elegant interest. "Two boys with straw raincoats and a wine boat, the lake and the mountains lead them to the front of the house. The plantains in the temple are not only a distant and pure setting, but also a depiction of the Buddhist temple (Qin Xi, "A Letter to Duke Di"). The plantains in the Zen room and Buddhist temple not only set off the tranquil setting, but also evoke a sense of Zen. The imagery of plantains in the poem is rich and intricate, forming a unique and charming system of imagery of its own.

3. An Integrated Aesthetic Sensibility

The plantain is not only a richly expressive poem, but also bridges the visual and aural senses, and has a comprehensive aesthetic quality.

The plantain leaves are as blue as silk, as wide as a fan, and they never fall, wither and grow again, and can be seen in all seasons. In Tang poetry, plantains are also found in a variety of forms: "Red roses stand on blue plantains" (Han Wo, "Deep Courtyard"), "Plantains open their green fans" (Li Shangyin, "If There is"), "Rain crushes plantains with phoenix wings" (Shi Shouwu's anonymous poem), and "Seeing a plantain in bed with white dew" (Liu Yanshi, "Seeing a Doctor in Bigogn Temple"). The shapes and colours are depicted, resembling a beautiful brush painting.

When the wind blows on the plantain leaves, the sound is sighing; when the rain hits the plantain leaves, the sound is like broken jade; when the plantain is dry and brittle in winter, the sound is like cracking silk. The poets often capture the sound of plantains in their poems, and the poems are like hearing them: "Green silk plantains crack" (Qi Ji, "Sending a Reward to a High Emperor"), "The wind makes red plantain leaves crack" (Du Xunhe, "Autumn Thoughts in Middle Fujian"). The poem is a replica of the sound of plantains, as if it were a piece of clear, crisp silk and bamboo music.

The form and sound of the plantains in the poem are beautiful in their own right, and the poet's experience of life has led to the accumulation of a deep and rich inner meaning. The imagery of the plantain is a combination of form, sound and meaning, thus bringing together a comprehensive aesthetic quality and giving people an integrated aesthetic feeling.

It is for this reason that plantain is also a favourite of painters and musicians. It is worth noting that, when a plantain appears in a poem, there is painting in the poem and music in the poem. When a plantain appears in a painting or a piece of music, there is also a combination of painting and poem, and a combination of music and poem. For example, one of the Eight Cranks of Yangzhou in the Qing dynasty, Luo Ping, painted "Mr. Dongxin's Nap in Plantain Shade", which shows several plantain plants, shaded like umbrellas, and Mr. Dongxin Jinnong (Luo Ping's teacher) taking a nap with his chest bare. After seeing this painting, Jin Nong liked it very much and inscribed it with a poem: "Mr. Sleepy, what is the harm in falling asleep? The minister of Chang'an does not come to this country. The green sky is like a curtain, and the body is cool. The only one in the world who dreams of the same thing is Meng Zi and Zhuang Zi." The painting's worldly coolness is evident. Another example is the famous Guzheng piece "Night Rain at Banana Window", in which the melody is slow, calm and thick, but gradually floating

and clear, in a simple and elegant style. The interplay between the plantain in the poem, the plantain in the painting and the plantain in the music constitutes a system of imagery that cuts through the art of language, space and time, and has become an enduring artistic image.

4. Conclusion

In Tang poetry, “plantain” is an ideographically rich and integrated system of imagery with comprehensive aesthetic qualities, which determined that it would inevitably continue to develop beyond the confines of Tang poetry in a horizontal stylistic and vertical flow of time. All the meanings that can be expressed by the “plantain” have been developed in Tang poetry - the realm of clarity, elegant rhythm, sorrow, Zen, and rational interest - and there is a stylistic focus in their development. The most notable difference is that the sentiment of solitude and sorrow is further developed mainly in the Ci. In Du Mu's “Ba Liu Zi”, an early slow lyric of the literati, there is already a woman's sentiment of “listening to the night rain, cold drops of plantains, breaking the good dreams of the red window”, and in Song Ci (Song Poems) there are even more such sentiments, such as “hating plantains that don't spread my heart” (Gao Guanguo, “Love the Embroidered Coverlet”) and “Where is the synthesis of sorrow? The heart of a loner is in autumn. Even if it is not raining, the plantain is still chilly” (Wu Wenying, “Tang Duo Ling”), and “The light of day is easy to throw away. The cherry is red and the plantain is green. The greenness of the plantain tree has turned red, and the greenness of the cherry has turned green” (Jiang Jie, “Yi Jian Mei”), and Li Qingzhao's “Cai Sangzi”: “Who planted the plantain tree in front of the window? The shade fills the garden. The leaves are heartfelt, and there is a residue of emotion in their relaxation. The Zen-like interest is mainly continued in the poems, such as Su Zhe's “Newly Planted Plantain”: “The plantain has not been planted for long, but the fragrant stems are already surrounded by several. After all, there is nothing in the empty heart, but the interjection of large leaves is not too fat”, and Huang Tingjian's “Reminiscing with my brother Yuanming on the ninth”: “I do not bother to ask questions about the thousands of mountains and rivers, but I see myself in the plantain forest”. The main reason for this phenomenon is the difference in genre between poems written on the desk and Ci written for musical instruments, and the fact that poems can still be reasoned with while Ci are better at expressing emotions. The poetic connotations of “plantain” continued to deepen in the course of mutually focused and divergent development, and together with painting and music, they have endured through time, giving off a very distinctive national artistic glow.

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