

The Process of Imagery Reconstruction in Classical Chinese Poetry and Its Creative Psychological Mechanisms

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Abstract

The reading and appreciation of classical Chinese poetry constitutes a psychological process of aesthetic re-creation by the reader. The object of this creative processing is the artistic imagery constructed by the poet through “integrating emotion into scenery,” which possesses three psychological processing characteristics: cognitive metaphoricality, emotional ladenness, and scene-emotion integration. The result of this creative processing is the generation of aesthetic imagery characterized by “scene-emotion integration,” a product that features both objective perceptual representation characteristics and connotations of thoughts and emotions subjectively comprehended by the reader. The process by which readers reconstruct artistic imagery into aesthetic imagery constitutes the core creative process in classical poetry reading and appreciation, with its psychological mechanism involving the activation and selective integration of information within the reader’s long-term memory system. Specifically, supported by semantic memory and episodic memory, readers evoke corresponding emotions and comprehend the emotional meanings carried by the imagery through semantic association and image construction, thereby generating subjective emotional experiences (affective elements) and constructing mental models of the poetic text (cognitive elements). On this basis, under aesthetic contemplation (goal motivation), readers selectively integrate relevant cognitive and affective elements with self-related schemas in their autobiographical memory, establishing novel connections and generating new ideas and concepts. This completes the aesthetic re-creation process that transitions from text-centered imagery reading comprehension to reader-centered psychological reconstruction of imagery. In this process, readers generate aesthetic imagery while simultaneously updating their self-schemas. This process is primarily constrained by the novelty of the artistic imagery in classical poetry and the reader’s own creative imagination ability. This interdisciplinary theoretical research calls upon domestic creativity researchers to emphasize creative psychological processes with Chinese cultural

characteristics and to focus on hot cognitive processes that include emotional processing.

Full Text

The Process and Creative Psychological Mechanisms of Imagery Reconstruction in Chinese Classical Poetry

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Abstract

The reading and appreciation of Chinese classical poetry constitutes a psychological process of aesthetic re-creation by the reader. The object of this creative processing is the artistic imagery constructed by the poet through “infusing emotion into scenery,” which possesses three psychological processing characteristics: cognitive metaphoricality, emotional loading, and the integration of scene and emotion. The outcome of this creative processing is the generation of aesthetic imagery that merges scene and emotion—a product that exhibits both objective perceptual-sensory representational features and subjective meanings such as thoughts and emotions comprehended by the reader. The process by which readers reconstruct artistic imagery into aesthetic imagery represents the core creative process in poetry appreciation. Its psychological mechanism involves the activation and selective integration of information within the reader’s long-term memory system. Specifically, supported by semantic memory and episodic memory, readers evoke corresponding emotions through semantic association and imagery construction, comprehend the emotional meanings embedded in the imagery, generate subjective emotional experiences (affective elements), and construct a mental model of the poetic text (cognitive elements). On this foundation, under aesthetic contemplation (goal motivation), readers selectively integrate relevant cognitive and affective elements with self-related schemas in their autobiographical memory, thereby establishing novel connections and generating new ideas and concepts. This completes the aesthetic re-creation process that shifts from text-centered imagery comprehension to reader-centered psychological reconstruction of imagery. Through this process, readers generate aesthetic imagery while simultaneously updating their self-schemas. This process is primarily constrained by the novelty of the artistic imagery in the poem and the reader’s own capacity for creative imagination. This interdisciplinary theoretical study calls upon domestic creativity researchers to attend to creative psychological processes with Chinese cultural characteristics and to focus on hot cognitive processes that incorporate emotional processing.

Keywords: Imagery, Reconstruction, Long-term memory system, Integration of scene and emotion

1. Introduction

Poetry is the earliest and most widely circulated literary form in human history. Chinese classical poetry (hereafter referred to as “classical poetry”) is characterized by its concise yet comprehensive nature, implicitness, and polysemy, typically containing profound thoughts and delicate emotions. In Western tradition, its most primitive meaning can be traced to the Greek term *poiesis*, signifying making and creation. Zhu Guangqian (2012) noted that both poetry creation and appreciation constitute creative processes. Regarding this creative process, he argued: “For the author, creation involves expressing the artistic conception—composed of imagery infused with the poet’s emotional interest—through language; for the reader, creation involves using language to mobilize their own emotional experiences to comprehend the artistic conception expressed in the poem. Since each reader’s emotional experiences differ, and even the same reader’s emotional experiences vary across different periods, appreciating a poem represents an irreproducible act of creation.”

While poetry composition as a typical creative activity in the artistic domain has attracted research attention regarding its psychological mechanisms and neural basis (S. Liu et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2020; He et al., 2022), studies examining the inverse process of poetry creation—poetry reading and appreciation (Tinio, 2013)—and exploring readers’ aesthetic re-creation processes and their underlying creative psychological mechanisms remain scarce. Currently, most cognitive psychological research on poetry, particularly classical poetry, in China adopts a psycholinguistic approach, focusing on the processing of rhythmic and prosodic features (Teng et al., 2020; Li Weijun & Yang Yufang, 2010, 2016) and the interactive characteristics of rhythm, prosody, and semantic processing (Chen et al., 2016; Chen Qingrong & Yang Yiming, 2017). These studies investigate perceptual and semantic comprehension processes rather than poetry appreciation or creative thinking processes. In contrast, Zhang Jing, Liu Chang, and colleagues have conducted a series of studies on insight evoked by “poetic eyes” (*shuyan*) in five-character classical poems, proposing that readers’ processing of poetic eyes represents a typical insight process in verse appreciation—one that integrates and updates the original representation of verses into a completely new representation through imagery recombination (Zhang Jing et al., 2015; Zhang Jing & Liu Chang, 2021). Based on this, they argue that readers grasp the deep meanings of classical poetry through “enlightenment” (*wu*) in an intuitive manner, accompanied by strong aesthetic experiences (Zhang Jing & Chen Yan, 2017). Zhang Jing, Liu Chang, and their team pioneered the connection between classical poetry appreciation and insight research methods; however, this “insight” is evoked and thus cannot adequately explain the spontaneous insights that occur during poetry appreciation.

Ancient Chinese poets, adhering to the principle that “language should be implicit,” primarily employed the techniques of “expressing aspirations through objects” and “conveying emotions through scenery,” creating poetry rich in meaning. This requires readers to “penetrate the text to access emotions” (*pi-*

wen ruqing)—to reconstruct the scenes depicted in the poetry, evoke their own subjective emotional experiences, and thereby comprehend the emotional implications. Therefore, when examining the important theoretical question of the process and creative psychological mechanisms of classical poetry appreciation, we must adopt an interdisciplinary perspective within the framework of traditional Chinese culture, integrating psychological theories with key concepts from Chinese poetic criticism. Traditional Chinese poetic criticism has consistently emphasized imagery as a core category and one of the most important components of poetic art (Chen Zhizhi, 1990), possessing an aesthetic structure that integrates scene and emotion (Ye Lang, 2009). Consequently, this article begins with imagery to progressively analyze the process of readers' poetry appreciation and its underlying creative psychological mechanisms.

2.1. The Concept of Imagery

The meaning of imagery can be traced back to the philosophical concept proposed in the *Commentary on the Book of Changes (Yizhuan · Xici)*, referring to images used to express certain meanings. Ancient scholars believed that “writing cannot fully express speech, and speech cannot fully express meaning,” thus sages “established images to fully convey meaning.” During the pre-Qin period, various philosophers expressed similar philosophical thoughts in their works. By the Wei-Jin and Northern-Southern Dynasties period, this philosophical proposition of “using images to reveal meaning” was further developed by classical scholar Wang Bi, who proposed the theoretical concepts of “obtaining meaning while forgetting words” and “obtaining meaning while forgetting images,” arguing that understanding “images” should not remain at the surface level but should pursue the profound “meaning” behind them. Liu Xie combined this philosophical thought with literary creation theory, establishing for the first time the status of imagery in poetics. In *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons (Wenxin Diaolong · Shensi)*, he noted that poets must “observe imagery before wielding the axe” (*kuixiang er yunjin*); in *Wenxin Diaolong · Wuse*, he elaborated the relationship between imagery and natural scenery as well as poet's emotion through “each season has its objects, each object has its appearance; emotion changes with objects, and words arise from emotion”; and in *Wenxin Diaolong · Yinxiu*, he explained the artistic effect of using imagery to express meaning beyond words as “meaning born beyond words, secret thoughts reaching everywhere, hidden colors emerging subtly” (Wang Yunxi & Zhou Feng, 2012).

In brief, imagery refers to typical objects in literary works such as poetry that express the author's subjective emotions and aspirations, where “meaning” (*yi*) denotes the author's thoughts and feelings, while “image” (*xiang*) refers to external concrete scenery. The two merge into an artistic image imbued with the author's thoughts and emotions. Qu Guang (2002) traced the historical development of imagery concepts in classical poetry and subsequently defined imagery as artistic images created by poets through unique aesthetic expression

that possess dual significance. This definition indicates that, on one hand, the essence of imagery lies in implicit conveyance and subtlety, thus possessing dual meaning; on the other hand, the artistry of imagery manifests in the internal connection between “image” and “meaning”—the internal aesthetic structure of “integration of scene and emotion.”

Based on their existential forms, imagery can be categorized into single-image imagery, multi-image imagery, and imagery combinations. Unless otherwise specified, “imagery” in this article refers to complete scenes composed of multiple single-image combinations at least at the level of poetic lines—that is, imagery combinations. The characteristic of such combinations is that each single-image imagery may possess its own dual significance, while the integrated whole also conveys some implicit meaning beyond the poet’s words. It should be specifically noted that the imagery discussed in this article is not the psychological concept of “representation” (*biaoxiang*). In cognitive psychology, representation refers to mental representations similar to perception, whereas the concept of imagery is more complex and can be simply understood as representational representations infused with the thoughts and emotions of the author or reader.

2.2. Features of Imagery in Classical Poetry

Imagery is both the product of the poet’s creation and one of the primary objects of psychological processing during readers’ appreciation. Drawing upon relevant poetic theories, we propose that imagery possesses three main features: cognitive metaphoricality, emotional loading, and the integration of scene and emotion.

Cognitive metaphoricality refers to imagery’s dual significance—surface meaning and deep meaning. The surface meaning corresponds to the literal meaning of the object, such as “moon,” “cicada,” or “plum blossom.” The deep meaning refers to the thoughts and emotions projected onto the object by the author. For example, the deep meaning of the “moon” imagery can be “longing” (as in “Raising my head, I gaze at the bright moon; lowering my head, I think of home”) or “sorrow of parting” (as in “I entrust my sorrow to the moon, may it follow the wind west to Yelang”). Therefore, readers’ cognitive processing of imagery proceeds from representation and results in accessing the implicit emotional meanings behind the imagery. Bai Juyi, in his *Golden Needle Poetry Manual*, referred to the deep meaning of imagery as the internal meaning of poetry, including categories such as “praise, satire, admonition, and instruction”—that is, certain emotional information the poet wishes to convey, which Yuan Xingpei (2009) termed “emotional resonance meaning.” In summary, classical poetry imagery functions similarly to figurative language, with single-image imagery resembling figurative vocabulary. Jia Dandan (2021) found through experimental research that access to the deep meaning of imagery follows a two-stage model without context and a direct-access model with context.

Emotional loading refers to imagery's capacity to carry the author's thoughts and feelings. Qu Guang (2002) argued that imagery created by poets possesses authenticity in emotion, psychology, and life experience. This authenticity enables readers, during appreciation, to follow corresponding emotional logic to reconstruct the poet's emotional experiences and establish emotional resonance. Research indicates that poetry can uniquely evoke readers' physiological arousal and emotional experiences (Wassiliwizky et al., 2017), and this emotional arousal may be related to mental simulation during reading appreciation (Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 2022). Jia Dandan's (2021) comparative study of single-image imagery (words), emotional words, and neutral words found that single-image imagery, similar to emotionally loaded words, possesses comparable emotional loading functions and emotional effects.

The integration of scene and emotion describes the aesthetic structural feature of imagery in traditional Chinese poetic criticism. Wang Guowei, in *Poetic Remarks in the Human World (Renjian Cihua)*, discussed the relationship between scene and emotion in classical poetry: "When ancient scholars discussed poetry, they distinguished between scene-language and emotion-language, unaware that all scene-language is emotion-language." This suggests that while ancient discussions separated scene and emotion in poetry, they are actually inseparable. Wang Fuzhi, in *Jiangzhai's Poetry Talks (Jiangzhai Shihua)*, expressed a similar view: "Scene and emotion are named as two, but in reality cannot be separated." The concept of scene-emotion integration in traditional Chinese poetic criticism not only implies the internal connection between "meaning" and "image" in imagery but also embodies an anti-dualistic thought regarding the interaction and unified fusion between aesthetic subject and aesthetic object during the aesthetic process, reflecting a dynamic, constructive, and integrative psychological processing mode. Specifically, imagery creation techniques can be divided into three types: "scene evokes emotion, emotion arises from scene," "express emotion through scene, emotion depends on scene," and "bidirectional interaction, fusion of scene and emotion," all reflecting the characteristics of integrated cognitive-affective processing during the poet's imagery construction. The process of readers' poetry appreciation involves the reprocessing and re-creation of the poet's constructed imagery to generate aesthetic imagery, which similarly follows the integrated cognitive-affective psychological processing employed by poets during artistic imagery creation.

2.3. Aesthetic Imagery

The ultimate goal of classical poetry appreciation is the psychological representational reconstruction of imagery, culminating in the generation of meaningful and interesting aesthetic imagery. The concept of aesthetic imagery was coined by Zhu Guangqian to translate the term "Aesthetic Image" in the works of Kant, Hegel, and others, integrating traditional Chinese aesthetic imagery theory with Western aesthetic thought. Subsequently, building upon the aesthetic imagery theories of Zhu Guangqian and Zong Baihua, Ye Lang proposed the view that

“beauty resides in imagery,” confirming that aesthetic imagery is neither a completely external entity nor purely subjective experience, but rather a perceptual form generated during aesthetic activity that integrates subject-object representations (Ye Lang, 2009). In contemporary scholarship, Zhu Zhirong further developed related theories, advocating that “beauty is imagery” and arguing that aesthetic imagery constitutes the ontological foundation of beauty itself—a perceptual object actively constructed by the aesthetic subject through agency and creativity, with aesthetic activity being precisely the creative construction of aesthetic imagery (Zhu Zhirong, 2014, 2016).

Classical poetry artistic imagery serves as the object of readers’ aesthetic re-creation, while aesthetic imagery represents the outcome of this re-creation. Both possess the essential feature of “integration of scene and emotion,” with artistic imagery reflecting the subject-object unity during the poet’s aesthetic creation, and aesthetic imagery reflecting the subject-object fusion during the reader’s aesthetic re-creation. The main differences are twofold: first, artistic imagery is readily available in the poetic text, whereas aesthetic imagery is constructed and generated during the reading and appreciation process; second, artistic imagery has linguistic symbols as its presentation medium, while aesthetic imagery exists as a perceptual form in the reader’s mental world. In other words, aesthetic imagery is the product generated by readers through creative processing of artistic imagery during poetry appreciation, possessing both objective perceptual-sensory representational characteristics and subjective meanings such as thoughts and emotions comprehended by the reader.

In summary, poets typically aim to “express aspirations and convey emotions” as their fundamental purpose, primarily employing the techniques of “expressing aspirations through objects” and “conveying emotions through scenery”—that is, using imagery to express thoughts and feelings. Classical poetry appreciation is largely the inverse process of poetry creation, with the primary psychological processing object being the artistic imagery in the poem, and the creative processing outcome being the generation of aesthetic imagery. The psychological process by which readers construct aesthetic imagery in classical poetry is the focus of the following discussion.

3. The Relationship Between Classical Poetry Reading and Memory

From the perspective of traditional Chinese poetic criticism, the imagery creation method of poets “being moved by scenes” roughly includes three main stages: “sensing objects,” “arousing emotion,” and “integration of scene and emotion.” Analyzed from a psychological perspective, the reader’s appreciation process—from processing the imagery in the poetic text to generating aesthetic imagery—can also be roughly divided into three psychological processing stages: cognitive processing of imagery, emotional arousal and experience, and cognitive-affective integration (i.e., imagery reconstruction). During this process, information from the poetic text interacts and gradually merges with information in the

reader's long-term memory, completing the transformation from text-centered reading comprehension to reader-centered aesthetic comprehension. As shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper], we have constructed a psychological processing model of classical poetry appreciation through theoretical analysis, which includes the psychological process and creative mechanisms of classical poetry imagery reconstruction.

3.1. The Relationship Between Cognitive-Emotional Processing and Long-Term Memory in Classical Poetry Appreciation

Since the process of classical poetry appreciation requires accessing information from long-term memory and selectively integrating it with existing information, we first describe semantic memory and linguistic schemas related to semantic information processing, as well as episodic memory and emotional schemas related to emotional processing, before analyzing readers' cognitive and emotional processing of imagery.

Generally, the psychological process of reading and appreciating literary works essentially involves individuals comparing and integrating externally input stimuli (e.g., poetic text) with existing information in internal long-term memory (here discussing only declarative memory), then updating their own long-term memory representations. Long-term memory is divided into semantic memory and episodic memory based on differences in information storage and representational forms. Semantic memory is typically stored in the form of concepts or propositions, reflecting an individual's knowledge about the world and connections among concepts (Kumar, 2021). Episodic memory is stored in the form of perceptual representations or situational models, reflecting an individual's representation of multimodal event experiences in specific spatiotemporal contexts (Tulving, 2002). Individuals' reading, learning, and life experiences create pre-existing information structures in long-term memory. We borrow the term "schema" to describe relevant information structures that readers may access during poetry appreciation. "Linguistic schemas" describe long-term memory representations of concepts and propositions related to reading comprehension—for example, for the common imagery of "plum blossom" in classical poetry, readers' semantic networks may store related emotional meanings such as "plum blossom-nobility." "Emotional schemas" describe episodic memory representations related to emotional understanding and experience—for instance, scenarios such as "breaking willow branches," "farewell at long pavilions," and "long journeys," with associated emotional schemas possibly being "reluctance," "sorrow of parting," and related subjective emotional experiences.

Neuroscientific research in memory demonstrates that when individuals receive new information from the external world, they actively integrate it with prior knowledge in long-term memory (Hasson et al., 2015; Yeshurun et al., 2021). Moreover, information in long-term memory can alter and shape individuals'

neural representations of original information (Bein et al., 2020; Hasson et al., 2015), exhibiting the transformative nature of memory representations (Sheng et al., 2023; Xue, 2018, 2022). It is precisely this interaction between external stimuli and long-term memory that promotes effective memory and meaningful association of input information (Z. Liu et al., 2017; Xue, 2018). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that when imagery from poetic text is presented in auditory or visual form, readers activate relevant information from their semantic and episodic memories, among which psychologically relevant schemas gradually become salient over time. Subsequently, external stimuli and internal information begin selective integration, with new information structures assimilating into activated psychological schemas, and corresponding long-term memory representations being updated accordingly.

Specifically, after completing preliminary semantic comprehension of the text, readers proceed with cognitive processes such as semantic association and imagery construction. Semantic association activates certain semantic connections in readers' semantic memory, and these linguistic schemas support further understanding of the emotional meanings expressed by the poet through imagery. However, pure semantic association may be insufficient for accurately identifying the complex emotional meanings expressed through specific scenes, so experienced readers often engage in representational processing as well. Imagery construction activates readers' episodic memory, where perceptual-motor details help construct vivid and distinct situational models and, based on relevant emotional schemas, evoke corresponding emotional experiences, initiating emotional processing. These emotional schemas are typically memories of emotional experiences in specific spatiotemporal contexts.

Through semantic association and imagery construction, readers construct coherent mental representations of the poetic text, generating a discourse mental model to explain "what the author wants to express." This model includes propositional semantic representations such as "the author uses xx imagery to express xx emotional meaning," as well as multimodal information representations of the scenery and events depicted in the poetry within specific spatiotemporal contexts. At this point, readers complete meaning-seeking reading. By constructing scenarios and engaging in vicarious experiences (mental simulation) within imagined situations, readers produce physiological arousal and subjective emotional experiences related to specific situations and achieve emotional resonance with the poet or text. This constitutes experiential reading. Both meaning-seeking and experiential reading in poetry appreciation possess characteristics of innovative learning, though this is not the focus of the current discussion and will be omitted here.

3.2. The Relationship Between Classical Poetry Imagery Reconstruction and Autobiographical Memory

The cognitive and emotional processing of classical poetry appreciation forms the foundation for cognitive-affective integration. Under aesthetic contempla-

tion, readers must not only integrate the outputs from the first two stages but also access self-related long-term memory information to further comprehend the internal or deep meanings of poetic imagery, appreciate the emotions, interests, or nuances of the poetry, and project their own subjective feelings onto the imagery, thereby completing the psychological representational reconstruction of classical poetry imagery—that is, generating aesthetic imagery.

This proposition is based on the following memory-related theories and research evidence. Constructivist perspectives hold that individuals do not passively receive and record information but actively construct meaning and interpret experiences (Wittrock, 1992). The primary method of meaning construction involves individuals attempting to establish connections between self-elements and external-world elements (Heine et al., 2006), meaning that meaning is subjectively constructed based on understanding the self and its relationship with the environment (Zhao Na et al., 2017). Recent researchers have proposed a theoretical framework for the role of memory in creative ideation (MemiC), arguing that psychological elements related to creative idea generation are inseparable from individuals' memory cognitive processes, such as information search in long-term memory, combination and construction of useful information, and evaluation and selection based on long-term memory (Benedek et al., 2023). Numerous studies have examined how individuals' semantic and episodic memories influence creative performance (Kenett & Faust, 2019; Ovando-Tellez, Benedek, et al., 2022; Ovando-Tellez, Kenett, et al., 2022; Madore et al., 2015; Thakral et al., 2020), yet few have investigated how individuals' self-related memory supports creative idea generation.

In the aesthetic domain, research has confirmed the important role of autobiographical memory in aesthetic appreciation. In visual arts, studies show that individuals' aesthetic preferences for artworks depend not only on the physical features of stimuli but also on self-relevance as rated by viewers (Vessel et al., 2023). Research in music has also found that people show more pronounced preferences for music from adolescence and early adulthood, possibly because this period represents a critical stage for adolescents to establish identity and self-coherence (Holbrook & Schindler, 1989; Loveday et al., 2020). Additionally, Hetherington and Atherton (2017) theoretically explained why readers experience “aesthetic empathy” when reading prose poetry, suggesting that readers may enter a state resembling “daydreaming” during reading, which activates a series of autobiographical memories. Supported by these memories, readers participate in reconstructing the memories reenacted by the poet through poetry and experience emotional reactions associated with these memories.

According to the Self-Memory System (SMS) model, autobiographical memory is described as a psychological representation constructed from conceptual knowledge about the self and related episodic memories in long-term memory, comprising three distinct components: the working self, episodic memory, and the long-term self (Conway et al., 2004, 2019; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). The working self refers to a transient psychological structure composed of con-

trol processes driven by a series of complex goals, typically evoked by external stimulus cues. Episodic memory stores perceptual-motor information from self-related events, usually represented in multimodal forms such as visual imagery. The long-term self encompasses the self-knowledge base and collection of self-concepts—the former being outlines of personal life stories, and the latter containing an individual’s cognitions, attitudes, and values regarding the self and external world (Conway et al., 2004). According to this model, during the construction of autobiographical memory, under the guidance of goals, a series of cognitive and affective elements integrate with information in the long-term self, thereby merging to form a complete psychological representation (Conway et al., 2004).

As previously discussed, during classical poetry appreciation, readers spontaneously activate linguistic and emotional schemas in long-term memory to support meaning-seeking and experiential reading. Similarly, information related to these psychological schemas in autobiographical memory is also activated under corresponding cues. This information corresponds to the working self in the SMS model, which we term self-schemas in this article. Self-schemas include both propositional structures about self-knowledge and multimodal information from self-participated events, but their core consists of more abstract information such as beliefs, attitudes, and values about the self within self-concepts, which may originate from individuals’ specific life experiences or social-cultural influences.

We argue that the process of classical poetry imagery reconstruction requires readers to establish connections between text and self, with the key creative psychological mechanism being the selective integration of cognitive and affective elements generated during the first two stages of appreciation with self-schemas. In other words, readers no longer simply represent the scenes described in poetry, nor are they limited to understanding the poet’s thoughts and feelings embedded in artistic imagery, but rather further integrate the mental model of the poetic discourse with their own subjective emotional experiences and self-schemas in long-term memory, establishing novel information connections and thereby generating new ideas and concepts. During this process, the act of reading and appreciation shifts from text-centered comprehension to reader-centered aesthetic insight, with scene and emotion merging, cognition and affect integrating, and aesthetic subject and object establishing connections. Readers’ psychological processing of classical poetry imagery becomes colored by the self, causing their mental representations to undergo reconstruction and generate aesthetic imagery, while simultaneously updating self-schemas in long-term memory.

The following example illustrates the activation and updating of readers’ self-schemas during imagery reconstruction. In Wang Wei’s “Seeing Off Yuan Er on His Mission to Anxi” (Weicheng morning rain dampens light dust, the inn’s green willows look fresh. I urge you to drink one more cup of wine, west of Yangguan Pass you’ll have no old friends), the first two lines use “light dust” and

“inn” to imply the purpose of travel is farewell, while the imagery of “morning rain” and “willow color” indicates the time of parting. The last two lines use imagery such as “urging wine” and “Yangguan” to describe the author’s actions during farewell and the farewell environment (Yu Pingbo, 2013). When reading and appreciating this poem, readers activate relevant linguistic schemas—for example, the homophone of “willow” (*liu*) is “stay” (*liu*), establishing semantic connections like “willow tree-retention-reluctance.” They also activate relevant emotional schemas, such as sadness evoked by the desolation of “west of Yangguan Pass,” regret associated with “parting with friends,” and consolation related to “drinking wine together.” Through semantic processing, readers construct propositional text representations about when, where, in what environment, and in what manner the poet bid farewell to his friend. Through representational processing, they construct a mental picture of “after spring rain, willows around the inn glisten with dewdrops, exuding vibrant spring vitality, as the poet and his friend part ways on the muddy roadside.” These two components together form the reader’s mental model of the poetic text, which, along with subjective emotional experiences of sadness, regret, and consolation generated during this process, serves as cues to activate related self-schemas. These self-schemas may include the reader’s emotions, attitudes, life perspectives, and values held as a participant in the event of “farewell to a friend.” When this information undergoes selective integration with cognitive and affective elements from the poetry appreciation process, the deep friendship between poet and friend is likely to move the reader, who projects the self into the text and generates new concepts such as “gathering and parting are both normal states of life” or “parting is fate, meeting is destiny,” thereby updating their self-schemas.

4. Imagination and the Reconstruction of Classical Poetry Imagery

As previously discussed, the core creative process in classical poetry appreciation is readers’ reconstruction of poetic imagery based on long-term memory, particularly autobiographical memory. Consequently, readers’ reading experience and life history significantly influence the innovativeness of the reconstructed aesthetic imagery, but perhaps more important influences derive from the novelty of the artistic imagery itself (the creative imaginative space left by the poet) and the reader’s aesthetic imagination (the reader’s own creative imaginative capacity).

We continue using Wang Wei’s farewell poems as examples for illustration. In “Seeing Off Yuan Er on His Mission to Anxi,” the first couplet describes “joyful” scenery (Weicheng morning rain dampens light dust, the inn’s green willows look fresh) to contrast with and intensify the sorrow of parting. However, the final couplet expresses emotion too directly, leaving limited imaginative space for readers, which to some extent constrains the novelty of their imagery reconstruction.

In “Seeing Off Shenzi Returning to Jiangdong” (Sparse travelers at the willow ferry, the boatman rows toward Linqi. Only my longing resembles spring colors, seeing you home north and south of the river), the final couplet also appears to express feelings directly, but fortunately employs a novel metaphor, comparing the poet’s longing to spring colors, using the gradual greening of grass north and south of the river as the small boat slowly carries Shenzi home to represent the poet’s continuous accompaniment.

When reading and appreciating the last two lines of the second poem, readers need to understand or comprehend the ingenuity of the novel metaphor based on imagination—that is, comparing the psychological activity of “longing” to “spring colors.” Readers must also mobilize imagination for mental time travel, imagining their own longing like spring colors accompanying the journey, thereby experiencing the poet’s deep affection in seeing off Shenzi. Due to vast differences between the Tang Dynasty and today in transportation, communication, and lifestyle, readers with richer reading experiences, when immersing themselves in classical poetry, can activate autobiographical memory-related information through vivid and distinct situational imagination, promoting imagery reconstruction while also updating their autobiographical memory.

Wang Wei’s another poem “Farewell in the Mountains” (After seeing you off in the mountains, at dusk I close the wooden door. Next spring when grass turns green, will the prince return or not?) leaves even greater imaginative space for readers. Attentive readers may wonder (imagine) why the wooden door is closed only at dusk—did the poet see his friend off very far and only return at dusk, or after bidding farewell, did he remain reluctant to part, still harboring hope that his friend might return, until dusk... Next, readers must follow the author’s thoughts, flying to next spring, hoping the friend will return, but uncertain whether he will return or not? Imagining the joyful scene of reunion when the friend returns... imagining the melancholy scene if the friend does not return... In short, during the process of reading and appreciating classical poetry and reconstructing its imagery, readers must not only access relevant information from long-term memory but also place themselves within the poetic realm, imagining themselves as the poet, like the poet having a close friend who half-recluses in the mountains with them, discussing ancient and modern times, enjoying music and chess together, exchanging poetry and prose... but one day, the friend receives an imperial summons to return to court or descends the mountain to travel, and the poet’s actions, feelings, and hopes when seeing off the friend in the mountains. When reading and appreciating classical poetry, the stronger the reader’s mobilization of aesthetic imagination—including mental simulation (farewell, closing doors), mental time travel (next spring, eagerly looking forward), empathetic imagination (I am the poet), and empathy—the richer the subjective emotions and self-schemas that can be evoked, and the more seamlessly integrated the scenes in the generated aesthetic imagery, making it more creative.

Wang Wei’s highly acclaimed poem “Farewell” (Dismounting to drink with you,

I ask where you are headed. You say you're frustrated, returning to sleep at the southern mountain foothills. Just go, don't ask again, the white clouds are endless) is particularly profound despite simple words. Its final two lines not only express emotions and reason through scenery but also manifest spiritual enlightenment. For example, "endless white clouds" not only expresses the poet's infinite longing but also seems to contain a Zen-like understanding of worldly principles and transcendent subtlety. Appreciating such "implicitly boundless" classical poetry requires readers to draw upon rich life experiences and attitudes from long-term memory, as well as rich imagination and contemplative ability, to comprehend the meaning beyond words and the significance beyond flavor. The process of contemplating such "infinitely meaningful" poetry is not discussed in this article.

5. Summary and Outlook

This article integrates traditional Chinese poetic criticism and aesthetic theory, proposing that the primary psychological processing object in classical poetry appreciation is the artistic imagery within poems. It explores three main psychological processing stages corresponding to "sensing objects," "arousing emotion," and "integration of scene and emotion" as proposed in traditional poetic criticism: cognitive processing, emotional processing, and imagery reconstruction. Combining relevant psychological theories and empirical research, it provides a detailed analysis of the process, creative psychological mechanisms, and constraints of readers' reconstruction of classical poetry imagery.

Vartanian (2014) noted that although artistic creation and appreciation are two sides of the same coin, research on them has largely proceeded separately, with theories and empirical evidence about the artistic creation process offering limited help in understanding the appreciation process, and vice versa. This article pioneers an approach from the perspective of creative psychology, focusing on the special creative process of imagery reconstruction in classical poetry appreciation (i.e., aesthetic re-creation in art appreciation).

We contend that in psychological research on literary and artistic appreciation, creative cognitive processing of semantic and emotional information tends to receive attention. However, appreciating emotions in literary and artistic works, generating emotional resonance, integrating cognitive and affective components, and generating aesthetic imagery—these processes are more susceptible to social-cultural influences and better represent the aesthetic re-creation process in literary and artistic appreciation—have not yet attracted sufficient attention from researchers. This interdisciplinary theoretical study preliminarily provides an explanatory framework for the process and creative psychological mechanisms of classical poetry imagery reconstruction, attempting to open new avenues for research on creative processes with Chinese cultural characteristics and hot cognitive processes incorporating emotional processing. However, this is merely a beginning. This article proposes three research directions:

First, regarding empirical research methodology, studying psychological processes like classical poetry appreciation—which are difficult to measure behaviorally and show large individual differences—is no easy task. Employing neurotechnologies such as EEG and fMRI to probe target processes of interest represents a reliable research method. Notably, experimental paradigms must be designed according to the spatiotemporal resolution characteristics of relevant technologies, locking recordings of target psychological processes to specific behaviors of participants. Researchers can also refer to well-established inter-subject correlation (ISC) analysis (Nastase et al., 2019) and multivariate pattern analysis (MVPA) based on whole-brain activity patterns (e.g., Cichy & Pantazis, 2017) from the field of naturalistic stimulus processing to interpret recorded data results. Machine learning techniques can be used to train relevant neural datasets for decoding psychological processes, comparing participants' neural processes with theoretical model predictions to further refine the model.

Second, regarding specific research design implementation, ensuring that participants can achieve the creative reading goal of imagery reconstruction when completing corresponding appreciation tasks is also challenging. One approach is to reveal the characteristics of creative processing in imagery reconstruction by comparing the different performances of experts, proficient readers, and novices during classical poetry appreciation. Alternatively, based on the relationship between classical poetry imagery reconstruction and imagination discussed earlier, the two main constraints—novelty of classical poetry imagery and readers' own imagination—can be manipulated as independent variables to examine related processes. Particularly, this article suggests that classical poetry imagery reconstruction is related to the activation of information in readers' autobiographical memory. Therefore, certain reading strategies or experimental procedures could be developed, such as situational setting priming or role-playing, to intervene in readers' appreciation processes and enable them to more easily achieve the target level of creative reading.

Third, regarding practical application value, researchers could explore the potential benefits of classical poetry appreciation in creative education and psychotherapy. On one hand, China's new curriculum standards for middle and high school Chinese language require cultivating students' imagination and innovative learning abilities. The cognitive, emotional, and cognitive-affective integration processes involved in classical poetry appreciation all constitute innovative learning. Learners can receive training in linguistic thinking during reading, cultivate aesthetic emotions during contemplation, and better comprehend the cultural meanings and values conveyed by classical poetry. Focusing on the innovative teaching and learning of classical poetry can, to some extent, change the situation where literary appreciation and Chinese language innovation learning theories lag behind teaching practice. On the other hand, readers' aesthetic re-creation process of classical poetry involves updating relevant psychological schemas in long-term memory, which may facilitate the reconstruction of traumatic memories and positively influence the development of self-concept

and construction of self-coherence. Combined with relevant art and narrative psychotherapy techniques, classical poetry appreciation may realize its value in the mental health domain.

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