From Literary Illusions to Media Simulacra: Toward a Semiotic Imagology in the Era of Global Communication

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In the pre-globalization era, when communication between nations was difficult and infrequent, and direct (experiential) or indirect (textual-descriptive) knowledge was scant, images of 'foreign countries' were frequently constructions based on inadequate information. As a result, fictional descriptions and images were the primary source for people to gain some knowledge of other nations. However, beginning with the great voyages of discovery of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, we began to step into an age of globalization, which generated the diversification of 'source texts' in this regard. Today, the emergence of new media has accelerated and proliferated such diversity. These new media texts now play a dominant role in forming the image of other countries, to some degree replacing traditional fictional texts. The basic presuppositions of comparative literature imagology have changed accordingly. Starting from the core concept of 'images', this paper discusses why it is necessary to integrate imagology, with 'semiotic images' as core concept, and 'communications research'.

1. Introduction: Challenges and Problems in Imagology Today

Imagological study has been an academic focus of comparative literature since the field's establishment. As pointed out by Hua Meng (2000, 2), 'comparative literature has attached great importance to "travelers" and taken them as objects of media studies. In the travelers' stories, images of other countries are represented. Hence the study of images appeared in the earliest international literature communications'. As a branch of comparative literary studies, imagology concentrates on images of other countries, especially how these often exotic images are constructed in literature. However, 'image' is a generally employed term within the concept of culture.

With the integration of cultural studies and literary studies and the rapid development of various non-fictional texts in new media, image studies have diversified into different fields. As a result, the 'image' itself has been involved in an increasing number of studies in cultural, political, and economic areas. Therefore, imagology too needs to be re-examined, in particular its categories and its relationship with comparative literature.

Why imagology needs to be re-examined can be explained as follows: first, the concept of 'image' involved far exceeds the scope of imagology. Second, comparative literature has largely turned from traditional literary research to broader cultural analysis, leading to further developments in imagology. Third, fast-evolving communication technologies have caused significant changes in the representation and construction of images of other countries. In such a context, a series of questions arises: Is it necessary for imagology itself to be developed into a general semiotic imagology? Are literary texts in a broader sense, such as journalism, advertisement, and other documentary genre texts, to be included in research on comparative literature imagology? Will the national images represented by various new media be dealt with in imagology studies?

2.　The Differences between 'Imagology' and 'Image'

2.1.　*The Importance of 'Images' in/of Cultures*

The idea of the 'image', although different in terms of its definition in diverse cultures, is endowed with great significance by the East as well as the West. In ancient China, images (象, pronounced 'xiang') are the basic way to understand the metaphorical world: the earliest Chinese philosophical book, the *I Ching* (or *Book of Changes*), known as one of the 'top six Confucian classics', offers a description of the universe and its laws through 'divinatory symbols' (images of Gua, 卦象). Therefore, ancient Chinese sagas 'set up divination to observe the image' (Shouqi Huang and Shanwen Zhang 2004, 531) – to build a concrete image of the invisible Tao. The *dharma-laksana* (images of laws, 法相) in Buddhism (originating from India) are images of different metaphysical laws, called *tathatā* (reality, 真如) or ultimate truth (实相), which consists of an image of an entity (essence, 体相) and a sensed image (meaning, 义象). There are 32 *dharma-laksana* (images) of Buddha Sakyamuni, and these images are all his incarnations. Therefore, the *dharma-laksana* is a comprehensive concept of an entity and essence rather than a visible sign or an appearance.

Parts of Christianity once held a negative attitude towards the production of 'images'. In the biblical *Book of Exodus*, one of God's Ten Commandments forbids disciples to make 'carved images'[1] because they promote idolatry and hinder true

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1. 'You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments' (*Exodus* 20:4).

spiritual belief. However, God also needed to be incarnated as Jesus Christ to communicate with his believers in the secular world, which reflects that the visual channel, involving images, is of great significance for such communication. Ancient Greek philosophy attached great importance to images and appearances as well. For example, as Plato envisaged in *The Republic*:

> You have only to take a mirror and catch the reflection of the sun, and the earth, or anything else—there now you have made them. 'Yes, but only in appearance.' Exactly so; and the painter is such a creator as you are with the mirror. (Plato 2016, 61)

The similarities in form of images and objects emphasized by Plato are entirely different from the concept in Chinese philosophy. In spite of these differences in the nature of the concept, however, it can be seen that as an essential idea, the 'image' has been of philosophical concern in both the Eastern and Western worlds.

2.2. 'Image' in the History of Literature and Art

The complexity and multiple meanings of the idea of the image have led to the great diversity of image study. Fine art study on images focuses on their visual representation; an image is considered an expressional form across diverse art genres (painting, sculpture, architecture, etc.) and/or rituals (religions, totems, utensils, etc.). In the 'pre-iconography era' before the sixteenth century, the motifs and meanings conveyed by images were built upon people's everyday life experiences. In the sixteenth century, however, the study of image interpretation stepped into the stage of 'iconography', in which research into images began to focus on stories and fables instead of life experience. Roughly, in the nineteenth century, the study of iconography made great strides, with mutual references to paintings and religious literature as its approach. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Warburg School, founded by Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky, developed a new method for image research, one which interprets artistic images by exploring the intrinsic meanings of symbols. This approach is termed 'iconology' by Panofsky.

Image study in Western linguistics and literature dates back to the tradition of *ekphrasis* originating in ancient Greece. When visual images transform into literary images or vice versa, there will be some variations due to the semiotic differences between linguistic signs and visual signs. Translation of heterogeneous signs plays an essential role in the interactions between human cultural sign systems. Ekphrasis turned from an oral tradition to written expression, and eventually into a literary genre. Homer's description of Achilles' shield in the *Iliad* is regarded as one of the earliest works of ekphrasis in literature, and vivid visual descriptions in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* also fall into the category of ekphrasis, which has become a standard rhetorical figure in literature.

In China, literature was greatly influenced by the concept of the functional interchangeability of the six sense organs (六根互用) in Buddhism. This idea inspired the

emergence of unique genres such as ink paintings with Zen poems. Synaesthesia also plays an important role in Chinese artwork. In *Comments on Wei Wang's Painting of Rain in Lantian County* (《书摩诘蓝田烟雨图》), Dongpo Su (also known as Shi Su) writes, 'The quality of Wei Wang's poems can be summed up as poems holding a painting within them. In observing his paintings, you can find that within the painting there is poetry' (Dongpo Su 2003, 305). Both Wei Wang and Dongpo Su were famous poets in, respectively, the Tang and Song dynasties of China. This comment goes right to the essence of the intertextuality between language and images in general.

2.3. 'Images' and 'Verbal Icons' in Comparative Literature

Studies related to the image are of great significance in modern literary criticism. The idea that a poem should become a verbal icon, as claimed by W.K. Wimsatt, is regarded as one of the general ontological appeals of art in the early twentieth century. In *Theory of Literature* (1956), René Wellek and Austin Warren (1956, 190) argue that there are four kinds of verbal icons: Image, Metaphor, Symbol and Myth. Studies on verbal icons have profoundly influenced Comparative Literature imagology. Image study in modern literature is conducted from the perspectives of linguistic rhetoric, including context, symbol, character, description, and metaphor, as well as the models or stereotypes of specific images. However, the focuses of different schools of comparative literature vary: American scholars associated with parallel study and the New Criticism engage in close reading of verbal icons in texts, while scholars associated with influence study and imagology discuss image problems from the perspective of readers.

New Critic scholars use the term 'icon' to refer to 'images' generated by literary works (Zhao 1986, 133). Wimsatt (1954, i) calls them 'verbal icons' and discusses them in poetry. Emphasizing 'the autonomy of the text', Wimsatt positions the 'verbal icon' as meaning the image depicted in the text rather than the subjective 'mental image' of the author or readers. In parallel studies of comparative literature, on the other hand, the focus lies on a comparison of the literary language and the rhetoric of images. For example, Zhongshu Qian reveals the common rules underlying Western and Chinese rhetoric in his essay 'Synesthesia' (《论通感》). He defines synaesthesia as the literary method that links different senses together – what has been known as the 'interaction of six sensory organs' (六根互用) in the Chinese literary tradition (Zhou 2011, 136–153).

In contrast, imagology focuses on studies of the alien images in literary description rather than on rhetoric. This academic interest originates from influential research by the French school of comparative literature. According to Paul Van Tieghem, the research object of comparative literature is the inter-relation between works of literature of different countries. He summarizes the research paradigm of comparative literature in three facets: 'doxologie', 'mesologie' and 'crenologie' (Van Tieghem 1939 [1931], 117–142, 25–40, 141–151), which respectively refer to comparative study from the perspective of the sender, the medium (or channel), and the

receiver. The focus of doxologie is to study influence on works abroad, from the perspective of the sender; mesologie discusses the dissemination, translation, adaptation, performance, and evaluation of works and the related communication processes; crenologie traces the origins of the themes, subjects, characters, plots and styles of literary works from the perspective of their reception, adoption, and adaptation – that is, their 'acceptance' (Van Tieghem 1939 [1931], 117–138).

The research paradigm of the French school of comparative literature can be summarized as one of 'influence studies', which also plays a fundamental role in imagology, since it is concerned with the whole process of semiotic communication as well as the main factors involved in it (including the sender, the medium, and the receiver). The research paradigm, therefore, is expanded into 'image cognition and acceptance', which is a breakthrough in comparative literature as well as a manifestation of the field's interdisciplinarity. Many important concepts of imagology were first introduced in communication studies and social psychology. 'Stereotype' is one of these; the term was coined in 1798 by the French printer Firmin Didot to describe the metal plates used in printing, while, in the early twentieth century, Walter Lippmann, an American media theorist and journalist, first introduced 'stereotype' into social psychology in his book *Public Opinion*. He argued that

> [f]or the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture. (Lippmann 2012, 44)

Daniel-Henri Pageaux takes the stereotype as the basic element of image research, for a stereotype constitutes a bundle of signs. He argued that 'it is remarkable to note the stability of … many images, or more precisely of stereotypes and clichés' (Pageaux 2001, 159). In other words, a stereotype disseminates a concrete image, which transmits a basic, initial image as well as a final, primitive image.

Therefore, the 'image' composed of signs is the research subject of imagology, which is the most essential distinction between the concept of 'traditional imagology' and 'modern imagology'. Since signs play an indispensable part in forming imagology, semiotics, which is the study of signs, might provide a brand-new path towards a better understanding of it. Compared with traditional imagology, which was born in comparative literature and centred on literary texts, semiotic imagology pays more attention to media symbolic texts. The main reason for this difference is that the connotation of the core concept of 'image' itself has expanded to a broad cultural category. As a result, we can investigate the possibility of 'semiotic imagology' by studying the more recent or modern development of the concept of the image itself.

2.4. *Towards an Integrative Symbolic Image Studies*

In modern iconology, an image involves icon, imagination, portrait, and idol, which share an iconic mental representation. The subtitle to W.J.T. Mitchell's well-known *Iconology* is *Image, Text, Ideology*, and later he used 'picture theory' to name his

image theory. In *Iconology*, Mitchell (2013, 10) establishes a genealogy of images by classifying them as graphic images, optical images, perceptual images, mental images or verbal images. Such a classification incorporates image study into the fields of art, visual research, psychology and literature.

Take the distinction between art and literature as an example. In Mitchell's genealogy, the image at the top of the spectrum can be regarded as an inclusive term for any form of visual icon. Image study in the field of art focuses on representations of visual perception, while that of literary works concentrates on how language depictions are transformed into 'mental icons' by readers. This sheds light on another difference between 'image' and 'icon': the former is built by texts, and the latter by perception, which is why it is usually described as a 'mental icon'. This then leads to a corresponding difference between iconology and imagology: the former is a discipline whose research objects are visual perception and metaphorical forms of icons (i.e. auditory icons), with visual logic as its essence, while the latter is a comprehensive study with its interest in an image generated by literary works.

There has been a common interest in the acceptance and cognition of images in the above-mentioned fields, including literature and visual culture, and a new trend is forming. Any kind of image is conveyed by signs; therefore, semiotic models and theories will help us understand images which, as texts, are the integration of heterogeneous signs and feature proximity, analogy, as well as the possibility of inspiring association and causing confusion in cognition (Hu 2014, 19–26). Text is not a single sign, but a combination of signs that the receiver considers to carry meaning. Charles Peirce's semiotics divides signs into three types: icon, index and symbol. The most prominent characteristic of the icon is similarity, which builds a connection between signs and objects. The most prominent feature of the index is the adjacent or analogical connection between signs and objects. Both icon and index are not arbitrary. The interpretation of a symbol, however, relies on the conventions of the community. Arbitrariness and non-arbitrariness refer to the relationship between the sign and its meaning. If the relationship is arbitrary, the interpretation of the symbol will depend on the common convention. If it is non-arbitrary, the interpretation will not depend on the convention. Therefore, in terms of arbitrariness, the symbol is different from icon and index. In addition, the three kinds of signs all have the possibility of infinite semiosis on the cognitive level. This means that no matter what the relationship between these signs and their meanings, they carry infinite possibilities for interpretation, because the essence of a sign is that one thing stands for another. In theory, the interpretation cannot be closed. Image text is a mixture of icon, index and symbol, which means its interpretation is both arbitrary and non-arbitrary, and therefore, various.

First of all, image symbols do not merely refer to the object, but aim to achieve iconicity or resemblance to the latter, as a combination of iconicity, indexicality, and conventionality. As Yiheng Zhao points out, iconicity makes the signifying process vivid, indexicality eradicates the ambiguity of the process, and conventions enrich its connotations (Zhao 2011, 87). In the image era, the iconicity of image symbols was particularly prominent. The subjects of the image symbols could be individuals,

organizations (ethnicity, race, community, gender), or institutions (governments, enterprises, non-governmental organizations, cities or states).

Second, current research into images is not just concerned with the study of 'exotic images' or aesthetics; it deals with the meaning-generating mechanism as well as semiotic practice in the media era, and therefore involves individuals and organizations from all over the world. As a global craze, the cosmetic surgery industry in South Korea has the most developed industry for cosmetics and clothing in the world; enterprises invest heavily to build brand image by hiring image spokespersons; government agencies and politicians attach great importance to image-building; and images have become significant elements to evaluate the soft power of nations. What Bourdieu calls symbolic capital is essentially a symbolic image based on one's face or reputation. He believes that once one realizes that symbolic capital is always credited, in the widest sense of the word, it can be seen that the exhibition of symbolic capital is one of the mechanisms that make capital go to capital (Bourdieu 1977, 181).

In contrast to the study of image symbols, traditional imagology ignores the image problems in cultural communications by clinging to elitism and confining itself to the narrower study of traditional literary texts. In the old days, as a result of the existing social structures, 'high cultural' texts were largely the prerogative of the upper, powerful class and the general public often did not have access to such texts or the basis to interpret them. With democratization and the popularization of their visual, auditory and tactile symbols and texts in mass media and consumer society, classical literary works, music and paintings fall into the vast ocean of the symbolic world of daily life. Multimodal literary texts, interrelated with symbolic consumption, have replaced or are replacing the former mainstream traditional written literary texts. From this, we can see the inevitable trend from traditional imagological research to semiotic imagological research. Traditional literary text imagological analysis is marginalized by the marginalization of the traditional pure aesthetic text itself, and the symbolic image produced by the media has become the most common symbolic text. It is high time to establish an interdisciplinary dialogue about images. Semiotics, which has interdisciplinarity as its characteristic and meaning-generation as well as image-construction as its research focus, offers new perspectives on such matters.

3. The Development of Comparative Literature and the Legitimacy of a General Semiotic Imagology

3.1. 'Influence Study' and 'Parallel Study'

The interdisciplinary nature of imagology has always been regarded as a typical characteristic of comparative literature. In the 1950s, under the banner of 'imageology', Guyard and Carré's attempt was considered to have become a 'public opinion study' subordinate to sociology and ethnic psychology (Guyard and Carré 1961 [1951], 6). Their expansion of the scope of comparative literature research has also caused controversy and criticism. Wellek (1963, 284) considered this to be one of the

reasons for the crisis of comparative literature. He criticizes the paradigm of simplifying comparative literature into a 'foreign trade relations of literary studies' (Wellek 1963, 282–295) which follows the causal logic of positivism and factualism. According to Wellek, influence study sacrifices 'literariness':

> [n]or can one be convinced by recent attempts by Guyard and Carré to widen the scope of comparative literature suddenly to include a study of national illusions, of fixed ideas which nations have of each other [. . .]. Is it not rather a study of public opinion?' (Wellek 1963, 282–295)

Since then, the French School has been in decline, while the parallel study advocated by the American school has been gaining in importance. Parallel studies are not based on the historical relevance between literary works; instead, the comparison is established by the interpreters of texts, the researchers. Parallel research enriches comparative literature and enlarges its scope. Influenced by New Criticism, parallel study focuses on texts instead of historical contexts, which forms a sharp contrast with influence study.

The inherent problems of parallel study gradually emerged, however, over the course of its development. The non-contact text comparison pursued by parallel study is better suited to dealing with pre-globalization era conditions. With the acceleration of globalization, literary relations between countries have become closer and closer. The 'contact pollution' caused by the convenience of dissemination poses a major challenge to parallel research. Furthermore, because of the lack of consideration of cultural contexts, the comparisons made by parallel study run the risk of leading to far-fetched interpretations of 'similarity' between texts, challenging the approach's legitimacy. Another problem, specifically related to East–West comparisons, with parallel study, at least as it has been practised hitherto in the West, is that it fails to engage in an in-depth investigation of Eastern culture and is unaware of the latter's heterogeneity, while precisely a thorough awareness of these issues could have offered dialogical possibilities for comparative study.

Since the 1960s, structuralism, semiotics, linguistics, philosophy, and reader response theory/reception aesthetics have provided common methodologies for literary and cultural studies. Interdisciplinary trends in methodology provide tools for interdisciplinary study in comparative literature (Remak 1981, 37–44). As cultural communications speed up, with rapid media developments and globalization, comparative literature embraces the changes and achieves self-renewal.

Thus, interdisciplinarity thrives. However, imagology scholars show some reserve in the face of these new trends and challenges. As a response to the questions posed by Wellek in 'The crisis of comparative literature', the 'literariness' of imagology is revisited by Hugo Dyserinck in his 'Zur Entwcklung der komparatistischen Imagologie' (Dyserinck 2015 [1988], 166). He confines imagology to literary study and excludes it from sociology, history, ethnology, and psychology, in order that the literariness of imagology will not be in doubt (Dyserinck 2007, 152–167).

Both Dyserinck, with his doubts as to the legitimacy of the interdisciplinarity of imagology, and Wellek take literature as a static sphere instead of a dialogical,

dynamic one. Such a restriction leads to a methodological retreat in the imagology field, especially when compared to its interdisciplinary orientation in the early stage. Imagology, therefore, has been questioned and criticized continuously with respect to its legitimacy and has had to clarify its scope and objectives repeatedly to defend itself.

It may be that to make innovations and breakthroughs in imagology, we need to re-explore the possibility of adopting an interdisciplinary methodology. As Henry H.H. Remak (2002, 245–250) points out, 'The contamination effect of inter-disciplinary studies in comparative literature has problematized the very concept of even approximate disciplines, so we now have – to put it dramatically – interdisciplinary studies without disciplines'. Such a claim transcends disciplinary barriers and helps to promote a new trend that could be called a 'New Influence Study', which advocates a paradigm of cross-cultural communication. Under this paradigm, imagology could be established as a general, interdisciplinary 'semiotic imagology'. As stated in the introduction to this article, the rationality and legitimacy of a general semiotic imagology involves several aspects: to begin with, the legitimacy of the idea of 'going beyond texts' in a new kind of influence study needs to be evaluated; then, the significance of organizational communication studies for imagology must be highlighted; finally, with the boundary between 'fictional texts' and 'documentary texts' being blurred, literary study itself naturally opens up to other genres and literariness too must be redefined.

3.2. 'Going Beyond Texts' in a New Influence Study

In the second half of the twentieth century, reception aesthetics, hermeneutics, cognitive science, pragmatics, and cultural studies all turned to interpretations by recipients in their different contexts. Correspondingly, the New Criticism, confining itself to the text itself, went into decline. This suggests that the need for a more balanced attitude towards text and context was felt. As a thematic touchstone for these shifts, we may consider the visual art movement of Suprematism, with K. Malevich's *Black Square* (1915, oil on linen, 79.5 × 79.5 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) as its representative work, and which uses only basic geometric forms, the meaning of which depends on their context, illustrating that the absence of text also generates meanings. As pointed out by Karl-Otto Apel,

> It is no secret that in the course of the development of analytical philosophy, the focus point of interest, as far as a philosophy of science is concerned shifted from syntactic to semantics and then to Pragmatics, which marks the start-point of Peirce-inspired semiotics. (Apel 1980, 94–95)

He argued further that

> within language-analytical philosophy in the narrower sense, an adequate interpretation of language and meaning led away from the syntactic-semantic model of 'logical atomism' towards the radically pragmatic model of 'language-games', i.e. of the use of language in the context of rule-governed 'life-form'. (Apel 1980, 94–95)

Pragmatics deals with the relationship between signs and their users, whereas semioticians are more aware of the role of other elements besides text itself in communication, or, semiosis. In 1958, Roman Jakobson proposed his famous model of communication, which consists of six main factors: addresser, addressee, context, message, contact and code. He suggested that if the communication process was biased towards any one of the six factors, the corresponding effect would become dominant. (Jakobson 2004, 160–184).

Such developments in semiotics and communication studies make semioticians more aware of the possibility of integrating imagology with these two disciplines. As Hua Meng enthusiastically declares: 'it is high time for Imagology to be established as an independent discipline by incorporating different theories and approaches' (Meng 2000, 2). Writing in 2000, she insists that literary relations between countries should be explored imagologically with an emphasis on the influence and acceptance of other cultures, but, with respect to the boundaries of the discipline, she also remarks that the ultimate goal of imagology as then practised was still to study the literary relations between the 'self' and 'the other', and therefore imagology still belonged to the general category of international literary relations while ignoring the emerging texts of new media (Meng 2000, 2).

However, as mentioned above, image study has broken the boundary of 'literature' and shifted its focus to general cultural relationships, including the political and economic soft power of nations. Writing at about the same time as Hua Meng, Jean-Marc Moura holds that images of other countries represent the imaginations of different cultures, involving studies in anthropology or history. Precisely because literature is formed in such a broad context, imagology has to be conducted in an interdisciplinary manner, which is always frowned upon by literary purists who believe in original, unadulterated literature instead of interdisciplinary categories (Moura 2001, 17–18). A good example of image study research that transcends the boundaries of traditional literature study is that of Ning Zhou and Binghui Song, who study the image of China by 'using the concept of image in the general sense, or in the integrated socio-cultural sense' (Zhou and Song 2005, 148–161).

Practically, then, image study is no longer merely an abstruse focus in comparative literature; instead, the source of national images has become an important question in the study of national soft power, diplomatic research, propaganda strategy, etc. Fictional and nonfictional texts depicting other countries in present-day media, including films, news, advertising, webcasts and documentaries have to be examined carefully so that in-depth and thorough research may be undertaken. Comparative study has to face this challenge and integrate literary study with communication study and other fields of study.

3.3. Imagology as Communication Study

As pointed out previously, before the era of the global village, the image of other countries was usually based upon very few texts and to a large extent relied on peoples' imagination, with literary works the dominant source of such constructions.

Even though the veracity of Marco Polo's visit to China is still treated with suspicion in historical study, *The Travels of Marco Polo* has undoubtedly played a very important role in the formation of the Western image of an alien oriental empire.

The dominant position that literary works traditionally assumed in forming such images is greatly challenged by globalization, which arrives with innovations in media technology, and stereotyped literary images of other countries – especially exotic images of 'others' – are subject to re-examination through a juxtaposition of the texts propagated in these new media. In news broadcasts, advertising, product packages, exhibitions, and social media, images of other countries abound and become familiar to their audiences. Films advertising Chinese brands are played in Times Square, New York, while Hollywood movies and American fast food chains such as McDonald's, KFC and Starbucks are easily accessible in Chinese cities. Moreover, communication as a medium in a broader sense, as defined by Marshall McLuhan, further eclipses the significance of literary works for the building of a country's image. For the recipients of mass culture, images of other countries established by multimedia greatly differ from those established by traditional literature, and this has to be taken into consideration by imagological researchers.

The research paradigm outlined by Van Tieghem identifies important elements for its model of communication – the sender, the medium and the receiver. Wang Xiangyuan proposes that influence study is actually 'communication study', and that the research on mutual interpretation among ethnic groups as well as intertextuality in travel literature advocated by Guyard and Carré also belongs to the field of communication study (Wang 2002, 129–134). Wang concludes that

> From the perspective of the sender, influence study examines the influence and reputation of a writer abroad; from the perspective of the receiver, it studies the source of themes, characters, plots and styles of literary works; while in terms of medium, the study of the ways and means of literary communication, including translation, adaptation, review, is media studies. (Wang 2002, 130)

As a result, Wang argues that what Van Tieghem elaborated is actually the communication relationship of literature. Meanwhile, Jie Li argues from the perspective of reception aesthetics that 'a work cannot be called literature unless it enters the process of communication' (Li 2001, 269–279). Modern mass media effectively hold a monopoly on the forms of cultural communication, so that it is only when one's works are transmitted to thousands of households through radio, television, newspapers, books and other forms of media that they can truly be said to enter a certain social culture and become literature in reality. To sum up, nowadays any 'image', including 'the image of other countries', is developed only under the influence of mass media communication; and thus imagology too inevitably involves the study of mass media texts as well as traditional literary works.

3.4. Opening Up Literary Study and a Redefinition of 'Literariness'

Literariness is the organization of language, which through special linguistic and formal properties distinguishes literary texts from non-literary texts, and is thus defined

as what makes a given work a literary work. However, the inclusion of non-fiction texts in imagological studies does not mean the decline of literary studies. On the contrary, as literariness, in the sense that we have used it earlier, is part of everyday life, it enables an imagology as observation of cultural constructions, yielding critical insights into social events and phenomena. Although multimedia texts such as news reports, photographs or documentaries are just a synecdoche for social reality, only a piece of the whole social reality jigsaw puzzle, people treat them as social reality itself. The following passage by Walter Lippmann, who coined the word 'stereotype' in its imagological sense, is a good demonstration of the relation between the 'information environment' and 'social reality':

> There is an island in the ocean where in 1914 a few English, French, and German people lived. No cable reaches that island, and the British mail steamer comes but once in sixty days. In September it had not yet come, and the islanders were still talking about the latest newspaper, which told about the approaching trial of Madame Caillaux for the shooting of Gaston Calmette. They learned that for over six weeks now those who were English and those who were French had been fighting on behalf of the sanctity of treaties against those who were Germans. For six strange weeks they had acted as if they were friends, when in fact they were enemies. (Lippmann 2012, 1)

In Lippmann's description, a 'pseudo-environment' that is contrary to reality can be constructed by texts. People rely on the information they are given to build an environment, in which they are, more or less, prisoners in Plato's cave – but, as claimed by the author, 'because it is behavior, the consequences, if they are acts, operate not in the pseudo-environment where the behavior is stimulated, but in the real environment where action eventuates' (Lippmann 2012, 8). That is, behaviour is stimulated by the pseudo-environment's work on the real environment, causing the 'environmentalization of the pseudo-environment' (Akira Fujitake 1968, 52). With interactions between the pseudo-environment and reality, the pseudo-environment grows stronger and leads to relevant changes in the real environment. In other words, the 'real environment', which is taken as the opposite of the 'collective illusion' in imagology, is only another constructed 'symbolic environment' or 'pseudo-environment'. Thus, ontological reality is called into question; but what may be confirmed is that the world of meaning is constructed via people's perceptions and communications, which are semiotic. For example, the Chinese Great Wall, originally construed as a military defence, has been endowed with multiple meanings by Western missionaries, and therefore has become the symbol of this country, a myth that might well be built on misunderstanding, or at least an exaggeration (Zhou 2006, 656–664). Such a symbol has gained pragmatic motivation in history, and is established as fact rather than imagination.

As meaning generation is an ongoing process, it is hard to say whether the real image or the literary image ultimately exists first – they are, indeed, always influencing each other, refer to each other, and the dynamic interactions between the two will never be exhausted. The exploration of this mechanism becomes subtler and more complicated if we take new media texts into account, which will greatly enrich

imagology and make it a more interdisciplinary, more expansive field of study. This is a challenge we cannot choose to ignore; for the collective memories of images are now built by mass communication rather than by traditional literary texts.

4. Conclusion: Towards a Semiotic Imagology in a New Context

Imagology originated from comparative literature and developed into an independent discipline. With the literary image accepted as at least an element of reality, the pseudo-environment shaped and changed the real environment, and the images produced by both the pseudo-environment and the real environment continue to build our cognition, experience and memory. They constitute the semiotic reality: in this sense, any study on images has to deal with how images are communicated – with semiosis. Therefore, the cultural study of media not only deals with the visual dominance in mass communication and culture today but also explores the philosophical interpretations of how and why people construct their lives based on visual experience. As W.J.T. Mitchell argues, 'we may find that the problem of the 21st century is the problem of the image' (Mitchell 1994, 2).

Imagology, therefore, is more important now than ever before. Different from the traditional fields of literature and visual culture research, imagology focuses on the laws of image perception, communication, and interpretation, and its study objects include individuals, groups, cities, and states, as pointed out previously. Generally speaking, the study of imagology has three main dimensions.

The first is the semiotic representation of visible signs. According to Mitchell, there are three kinds of visible images; the perceptual, optical and graphic (Mitchell 2013, 10).

The second dimension is that of semiotic apperception – how a 'mental image' is formed as the consequence of abstraction and integration of perception and meaning-interpretation. In this sense, the image is not necessarily visualized as a visible picture; it could be formed as a clutch of verbal icons, for example. Different genres and media texts generate and reinforce different images of an object, and how to integrate various icons and meanings into one is a process both individualized and socialized. Image formation could take place in a subconscious dream or fantasy as personal as what is depicted in the legend of the 'Peony Pavilion' (牡丹亭), in which an image of dream lovers is produced through the imagination of the protagonists Du Liniang (杜丽娘) and Liu Mengmei (柳梦梅). It can also proceed through collective imagination as consensus, as what happens in mass communication. It should be pointed out that an image is a synecdoche of the object; as signs are always perceived and understood partially, to establish a comprehensive image the receiver has to make abstractions and integrations.

Third, imagology has to deal with the self-construction and recognition of the image, which involves dealing with expectations from and evaluations by self and society. How self and social feedback interact with and influence each other and how this interaction works on image construction is an interesting topic to explore.

Such observations are appealing if they are made by outsiders to a culture; for example, research by Tsung-yi Michelle Huang on women's image-building in the Pearl River Delta discusses the tension between their self-recognition as 'New Women' and traditional gender ideology (Huang 2011, 121–155).The horizons of 'self' and 'other' indeed together construct the image, as well as the subject itself, in the end. A semiotic interpretation of 'image' can then be given as follows: image is the collection of symbolic meta-language around a specific object in social and cultural communication.

Such an interpretation is made in terms of how images are recognized. Image cognition could relate to personal choices, as argued previously; yet, in the end, no one can completely isolate himself or herself from social life. The cumulative effect of stereotypes and the individual's choice to ignore or resist them, what information reaches the audience, and how they interpret its meaning are all unpredictable elements in actual communication. Therefore, imagology studies the mechanism as well as the practice of image formation.

Thus, semiotic imagology explores the semiotic mechanism of this image formation and gives a detailed analysis of how images are established as symbols through narration, rhetoric, and discourse in different media texts. Hence, it transcends comparative literature imagology both in terms of text genres and approaches. The signification and communication of images are analysed with semiotic models, which prove to be an effective way of describing meaning generation in general, and now are developing into the models of cognitive sciences.

The image itself becomes a 'simulacrum' constructed by the iconicity of the object as well as by semiotic meta-languages. Image-building is governed by a social evaluation mechanism as well as by semiotic rules of communication. The difference between 'simulation' and 'reality' in the 'pseudo-environment' can be regarded as reflecting the disparity between 'perception with media' and 'first-hand perception', which are constructed together by fictional texts and factual texts. The constructed image works on reality and eventually changes it, as noted. Good images of individuals, institutions and countries can position these things favourably, which is why governments are attaching increasing importance to image construction.

In the digital era, the role of the media is dominant in image construction. The 'pseudo-environment' created by digital media has made virtual reality less and less distinguishable from physical reality, and to make critical observations about digital images is one of the main tasks of semiotic imagology today. The interactions between the textual image and the real environment become more complicated. For example, the famous tourist site traditionally known as the 'Southern Pillar' (南天一柱) in Zhangjiajie (张家界), Hunan, China, in popular perception has now become 'Avatar Hallelujah Mountain', as it was one of the prototype locations of the Hollywood movie *Avatar* (2009). The image created by virtual technology changes the corresponding object in reality and generates an exotic imagination of China for Westerners as well as a new interpretation of the original image/reality among Chinese people. Such phenomena await further exploration through semiotic imagology, which, in the digital age, offers new and greater opportunities, as well as challenges.

Notes

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