This paper examines two paradoxical characteristic of images: images can be both universal and culturally specific. In the context of globalization and decolonization, the strategic employment of the two seemingly opposing characteristics of images can greatly help overcome the challenges in comparative rhetoric. The connection, application and theorization of visual rhetoric within comparative rhetoric, both of which are comparatively new, crossing-boarder disciplines, hold considerable promise in further developing productive communications between Western and non-Western cultures.
VISUALIZE THE UNTRANSLATABLE:
APPLYING VISUAL RHETORIC TO COMPARATIVE RHETORIC

A Thesis

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Introduction

“To visualize means to bring into being.”

-- Ron Burnett, How Images Think, 14

A news photograph. A memorial. A television documentary. Commercial posters on the streets. A graphic novel online. Public, politically and culturally sensitive spectacle has been framed more and more in visual media. The power of the visual pervades our culture, dramatically shaping our perceptions of the world. Because of the explosion of mediated spectacle and the audiences’ insatiable hunger for it, the 20th century in the West has been called ocularcentric (Jay 1994) or eye-centered. With the ever-thriving new media technology and new means to visualize meaning, the contemporary 21st century public sphere seems more than ever dominated by visual images, visual artifacts, visual performances, and other commands to “look” (Olson, Finnegan, and Hope 1).

At the end of the 20th century, the realm of rhetoric has been broadened to “all effective expression” (Kennedy 157), which consists of both verbal and non-verbal expression. Visual artifacts constitute a major part of the rhetorical environment, and to ignore them to focus only on verbal discourse means we understand only a miniscule portion of the symbols that affect us daily (Messaris and Moriarty 303). Although comparative rhetoric is still commonly assumed to focus on language acts among different cultures, this thesis documents and analyzes how comparative rhetorical actions frequently comprised both verbal and visual symbols. Different examples are used to argue that visual rhetoric occupies a central place within the interconnected dynamics of civic, cultural, and social discourses. Because rhetorical critique is concerned with how symbolic actions influence and construct “reality” for diverse publics, “it is past time that we acknowledged fully that pervasive presence of visual actions in rhetorical studies” (Olson, Finnegan and Hope 4).

Comparative rhetoric has been valued more than ever recently, because it promises to achieve “better understanding of Western rhetorical tradition by learning more about non-Western rhetorical traditions—so that Western rhetorical tradition can be re-examined, refined, and enriched through those other traditions” (Mao 413). However, the deep rooted Western superiority, the immense cultural and lingual barriers between Western and non-Western rhetorics and the fact that the traditional “talk and text” rhetoric has not always been an option for groups marginalized by class, race, gender or sexuality (Olson, Finnegan and Hope 4) add subtle challenges to the development of comparative rhetoric. Thus, in the 2009 article “Recent Achievements in Comparative Rhetoric”, Hum and Lyon raised the following inquires: “What might constitute a valid or an interesting comparison or contrast? What kinds of methods constitute comparison? If cultures do not share the concept of rhetoric, what are we comparing? By what method and means do we come to know a culture different from our own?” (153).
This thesis aims to answer these questions by applying visual rhetoric to comparative rhetoric. In order to qualify this application, I examine the tremendous overlapping between language and image:

1. Both language and images are by nature a system of signs. Saussure (among many others) defines that the linguistic sign as a “two sided psychological entity” consisting of a sign vehicle and its meaning. He uses the word signifier for the sign vehicle (the antecedent experience, or the word, or expression, or speech sound) and the word signified for the meaning of the sign (the consequent experience, or the thing, or the content, or the response in hearer) (53). Voloshinov (among many others) links images to the linguistic sign by arguing “Any physical body may be perceived as an image, […] any such artistic-symbolic image to which a particular physical object gives rise is already an ideological product. The physical object is converted into a sign” (Voloshinov 40). Every individual lives in the world filled with lingual and visual signs, such as “the domain of artistic image, the religious symbol, the scientific formula, and the judicial ruling, etc” (41).

2. Both language and images, as means to externalize the internal world, serve as representations of meaning. All linguists, rhetoricians, and semioticians are concerned with how signs (both lingual and visual) “mediate” between the external world and our internal “world”, or how a sign “stands for” or “takes the place of” something from the real world in the mind of a person. What all these scholars are concerned with is called representation (Kenney 99), one of the major functions language and images share in common. Since both the linguistic and visual signs “represent, depict, or stand for something lying outside themselves” (Voloshinov 40),

3. Language and images both are culturally loaded. A Christmas tree is perceived more than just a pine tree covered with colourful decorations; it is heavily loaded with all kinds of cultural implications, such as the festive season, the get-together of the family, Christmas cards, Santa-Claus, angels, churches, Christianity, Western world, whiteness, etc. Likewise, the phrase “Merry Christmas” means way more than merely a greeting; it evokes mostly the same rich cultural implications. Ideologically and culturally loaded, both linguistic and visual signs can be agents through which identity is articulated. Proclaiming “Have sex not war!” and tie-dye shirts can both be an indication of a Hippie; both the verbal statement “My partner is adorable” and a rainbow flag pin articulate a homosexual identity.

4. Both images and language communicate to an audience and can both be performative. Mitchell emphasizes communication appropriate for the study of language and pictures, which presumably were created with the intention to communicate, or to express the creator’s feelings, or to elicit an (intended) emotional response in viewers. A visual sign communicates when it is connected to another object, as the new buds in May communicate to the viewer a change in temperature or outfits, and the word “spring” conveys a similar signal. Performativity is inevitably embedded in such a communication: a red traffic light or a stop sign is connected to the act of stopping a
car while driving, just like the words “Stop!”,” “Halt!” (stop in German), “停!” (stop in Chinese) result in, or aim at resulting the act of stopping a movement.

5. Both images and language are Symbolic. A symbol is something verbal or nonverbal, in a language or culture, that comes to stand for something else (Kottak and Kozaitis 15). The symbolic nature language embodies is basically how language functions in this world. Yet it can also be nonverbal. Flags can stand for countries, and the yellow arches stand for the popular fast-food chains. And the symbolic relations between meaning and language/ images can both be arbitrary. There is usually no obvious, natural, or necessary connection between the symbol and that which it symbolizes. A warm blood feathered animal with wings is no more naturally a bird than oiseau, das Vogel, or 鸟, to use the words in French, German, and Chinese for the animal we call “bird”. A cross shape is an important symbol for Christianity, and as is true for almost all cultural symbols, the link between the symbol (cross) and what is symbolized (holiness) is arbitrary. In itself the shape cross is not holier than a triangle, a square, or other algebra shapes. Nor does the wooden cross differ chemically from ordinary wood. The wooden cross is a visual symbol within Christianity, which is an international cultural system. A natural object acquires special symbolic significance after mediated by human acts, and among the specific cultural group, the symbolic relationship passes on through people learning across the generations.

6. Both language and images are fluid rather than stable; they change over time or according to different historical and social contexts. The English language has changed from “May, with alle thy floures and thy grene, welcome be thou, faire fresshe May…” (20 Chaucer) to “May is so cool; I’m lovin’ it”. The dressing style has changed from the decorative Baroque evening dress to white “Miami” T-shirts and blue jeans. Similar changes can easily be found in other languages and other cultures as well.

Based on all the overlapping between language and image introduced above, I suggest that in comparative rhetoric study, we should not separate or isolate words from images, just as we should not isolate word from the world; in practice and principle, words and images are oftentimes mixed together in rhetorically interesting ways. While the overlapping between language and images is inexhaustible, other theorists call attention to the differences between word and images, which basically deal with the universality, concreteness, openness and rhetorical implication of the visual and the linguistic sign. These are the issues that the following chapters are going to address.

The first chapter argues that images are rhetorical in nature, and visuality always has been integral to rhetorical consciousness. Thus, rhetorical images deserve more attention and examination of rhetoric scholars.

The second chapter deals with the first side of the paradoxical nature of images: images can be more universal than language. In order to support my argument, I introduce the psychological notion “the concept of vividness”, and use it to articulate why the visualized version of the inaccessible Chinese philosophy is more accessible, and how it may serve as a
heuristic of contributing to the very fundamental but important stage of comparative rhetoric: an accurate understanding of the non-Western culture.

The third chapter, on the other hand, deals with the other side of the paradoxical nature of images: images are socially constructed and culturally specific. I used two popular visual artefacts to articulate my argument: Chinese knots and a Chinese graphic novel, which are both defined as carriers of Chinese culture. Through close examination and analysis, I argue that besides being an effective method, images are also excellent subjects of comparative rhetoric studies.

In the fourth chapter, I suggest the strategic combination of the two seemingly opposing characteristics of images can be a great help in the application of visual in comparative rhetoric studies in a digital age. A video version of Chinese ancient poetry was examined in terms of translation, contextualization and productive vagueness.

All four chapters support my central argument of this research: images can be both universal and culturally specific, which is an exciting, productive paradox. The strategic employment of the two seemingly opposing characteristics of images can greatly help overcome the challenges in comparative rhetoric, by using images both as a study methodology and study subject. The connection, application and theorization of visual rhetoric within comparative rhetoric hold considerable promise for the present and future.

Chapter 1

Images are rhetorical in nature

To broaden and challenge the traditional study of human communication is one of the important purposes of comparative rhetoric. This broadening, however, has been mainly conducted by rhetorically moving from Western to non-Western. The rest of the chapter endeavours to argue for another rhetorical move which can further expand the traditional concept and scope of linguistics and rhetoric: a move from textual to visual. How do images qualify themselves in the realm of rhetorical studies? As was introduced in the introduction, rhetoric studies “all effective expression” (Kennedy 154). Persuasiveness counts as one of the major criteria for whether the expression is effective or not. There is an old Chinese proverb called “眼见为实”, meaning “seeing is believing”. It coincidently finds its “clone” in the English proverb “Seeing is believing”. Why is it seeing, then, instead of “hearing/feeling/reading is believing”? Cognitive theory proves that seeing is “the most fundamental in acquiring information among other human senses” (Hill and Helmers 36).

We must not assume that the idea of seeing is believing (and knowing and interpreting and judging) has arisen suddenly in the West. Diogenes of Sinope (4th century BCE) was perhaps the first great master of performance art, acting out his beliefs and critiques as one of the
Cynics of Athens: to be seen acting publicly was to embody an argument. Or, consider Plato’s allegory of the cave from Book 7 of *The Republic* as an argument about sight-centered knowledge: seeing not the shadows of the objects cast on a cave wall by an inferior light source (fire), but the objects themselves observed in bright superior light (sunshine), became a primal Western story whose moral is clear: direct observation of the world is the surest guide to truth, allowing us to avoid confusing what is real with what is merely simulation (Jay, 1994, p. 478). Aristotle’s treatise on memory also reflects the special virtue of vision in human life. According to Aristotle, humans use *phantasmata*, mental images or pictures, in the construction of memory. Longinus, too, in *Peri Hypsous* or *On the Sublime*, in seeking to define sublimity in oral and written discourse, takes resource to the visual: “Weight, grandeur, and energy in writing are very largely produced, dear pupil, by the use of images, …[where] you seem to see what you describe and bring it vividly before the eyes of your audience.” We could continue moving through the Greek and Roman worlds to find knowing and believing grounded in seeing and the visualized. In Greek, the words *theoria* or knowledge and *theoros* or witness are rooted in sight. The Latin *imago* comes from the infinitive “to see”, even the English word *evidence* derives from e-videre or “out of or from seeing”.

Kenneth Burke, Sharon Crowley, and Perelman and Tyteca all point out in their linguistic/cultural/rhetorical theories that images are usually more rhetorically powerful than language. Burke claims that an evocative image is often associated in each individual’s mind with “many kindred principles or ideas” and that, when referring to the image, the rhetor implicitly brings all of these ideas to bear without having to explicitly argue for their relevance (Burke 87). (Burke is discussing the use of verbal imagery, as the visual metaphors in poetry, but his observation is undoubtedly even more true when applied to the use of actual representational images).

Figure 1. U.S. Marines Raise the American Flag atop Mt. Suribachi, Iwo Jima, 1945
For example, the famous picture of U.S. Marines raising the American flag on the Pacific island of Iwo Jima (Figure 1) may instantiate in an American viewer feelings of patriotism, pride, or even nostalgia. If an institution such as a bank or insurance company includes this picture in its promotional literature, the hope is that the image and the values that it evokes in the viewer (e.g., patriotism, valor, courage, sacrifice) will become associated with the institution itself (Figure 2). It is notable that no explicit ethical arguments need to be made for why the institution might deserve to be associated with such an event and, since the relationship between the institution, the attitudes and the feelings associated with the image are not explicitly stated, it is not likely to be questioned or challenged.

The process of building associations between an ideologically loaded image and a specified product, institution, political candidate, or ideological concept may be the most common way that images are used persuasively. Language, however, does not enjoy the luxury of credibility without any convincing argumentation. The verbal claim “Since Chase bank has a long history, we can really trust it even if the U.S. economy is down.” is way less persuasive than simply linking it to an arbitrary patriotic icon.

In order to utilize the rhetorical nature of images, humans produce countless images everyday in order to create effective expressions. Such images are produced within a specific
social context, a specific time in history, for the purpose of a specific cultural group and, in a specific medium. It is shaped by a set of “representation codes”, which is organized into coherence and social acceptability by “ideological codes, such as individualism, patriarchy, class, materialism, capitalism, and so on” (O’Donnell 531). Below are two good examples of how human use different rhetorically framed images to create different responses in the audience. Figure 3 and are taken from the editorial of 2007 Chinese NPC (National People’s congress) in the New York Times. Figure 4 is the depiction of the same event in XinHua Daily, one of the Chinese mainstream official posts.

In Figure 3, the man in the middle at the bottom is China’s president Hu Jintao. With the symbolic steps carpeted in the “communist red” behind the emperor-like president, the image presents a highly hierarchical, president-centered compact governmental system, epitomizing the “authoritarian” nature of the socialist nation. Figure 4 portrays the same event on the same day, yet is based on a set of entirely different representation codes. With a grand vantage point, the multi-dimensional and multi-layered arcs in golden celebrating each other, it portrays a dynamic, powerful, and harmonious congress serving a great nation.
Figure 5 NPC by NYT


Figure 5 may be trickier compared with image I, as seldom does American news media show the minority women congress participants instead of the solemn party leaders in the NPC. However, by a slightly closer examination, the anti-communism rhetoric beneath this seemingly “democratic” picture is easy to be found. The extraordinary low-angle shot instead of a normal eyelevel one creates a heroic image of the female deputies, as if they were standing on a stage. Two photographers were intentionally included in this picture, and judging from the direction these women were smiling at, there must be a third photographer in the invisible left to that picture. So obviously this very picture was taken by the fourth—who was kneeling down, if not lying down, somewhere on the invisible ground on the right front. Thus, surrounded by at least four photographers in the four different directions, these deputies, minority, female, posing with smiles, are portrayed as puppets on a circus stage. The accusation that Chinese democracy is just a stage show, which is not appropriate to directly write in an editorial, is well implied in the images within it.

The same images can either re-enforce the negative notion against the Chinese government, or be criticized as the Western media’s scheme to trick the audience into believing the “capitalism-thus-democratic and socialism-thus-oppressive” political propaganda or the hegemony of Western culture. “That images, as well as discourse, are always associated with power relations is the one premise that all cultural studies practitioners agree on” (Hill and Helmers 12). The above examples are exactly how humans use images to reinforce the present power relations by approving itself, or disapproving the other power relation. Likewise, the images in popular movies, as is believed by Edward Said
in his “The Slanted Screen”, are crucial subjects to discuss the power relations among different cultures, whether driven by economics, politics, or social/racial discrimination, which determine who is represented and who is not, who speaks and who is silent, which issues are important and which are not. Thus, images can be excellent subject for cultural and rhetorical studies, which represent ideology, dismantle power hierarchy and most importantly, prompt critical thinking.

Chapter 2

Images are universal: image as a heuristic to prompt better understanding of a different culture

Language is generally acknowledged as belonging exclusively to humans. Meanwhile, zoology experiments show that pictures of predators can be recognized both by pigeons and humans. We could also call up the famous example of XeuXe’s painted grapes that tricked birds into pecking them. In the human world, as is shown in Illustration VI, the color of pink and the shape of heart are perceived as a sign of love, romance, warmth, and cosiness by either Asians or Europeans, male or female, the young and the old. Likewise, in Illustration VII, the shape of the snowflake and the color blue are perceived as a sign of coldness and winter also by different people from different parts of the world, regardless of what language they speak or how well they are educated.

Figure 6. Heart in pink

Figure 7. Snowflake in blue
Since both verbal and visual messages are encoded signs, the audience have to decode from an encoded message in order to make meaning (Hall 510). This means that in many cases, visual images can be a less coded sign, and to recognize visual information is more of an elementary stage of vision, which I name the “universality” in images. The universality in visual images can easily overwhelm the one in language, and as an audience, to recognize a visual image may not be affected by our beliefs, values, or background knowledge. That explains why even among the most diverse audience, “images can be used to prompt sustained, analytical thinking, an immediate, visceral response and develop cognitive (though largely unconscious) connections over a sustained period of time” (Scott 32).

According to psychologists and semiotics, the rhetorical effectiveness of the message depends on its ability to create the “mental image” in the message receiver (Hill and Helmers 31). In other words, the clearer mental image a message is able to create, the better understanding and, the more interest and more credibility it will enjoy from the recipient of information. The degree of the ability in creating mental images by different types of information has been studied by psychologists as “the concept of vividness” (Hill and Helmers 31).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Vivid Information</th>
<th>actual experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>moving images with sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>static photograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>line drawing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>narrative, descriptive account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>descriptive account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>abstract, impersonal analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Least Vivid Information | statistics |

It is notable that all of the top four most vivid messages are visual information. With the claim that the more vivid the information, the more likely it is that the information will prompt understanding and emotional response from the receiver (Hill and Helmers 31), visual signs are proved to be more understandable and persuasive compared with texts. This claim also echoes Perelman and Tytca’s contention that imagistic and concrete information prompt more emotional responses and thus are more persuasive than non-concrete and non-vivid information, which can be of great help in presenting a certain culture to its outsiders. Vivid information tends to overshadow information presented in abstract or technical language and to be given more weight than a coldly rational analysis would justify: a picture of a single starving child with tearful eyes might move masses to action, while an abstract technical argument about crop yields and nutritional requirements might fail to instigate any action at all. Although verbal discourse can also be used to prompt the audience to create “mental images”, the actual image tends to be a more efficient form for accomplishing this goal.
While the universality featuring the vividness of visual messages can be used in many fields of communication, I argue that it would be a particularly helpful tool for comparative rhetoric, which can prompt better understanding between different cultures and rhetorical traditions. Although the rise of comparative rhetoric study aims at enhancing the globalization in the wake of decolonization, the discipline may still be over-shadowed by one of the by-products of imperialism: the English language imperialism.

Defined as “the dominance of English asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages” (Phillipson 50), English language imperialism has always been one of the major obstacles of comparative rhetoric and cross-cultural communication in general. As “an imposed colonial tongue” (293 Paulin), the English language created core English speaking countries, periphery English speaking countries, and numerous ESL and EFL countries (Phillipson 24), among which, especially the latter three, are where the non-western rhetoric belongs. Comparative studies, if taking place in core English speaking countries, such as the U.S., U.K., and Australia, are certainly carried out by using the English language. Nevertheless, even if any comparative study takes place at the countries where the target foreign culture is located, the study can still be done in English, due to “the language replacement” (English gains ground as the “language of power”, and subsumes native languages and becomes a “necessary professional skill”, especially in higher education) and displacement (English takes over in specific domains, whether in doing research or presenting research, while the local language is used for less prestigious functions). Thus, it is evident that the English language has invaded into every aspect of the local culture, as well as the study of that culture.

As has argued that language serves as an “agency through which identity is articulated” (Chomsky 6), the use of English is an articulation of a superior identity compared with non-English speakers. It is “associated with a power more subtle than mere worldly success: it is considered to be a tool of ‘civilization’ and ‘light’” (Kachru 320). The power bases for English today still exist on almost all continents; it is still a powerful linguistic tool for manipulation and control, which “left a deep mark on the languages and literature of the non-Western world, […] across cultures and languages” (Kachru 325).

Linguistic imperialism permeates all types of imperialism, such as cultural, scientific, media, and educational imperialism, since “language is the means used to mediate and express them” (Phillipson 47). Consequently, the tendency to understand other (especially non-western) cultures by translating them into the English language is very likely to result in an unconscious pitfall: an “Englishness” might have already been imposed onto the foreign culture while we translate it into English. Using the English methods, terms and logic, while creating the lingual accessibility to English speakers, is likely to force upon the culture, philosophy, or modes of thinking a western, if not English, structure that may not be applicable. As we do so, it is challenging to make our comparative study more than a mirror of our own minds, as was pointed by I.A. Richards almost a century ago, and thus all chances of genuine comparative studies are wiped out (Richard 92). Many modern comparative rhetoric scholars, such as Kennedy,
Garret, and Mao, also have placed intensive emphasis on the problem of basing comparative studies on non-Western texts translated into English or non-Western rhetorical traditions defined by Western terms. Hum and Lyon have also identified that there are “at least two methodological problems in approaching texts: translation and the question of an appropriate methodology as the usual rhetorical tools may not be appropriate” (156). Thus, visual rhetoric to be applied to comparative rhetoric, I suggest, refers not only to the visual object as a communicative artefact but also to a perspective and a tool scholars can take to analyze non-visual data.

As one of the major translation problems, the “incommensurability” (Gernet 48) between different languages and cultures is basically caused by the absence of certain words, terms, or concepts on one end of the intercultural communication, known as the “lexical absence” (Hart 49). Words, beyond their literary meanings, are unconscious bearers of a whole civilization. The reason why translators often encounter difficulties of translation is that different languages express, through different logics, different visions of the world and the individuals. The Chinese initially failed to comprehend the deductive structure of the Elements precisely because of linguistic incommensurability of the absence of “copula” (Hart 50) in Classical Chinese. Lexical absence functions the same way when the Chinese try to introduce their culture to Westerners, such as the Taoist term **yin and yang**.

In ancient China, the philosophical concept of **yin and yang** (阴阳 yīnyáng) is used to describe “how seemingly opposing forces are bound together, intertwined, and interdependent in the natural world, giving rise to each other in turn” (56 Aria). Although the explanation is concise and flawless to the receivers who are familiar with Taoism or Chinese culture, the explanation might sound obscure, confusing and inaccessible to “cultural outsiders” (121 Moss) who merely know China by the name and have never even heard of Taoism. On the one hand, the textual description is so abstract and complex. The transliteration of the term “**yin and yang**” practically does not mean anything but a foreign pronunciation to non-Chinese speakers, who suffer from the “lexical absence” (Hart 49). Such inaccessibility casts great shadows on an accurate understanding and efficient communication between different cultures, or even on the passion and motivation of the scholars who wish to explore other cultures. With the immense cultural and lingual thresholds, scholars may be easily led to generalizations, or the assumption that “the other is other—is different, exotic, mysterious, and inaccessible” (58 Garret).

One of the possible solutions to such inaccessibility, suggested by I. A. Richards, is the Exercise of Multiple Definition by “sketching out as many alternative possible meanings for them as our imagination and experience will suggest” (Richards 94). Although the great efforts Richards has made in advancing comparative study and his insights of a systematic survey were impressive and valuable, the feasibility of his method is still questionable. In his book *Mencius on the Mind*, he made a list of five single-spaced pages to translate the word “beauty”. Thus, I assume that, with the multiple definition method, dozens of pages will be taxed in the effort of translating the term **yin and yang**, which might turn out to be an exhausting process for both the translator and the reader. It is evident that the attempt to study
“yin and yang” merely by textually translating it into English can “diminish necessary
differences and hide methodological assumptions” (Hum and Lyon 157).

In light of such challenges, I suggest visual signs can be adopted as one of the
possible methods solving the incommensurability.

FIGURE 8. Yin and yang visual symbol

The visual symbol of yin and yang (FIGURE 8.), despite its simplicity, does a great
job in presenting the profound philosophy imbedded in the term. The symmetry halves in
black and white evoke the mental images of many natural dualities, such as day and night,
summer and winter, male and female, etc. Yin, colored with black, conveys a sense of dark,
slow, soft, insubstantial, diffuse, cold, wet, and tranquil. Yang in white, by contrast, is
characterized as bright, hard, fast, solid, dry, focused, hot, and aggressive. The two tiny dots
on each side are very likely to evoke a mental image of “eyes”, which is a highly biological
metaphor. Thus, the viewers are very likely to associate yin with the female, birth and
generation, and Yang with male and masculinity. With the white “eye” in black half and the
black “eye” in white half, the image suggests the opposing but inter-dependent relation of yin
and yang. In addition, the two halves are not split with a sharp, straight line, rather, they are
intertwined with each other in a winding arc, which stresses the relationship between yin and
yang is fluid rather than still. The motional shaping of the two halves represents that yin and
yang gradually trade places with each other, revealing what was obscured and obscuring what
was revealed.

All of the above are exactly the ideas that the term yin and yang meant to convey. The foreign, inaccessible and obscure philosophy landed right in the viewers’ hands with the help of visualization, listed as the top four most vivid information. With their valuable
universality, images easily bridge over the cultural and lingual thresholds such as the lexical
absence, among the message receivers from various geological and cultural backgrounds.

It is argued that “the roots of the discipline’s [comparative rhetoric] conceptual
paradox are in the patriarchal and colonialist ideologies that pervade discussions of the other”
(Hum and Lyon 159), and “often the possibilities of dialogue are left unexplored or
inadequately pursued by more privileged persons” (Alcoff 23). To minimize the danger of speaking from privilege, one approach would be to provide accurate descriptions rather than judgments, thus “preventing the reduction of the other’s texts to an object that is consumed by Western traditions” (Hum and Lyon 160). Images as one of the most universal means of communication, are capable of objectively presenting the complete, vivid, and unfiltered information. Other cultures, when presented without our own terministic screen, are better understood and offer more knowledge when the gaze of ethnocentrism (Eurocentrism) has been dulled through self-reflection, openness to difference and critique, and consciousness of effect. Even though pictorial description also has a standpoint, if one only describes, just as does the simple image outlining the “yin and yang” philosophy, one minimizes the danger of coloring the other’s rhetoric. Moreover, using images as a non-verbal heuristic to assist comparative studies also challenges Standard American English as the only language of knowledge and truth and to repudiate a cultural policies that “relies on the constructions of sameness and exclusion of differences” (Lowe 28).

Chapter 3

Images are socially constructed and culturally specific: using images as the study subject to identify and analyze a different culture

In the previous chapter, I introduced the universality of images, proving that an image is a less coded and more vivid message compared with text, and thus is more communicative among the audience from different cultural and lingual backgrounds. However, although the universality serves as a powerful tool for visual comparative rhetoric, not every visual object, however universal it might be, deserves to be the subject of visual rhetoric. The work of comparative rhetoric is not simply transcendence of universals and affirmation of the prevailing “tradition” but also an attempt to define the cultural bases of discursive power and the ways it privileges some statements and strategies in the production of knowledge and the reproduction of power (Foucault, 1972). Comparative rhetoric now is seen by some scholars as a strategy for “engaging other cultures, knowledges, and discourses rather than a discovery of commonplaces and universals” (Hum and Lyon) 154.

This chapter examines the other side of the paradox of images: images are socially constructed and culturally specific. This characteristic turns a visual symbol into a communicative artefact—a symbol that communicates culturally loaded messages, and can be studied by comparative rhetoric. In the article “Theory of Visual Rhetoric”, Foss introduced three characteristics of images that qualify them into the realm of rhetorical study: “the image must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and be presented to an audience for the purpose of communicating with the audience” (Foss 144). In other words, rather than merely the use of color pink to evoke the notion of love in the audience, the images as
subjects for comparative study must be produced by humans within a specific context, a
specific time, in a certain medium, such as a brochure, a website, a piece of cartoon, a
handcraft and so on. Most importantly, the image must be symbolic and represent or
misrepresent a specific culture. Culture is defined here as “the actual practices and customs,
languages, beliefs, forms of representation, and system of formal and informal rules that tell
people how to behave most of the time” (O’Donnell 523). By studying these culturally loaded
images, we can go beyond the studies of artists and art objects, and explore the ways in which
visuals themselves are historically and socially constructed.

**Exploring the symbolic meaning in visual artefacts: Chinese knots**

As the realm of rhetoric has been broadened to the study of all symbols, the study of
“other’s” rhetoric can also be based on “the unique human capacity to use symbols” (14
Kottak). Through enculturation, people gradually internalize a system of meanings and
symbols that represent their cultures. The anthropologist Leslie White saw culture as
dependent upon symboling: “culture originated when our ancestors acquired the ability to use
symbols… freely and arbitrarily to originate and bestow meaning upon a thing or event, and
correspondingly, […] to grasp and appreciate such meaning” (White 3). The symbols
identified can be categorized as verbal and nonverbal. There are countless non-verbal
symbols, mostly visual, that serve as the carriers of different cultures. Chinese knots, for
instance, belong to that category.

A Chinese knot (中国结) is a traditional, auspicious knot artwork made by plaiting a
string into a knot of diversified shapes and colors.

![FIGURE 9. Chinese knots](image1)

![FIGURE 10. Chinese knots](image2)

Boasting of a long history of thousands of years, the Chinese knots have become a visual
symbol of Chinese culture with their visual uniqueness and profound cultural connotations.
Derived from the phenomenon of "keeping records of historical events by tying knots" (结绳记事) prevalent in the primitive age China, the "knot" contained in it a legal representation of "contract" and therefore was of great significance. With no buttons or zippers, the earliest Chinese dresses were also fastened with knots. Taking a panoramic view of the 5,000-year history of Chinese dresses and personal adornments, one marvels at the wide applications of Chinese knots during the dynastic periods. A knot was widely applied to fix garment, ornaments and seals in the Tang and Song dynasties. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, it was prevailing and divided into two types: auspicious hanging decorations and weaved trappings. Auspicious hanging decorations (known as "Chinese knot" currently) were customarily used on religious occasions to ward off misfortunes, while weaved trappings were of various types including buckle knots.

Besides its practical usage as a daily necessity, the knot’s linguistic connections also made it popular throughout centuries. In Chinese, “string” (绳 sheng) has the similar pronunciation of “God” (神 shen), and the noun "knot", besides its literal meaning, also means reunion, friendliness, peace, warmth, marriage, love, etc. Different knots are endowed with different meanings. For example, the interlink palindrome-type "Truelove Knot" plaited with brocade ribbons symbolizes mutual love and living to old age in conjugal bliss. Ideas pressed with knots can be seen in poems and classical Chinese writings such as the Book of Songs (诗经), Rhapsody on Han Yuefu (汉乐府, a style of poems during the Han dynasty, collected by the Bureau of Music). Ancient poets compared the knot to varied and colorful human emotions, especially the sentimental love between people. In the Chinese language, the word jie (knot) is connected with many affairs of centrality, like jieyi (结义, to become sworn brothers or sisters), jiemeng (结盟, to form an alliance), and tuanjie (to unite). It is used to refer to the important matters like marriage, such as jiefa (结发, to become husband and wife by the first marriage), jiehun (结婚, to marry) and jiehe (结合, to be united in wedlock or marriage). Jie also indicates the end or result of something, like jieguo (result or outcome), jieshu (to end or complete), and jieju (final result). Concentric knots have been used by lovers as the tokens of their love since ancient times.

As a long-standing cultural product, the Chinese knot is integrated with the quintessence of Chinese culture. Some Chinese knots are used to ward off evils and disasters, such as panchangjie (winding long knot) and shuangqianjie (double-coin knot), with a strong religious air representing the ancients' cultural beliefs and wishes to pursue the true, the good and the beautiful. The panchangjie on a wedding invitation card implies lifelong love. The ruyi knot on a jade pendant expresses a good wish that one would be successful in everything one undertakes. The falunjie (knot of the wheel of the law) on the handle of a sword implies giving up evils and fostering healthy trends; the Reversed Swastika Knot was derived from the Buddhist symbol commonly seen on the streamers hanging down from the waistband of the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy. Chinese knots are also used in some traditional customs to express auspiciousness. For example, on the Lunar New Year’s Eve, the elders typically give money—100 coins strung on a red silk rope—to each of their children to wish him or her a long life. During the Dragon Boat Festival (5th day of the 5th lunar month), the elders, to
ward off evils, hang ropes woven of colorful silk threads, called "long-life threads," around the children's necks.

Nevertheless, what is notable for rhetorical scholars is the fact that, as ages went by, the practical significance of Chinese knots have gradually faded, but the knot itself survives as a solid visual symbol of China or Chinese culture, because of the rich, vivid cultural significance it bears, with its own appealing visual image. It is often used to express good wishes, including happiness, prosperity, love and the absence of evil. These knots are also an embodiment of people's pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty, which is mostly due to its visual rhetorical effect. The images of Chinese knots are highly culturally specific and worth close examination from cultural rhetoricians.

First of all, the knots are pulled tightly together and are made sturdy, visualizing the tight union of force, faith and love. The inter-connected shape is also metaphorically used to refer to human's multiplication. Besides, the basic structure of the Chinese knot allows all kinds of variations and enhances its decorative value. Almost all basic Chinese knots are symmetrical, which is consistent with time-honored ornamental and aesthetic standards in China. Meaning wise, it signifies that all things and matters have two sides contributing to each other (similar as the basic yin and yang philosophy discussed in the previous chapter); design wise, as much of a universal ideal visual shape, the symmetrical designs are more easily accepted and appreciated by Chinese people as well as the world audience.

Furthermore, some complicated versions of Chinese knots usually contain up to dozens of small, basic knots, connecting them all into an exquisite big picture (Illustration XI). It vividly visualizes one of the very classical Chinese philosophies that connection makes the ultimate harmony. The big general shape visualizes the big world, or, the universe, while the smaller knots that contribute it visualize the small unites belonging to the “big matter”. The whole shape shows that the universe is an inclusive whole, and individuals, families, and even countries are merely small inter-connected units within it. If these unites are harmoniously integrated in the big universe as the basic knots do in the big knot,
the whole world are blessed with peace, joy, and success. It is a deep, profound understanding of being and belonging, echoing the central philosophies of many ancient Chinese mainstream rhetorics.

Characterized with complicated and varied curves, every knots can yet be restored to the simplest line. That is another dialectical argument of the dynamics of the simple and the complex, the appearance and the truth. Nowadays people express their blessings in modern ways, sending their regards through phone calls or emails or presenting flowers as gifts. The handmade art of Chinese knots add tea's aroma to the "coffee life" of modern people. All these explain why the Chinese knot, a visual embodiment of the craftwork and wisdom of ancient Chinese civilization, still thrives with its classic elegance and ever-changing variations. Even the most general and brief visual rhetoric analysis is enough to tell its popularity as a classic decoration and so much more beyond it: the visual carrier of the grace and the depth of Chinese culture. It is yet merely one of the numerous cultural-loaded visual artefacts that are worth our attention and examination through rhetorical and comparative studies.

**Green tea vs. Coffee: Reading American and Asian popular Graphic books**

As one of the new popular literature genres, graphic books, a special way of story-telling by a blend of text and images, are usually more culturally distinctive compared with traditional textual novels. With its related history dating back to the cave paintings in primitive ages around the world and the tapestries in the Middle Age Europe, graphic books are one of the most vivid, effective visual representations of the cultural context in which they are produced. The two sample graphic books I selected for comparison below are *The Watchmen* by American artists Moore and Gibbons, and *The Photo Album* by Taiwanese artist Jimmy Liao. The comparison is conducted with the knowledge that the two graphic books belong to different genres, with the former categorized as sci-fi/action and the later magical realism. However, the two books were published in the roughly same time period (late 80s for the *Watchmen* and early 90s for *The Photo Album*), and both have been very popular among their native audiences since their publications. The *Watchmen* has been selected for ENG 111 and 112 in some American colleges and universities and was made into a popular movie in 2009, and *The Photo Album* and its followed issues became a timeless favourite of China and even the most East Asia, with their icons found on greeting cards, cellular phone and computer wallpapers, metro walls and countless fashion products. These characteristics qualifies the comparison regardless of the genre difference, because the different popular literature genres in different cultures are enough to inform us about the creation and appreciation of images, which, like images themselves, are also culturally specific.
At the first glance at the cover of the *Watchmen*, the famous American comic novel, the audience can easily find a lot of “Americaness” by merely judging the visuals. The sharp contrast between the background and foreground reflects the directness in American way of narrating, and the sharp contrast in the overall colouring (yellow and purple, blue and golden, and big chunks of black fill) implies that the story is intense and dramatic. While the fully equipped characters, with masculine figures, lethal weapons and aggressive facial expressions, serve as a still trailer of a typical American narrative: realistic and direct in genre, a dramatic and catchy in story showing individualism, heroism, materialism, competition, struggle, and the inevitable involvement of reasonable violence.

The study of Asian graphic novels is close to being virtually unknown among American cultural/rhetorical scholars. Image ii, the cover, and a couple pages below are taken from the Chinese graphic novel *The Photo Album* (or *The Moments* as a different translation), featuring the distinctive Asian culture and rhetoric. The cover, opposite from the *Watchmen*, avoids any sharp contrast in either the color or the shape. The background was mostly left open except for the faint shadows on the fallen leaves loosely scattered on the ground. The characters, two kids and an extraordinary giant bird, leave a magical tinge in setting the tone of the narrative. What is the most interesting is the different directions from which the characters are presented on the novel’s cover. In the *Watchmen*, all the characters are framed as straight facing the audience, all perfectly posed, ready for the breathtaking show. The straightforwardness and aggressiveness of American rhetoric is more than obvious.
In *The Photo Album*, by contrast, all the characters, realistic (the kids) or imaginary (the bird), are quietly walking away from the scene, leaving only their backs to face the audience. The indirectness of the images echoes the indirectness of the narrative, and predicts a comparatively moderate, and perhaps less catchy story, which is the exact visual presentation of Asian rhetoric, which is known as indirect, illusive and profound.

There must be five of us to surround this giant tree,
   The two behind the tree are cuter and smarter
      It’s a pity that you can’t see.
         I even hear their talking and laughing
            It’s a pity that you can’t hear.
               Most who are behind the world
                  Are absent from our view.
I laughed with proud at that time
Without noticing it is crying
Maybe because of the pain
Maybe because it is cursing this unfair game
If the fisherman plays and struggles
Also with a hook in his mouth

The loser fish
Wouldn’t have been crying.

Anybody home?
No one answered. The tree is not home.
The little squirrel said: “She has gone wandering!”
The leaves gradually wither, and eventually all fall, the tree still wouldn’t return
It’s said she won’t until next spring
But when she returns, she will bring a set of new leaves,
As well as a whole pack of happy little birds and little bugs.

When it turns out to be sunny
I want to watch the birds in the woods, kiss the waves in the sea
When it turns out to be sunny
I want to plant flowers in the garden, pick fruits in the field
When it turns out to be sunny
I want to visit my friends, walk through the markets
But, it keeps raining on and on…
Until
I have decided to watch the birds, kiss the waves, plant the flowers and visit my friends
In the rain
The rain
Gradually stops.

With the setting in the New York City, a typical modern Western city with skyscrapers, cars, technologies and adventures, the *Watchmen* story is loaded with the most realistic elements such as the Vietnam war, the presidency of Richard Nixon, the uneasiness with the Soviet Union, etc. all those elements having made the *Watchmen* into an alternate
reality which closely mirrors the contemporary Western world of the 1980s. Unlike the *Watchmen*, which is a rapid paced, intense story, *The Photo Album* is a series of photos, or rather a visual record of different moments of life the author wishes to share. And instead of directly portraying the realistic world, it turns its attention to a few less realistic topoi: the nature, the childhood fantasy, and the spiritual truth. Utilizing images as a refreshing form of literary language, the author creates in his work poetic frames that emit charms and appeals. Mild shaping and colouring together with the articulation of deep meaning using a child’s vocabulary and vantage point, appeals to the audience from all generations. The abundant use of the colour watery green evokes an idea of retreat from the city, echoing the classic Buddhism notion of the retreat from the mortal world. More identifiable “Asianness”, as can be seen in the low profile shaping and narration of the characters, and the tranquil lifestyle behind them is evident in every line he draws and writes. Reading/viewing the book *The Photo Album* can be compared to having a visual tour into an Asian’s artist’s inner world, with all the inviting moments and stories reflecting the morals in real life. The highly original, fresh, and inviting lines and colours, indirectly but successfully give voice to the usually voiceless Asian culture and rhetoric. All of these qualities in the book constructed an “Asian magic realism”, which many Western reviewers found to be “intoxicating” (BBC).

*The Photo Album* is merely one of the hundreds of Asian graphic novels that visually portray Asian philosophy, culture and identity. And the same role graphic novels play can also be predicted in other cultures as well. That answers the call that “the systematic and effective use of symbolic resources—was not an Anglo-American phenomenon only, and that the use and study of rhetoric existed in other communities and in other regions around the world” (Mao and Young 4). Burke argues: “all human activity is symbolic” (Burke 16). With culturally distinctive strategies in color, shape, angle, foreground and background management, the graphic book is a visual recording of these activities. And in making these activities visible, it makes one’s culture or social group visible, so the public can serve as meaningful resistance to bias, discrimination, ignorance and social injustice and enable public dissent and resistance. Since one of the aims of the contemporary comparative study is to learn that how “others use languages and other forms of symbolic action to bring about necessary changes and to advance and complicate our understanding of the self, the other, and the world” (Mao and Young 4), I suggest that popular graphic books from different cultures deserves immediate attention and examination in comparative studies. The cultural specific images and visual designs in the books visualize different cultures and rhetorical traditions in a more visible and vivid manner compared with textual books, and the popularity those books enjoy also reflects the culturally specific expectations of visual information of the mainstream audiences.
Chapter 4

A productive engagement of the paradox: A new way of intercultural communication

The previous two chapters examined the two sides of the paradoxical nature of images: images are universal and images are socially constructed and culturally specific. In this chapter, I wish to introduce that how we can properly blend the two seemingly opposing sides of images, making the paradox a really productive one in comparative rhetoric. The universality and the cultural uniqueness of images provide us with a new position from which to see both the familiar and the other.

1. The regaining of the lost “aura” in textual translation

In cross-cultural studies, visual images provide access to a range of human experience not always available through the study of discourse, including the artistic “aura” in art works. In his classical The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, Walter Benjamin uses the word "aura" to refer to the sense of magic and reverence one presumably has experienced in the presence of unique works of art. “We define… aura as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch” (Benjamin 16). According to Benjamin, this aura inheres not in the object itself but rather in external attributes such as its known line of ownership, its restricted exhibition, its publicized authenticity, and its cultural value. In the two-thousand-year-old Chinese rhetoric, the term “aura” (韵味 yùn wèi) with a mysterious halo of art and all its implications has been highly valued and treasured throughout the dynasties. Confucius stated that “True wisdom makes a sign to present the possibilities of meaning, instead of telling it” (书不尽言，言不尽意). Mencius also believes that “the sages constructed ‘images’ to give a full account of their meaning” (qtd in: 217 Hall and Ames).

Below is the translation of a Chinese poem, compared with its original version in Chinese.

夏

Ode to Summer

绿树荫浓夏日长， The shadows dance among green arbors
蜻蜓锦鲤戏池塘。 on a long Summer’s day,
Knowing that it is a poem, the Western audience might force a tinge of aura in the Chinese version, though it is quickly muffled in the poem’s immense inaccessibility. The English translation does help with basic understandings, but the rhymes, rhythms and most importantly, the aura, which is highly valued in ancient Chinese poetry, are lost in the translation activity. As Walter Benjamin pointed out about fifty years ago, “it is plausible that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original” (Benjamin ii). With the textual “untranslatability” (Benjamin ii), which is inevitable among different languages, the foreign literacy is very likely to appear less brilliant to linguistic and cultural scholars. In other words, in order for it to be introduced to the non-Chinese speaking audience, that poem is “reduced for quick sale”. Thus, the impression of Chinese classical poetry shaped by textual translation is no more than “a mirror of our own minds” (Richards 86). Using the western verse, diction and rhyme, we unintentionally forced a structure to which may not apply this machinery (Richards 91).

In order to avoid those pitfalls in translation, Richards made the following inquiries a hundred years ago:

Are we able to translate the one set of mental operations into the other? Can we maintain two systems of thinking in our minds without reciprocal infection and yet in some way mediate between them? Do we need a third system of thought general enough and comprehensive enough to include both? (Richards 87)

Almost a century later, however, cultural and rhetoric scholars are still struggling to find the perfect answers to those weighty inquiries. Many of them still confine their visions within the “deficiency model” Mao has identified, known as a methodological bias assuming that Asian rhetoric is inferior to Western rhetoric, based on their partial or superficial understandings of Asian culture due to cultural and linguistic barriers. Facing the above inquiries as well as challenges, we as cultural rhetoricians must be methodologically more self-critical and open-minded. My answer is that we do need a third approach to bridge over the cultural and lingual barriers, and that approach is marked by a multi-model presentation.

Below is the visualized version of the poem, especially designed for the
Western audience. The visualized version is a smart mixture of poetry, calligraphy, traditional Chinese painting, English subtitle and music. The graceful ancient painting slowly transits itself into the fantastic summer world the poem describes, and after two minutes of the splendid visual tour, the entire fantasy re-folds itself into its original calligraphy version on the corner of the ancient painting. The poetic aura, calm, ancient, and mysterious, thrives in the object—>fantasy—>object artistic structure, which can be exclusively presented by visuals. The English subtitle and the dramatic calligraphy compose a harmonious duet, in which sense and aura celebrate each other despite the cultural and lingual barrier.

However mysterious and artistic and profound the term is, “aura” is primarily based on a required degree of understanding. It is undeniable that the visual elements in writing do save a certain part of the decoding process. There is an elaborate but, I will argue, that with the help of visualization, it is usually the tiresome process of primary decoding that is efficiently left out, allowing the spectators (and writers/ creators as well) more time, motivation and possibility to dig in the “real matter”, in which a deeper sense of “aura” can actually be found, enjoyed, shared and recreated.

Most evidently, the “aura”, or even the art of writing should not be restricted to words only. As signs of meaning making, both words and images reach the very same destination from two seemingly diverged roads. Simply put, the so called “aura” is personal interpretation mediated by one’s cultural and historical context. Such interpretation occurs, however, with words and a world of other informative elements. In visual presentations of literary works, the personal interpretation is never dimmed but strengthened due to the profuse possibilities and interactions digital images bring, as well as the necessary cultural context they visualize and present to the audience.
2. The visualized contextualization

If “aura” is achieved by the new approach of presenting meaning with the aid of the universality of images, the culturally specific side of images echoes the “contextual turn” in translation (Hart 59), with all kinds of visual signs creating an instant, ready-made cultural and social context. It is believed to be one of the most effective ways to present a text to its cultural outsiders, because “the examination of a text within its cultural context seems to be the most revealing of political insight, and the most useful to political and cultural rhetorical studies” (Hum and Lyon 158).

In order to prove how visuals work to contextualize texts by visualizing the culture within which they are produced, I compare the Western and Asian cultural thought patterns. Usually demonstrated by an arrow pointing directly to the target, westerners’ cultural thought pattern is generalized to be direct and straightforward, so Westerners usually get straight down to the issue when thinking, expressing or writing. Asians, on the contrary, usually tend to wind around and around the target and let the idea “unfold” naturally and indirectly. These two approaches to communication are deeply rooted in the two different language systems: “reader responsible” language and “writer responsible” language (Hind 35). In “reader responsible” writing, the task is on readers for exacting the meaning from the text. In Asian culture in particular (e.g. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai), readers expect ambiguity and imprecise writing as they work their way inductively through the text. In contrast, English speaking readers expect writers to be explicit and direct, depending on the “writer responsible” writing culture.

The different cultural thought patterns, inevitably, result in the different method and value in writing. In Chinese writing culture, “something not covered” is appreciated and perhaps valued more than “something covered”, because the poetic “aura” lurks behind the openness. The whole rhetoric of “openness” is visualized in the classic Chinese paintings, in which the art of “leaving open” can be understood in a more visible, and perhaps more obvious way (see Illustration XIV).

With the whole background and even part of the bamboo itself kept absent from view, the painting aims at conveying a sense of the elegant motion in breeze instead of depicting the actual subject in a realistic manner. No actual context is provided to the viewer, such as whether the bamboo is growing in a forest or in solitude, whether it is in the yard or in the wild, or what the weather was like on that day. So the value of free style Chinese painting is merely a motional impression...
FIGURE 16. A traditional Chinese realistic still life

If Illustration XIV is considered as a special genre of Chinese free style painting and thus is hard to be compared to Western classical realistic painting, Illustration XV offers an example in a basic, classical painting genre that China and the Western share in common: realistic still life. In the picture, the chief matters, though depicted in finest detail, occupy only a certain area of the whole paper, with the back ground left totally undone. It is considered that the “blankness” is essential in creating the necessary space for the viewer to “feel”, in which the poetic aura with all its profoundness is set free. The interaction of “the concrete” and “the abstract” can make the painting balanced: exquisite but not stuffed.
However, in traditional Western painting, the painter portrays the similar pots and flowers in a very different way. In Illustration XVI, the whole canvas is stuffed with colors as we see things in the real world; even the cloth behind the objects is painted with equal emphasis. Valuing accuracy, or, the concrete, instead of openness, or, the abstract, the painting is supposed to present all the matters which are within the frame as they really are.

The very different concept and value on “the concrete” and “the abstract” in the art works vividly contextualize the difference in Western and Asian cultural thought patterns, as well as in Western and Asian rhetoric. The video functions the same way in contextualizing the ancient Chinese rhetoric, the art of “the open vagueness”, which is greatly valued in traditional Chinese painting. Exquisite as they are, the moving images leave the entire background blank, the water transparent and materialized only by smart ripples. One can never tell the actual size of the pound, where it is located, and what is beyond it. The whole scene appears borderless, and is dominated by watery black and white, as if the moisture in the summer’s air was gently spreading to the viewers. Such enjoyment is the fruit of “visual thinking” (Gibson 34) prompted by the visual message, which invites the viewer to experience, rather than to read or observe Chinese rhetoric. The visual thinking is also freer and less stereotyped than verbal thinking, allowing for greater range of treatments and variations, as well as a valuable distance for the audience to realize the poetic aura, which can only be felt rather than told or translated.

Comparative rhetoric is a vital enterprise, but it can only be such if it transcends colonial tendencies. A comparative historical approach, focused on moments, texts, and political
situations within cultures, would allow us to develop the “shared, interlocutionary dialogic modes of thought and language” (Swearingen 1991, 18). The contextualization achieved by visualization of meaning also agrees with Xing Lu’s suggest of “moving from a superficial understanding of Chinese rhetorical practices through the Western lens, to an in depth exploration of original texts in search of rhetorical senses and meanings in ancient Chinese contexts” (3). Moreover, with the visualized poem has actually transcended its literary form and become a multi-representation of ancient Chinese art. With the additional opportunities visualized translation can potentially provide, this kind of translation can really embrace its revolutionary role as “no longer an introduction of meaning, rather a recovery of meaning” (Hart 61).

3. The Productive vagueness

One other advantage of presenting a non-Western work in a visualized, multi-model way lies in the productive vagueness it manages to provide. I will begin the exploring the productive vagueness in images by firstly introducing the dynamics of viewing. I define viewing as a wide range of human activities such as observing, examining, seeing, watching, or simply glancing at all kinds of images. Very much like images, vision itself, too, “is not merely natural or physical but social and situated” (Jay). Foster also defines “sight as a social fact”, meaning we see in particular ways because we grow up in cultures that teach us to see in those ways (Foster 8). The viewing of the foreign poem, rather than trying to read, copy or recite it, is a more productive way of acquiring, because visual messages, though less coded and more vivid, allow more space and possibilities for interpretation.

According to Ron Burnett, spectators, especially in the digital age, become “navigators” (65) who interact with pictures. The term “visualizing” means a process that is discursive, intellectual, and emotional, which requires a large and active participation of the viewer including his perceptions, thoughts, daydreams, and projections (65). Thus, every reader, with or without realization, keeps on probing the boundaries among different levels of reality and image. There is also a famous quote in describing the deep emotional interaction humans have with images in ancient Chinese philosophy: troubled by the times—the dews on the petal evoke the tears; dreading parting—the flapping of a bird’s wings startle the soul. (感时花溅泪，恨别鸟惊心) Flower and birds, usually icons for the happy and the beautiful, can be interpreted to be associated with tears and something dreadful depending on mere personal occasions.

It is notable that the visualized version brings better understanding and sensational delights without suffocating reader’s imagination. The meaning of an image, whether in a drawing, a photo, or a documentary, is “not in the visual sign itself a self-sufficient entity, nor exclusively in the sociological positions and identities of the audience, but in the articulation between viewer and viewed, between the power of the image to signify and the viewer’s capacity to interpret meaning” (Evans and Hall 4). The audience, the image and the meaning
are not in a relationship of merely cause and effect; rather the relationship is a complex one in which various elements interact and lead to an outcome that is dependent on one’s culture and cultural practices of looking and seeing. So, the possibility of multiple meanings, polysemy, exists depending on the interpretations of various audiences who bring their own subjectivities to the image and take up various positions of identification in relation to its meaning.

We can experience the “productive vagueness” by trying to interpreting this famous poster of the movie *Schindler’s List*. Only two hands can been seen on the poster: one adult’s and one child’s. If the producer changes this image to a textual statement, it would be “Mr. Schindler saved a little kid from the Nazi’s concentration camp.” And no matter in what language this statement is translated to, only this one version of limited meaning is conveyed to the audience. The silent image itself, comparatively, is a lot vaguer than the explicit textual statement. The two hands can be interpreted as Mr. Schindler’s and the red coated little girl’s, father’s and son’s, the old’s and the young’s, the powerful and the powerless, God’s and human’s, just to name a few. Interpretations differ according to the viewers’ social and cultural context. But different audiences, with or without the knowledge of the movie, feel a strong sense of helping, support and perhaps love by the generally universal meaning that two holding human hands convey. Without explicitly knowing to whom those hands belong, the sense of support and love actually gets greatly broadened and complicated by all sets of possibilities imagined by different viewers by seeing this simple image.

Functioning in the same way in the visual representation of meaning across cultures, the openness of an image opens up the multiplicity of meaning. Quite a few steps higher than elementary viewing, a rhetorical picture represents whatever it does by virtue of belonging to a symbol system with rules or conventions that link marked surfaces of pictures with external things. Pictorial “reality” is shaped by a viewer’s way of seeing, which is under the control of the conventions imposed by a culture. Since it is impossible to split images from mythology, “the mix of icons, clichés, and ideology that are dominant to certain culture, or surrounds a particular idea” (Kaplan 167), the images are historically situated, socially conditioned and culturally specific. Based on the “productive vagueness” suggested by Hall and Ames in comparing rhetorics, the open-endedness of visual information should be protected, since it is “central to the interactions as a means of serving the pragmatic ends of conversation” (Hall...
and Ames 167). And with the productive paradox, visual information has the great potential to play its unique part as a cultural mediator, with both its easy accessibility and “productive vagueness”. Just as Helmers points out, “images are used to imagine alternatives, to create new ways of looking at something, to record parts of the world that are inaccessible to a certain public” (Helmers 2).

The very first step of comparative rhetoric studies is to present a certain culture to its outsiders, which inevitably relies on translation. As Hart suggests, “different choices of translation provided the Jesuits and their converts with different opportunities which entail complex strategic implications and consequences—social, political, philosophical, and philological” (Hart 61). Images are proven to be the effective method in translating and presenting one culture to another. Besides being the method, images are also excellent subjects for comparative rhetoric. An image is produced within a specific social context, a specific time in history, for the purpose of a specific cultural group, and in a specific medium. It is shaped by a set of “representation codes”, which are organized into coherence and social acceptability by “ideological codes, such as individualism, patriarchy, class, materialism, capitalism, and so on” (O’Donnell 531).

With the essential universality, “visual images are inherently more specific and concrete than words because the underlying meaning category is made manifest through the artist’s choice of a particular image” (Whittock 32). Paradoxically along with its concreteness, Gibson’s theory of pictorial perception argues for the openness of the visual sign, in which information is conveyed through an “informative structure of ambient light that is richer and more inexhaustible than verbal thinking” (Gibson 34). Thus, to Gibson, “visual thinking is freer and less stereotyped than verbal thinking (34). These observations of the symbols used to create linguistic and visual metaphors suggest that the latter type may allow for a greater range of treatments and variations.

This visual poem is merely one of many successful examples of presenting a specific rhetoric to its outsiders. Set free from the boundary of alphabet text, visual literacy allows us to “weave and orchestrate multiple sign technologies (e.g. images, voice and other sounds, music, video, graphics), layered together across space and time to produce artifacts that can be interactive, hyperlinked, and quite powerful” (WIDE 22).

**Conclusion**

Based on the examples examined in previous chapters, I wish to conclude this study by making three recommendations for the study of visual rhetoric in the cross-cultural context.

1. **No separation between the verbal and the visual**
We should not attempt to separate or isolate words from images, just as we should not try to isolate word to from the world. In practice and principle, words and images are oftentimes mixed together in rhetorically interesting ways. To study visual rhetoric does not mean studying images or artefacts in isolation from larger textual or performative contexts in which an audience might encounter them; rather it means studying “a precise relation to those contexts that give them shape and meaning” (Olson, Finnegan and Hope 2). Visual rhetoric should not be viewed as supplement to more traditional “talk and text” approaches to rhetoric, but rather as an integral part, since “one of the crucial mediations that occurs in history of cultural forms is the interaction between verbal and pictorial modes of representation” (Mitchell 622). The concern that visualizing linguistic studies is off the track or will threaten the profoundness of language sounds similar to what Denis Baron says in his From Pencils to Pixels: “Plato was one leading thinker who spoke out strongly against writing, fearing that it would weaken our memories” (Baron19).

2. To engage visuals as both an object and a method for comparative rhetorical studies

The term visual rhetoric has to meanings in the cross cultural context. The above examples demonstrate how comparative rhetoric scholars can adopt two paradoxical characteristics of visual image: the cognitive universality and the cultural uniqueness. In the first sense, visual rhetoric is a product individuals create as they use visual symbols for the purpose of communicating, as the universality of images can be used to prompt basic, unbiased understandings of any culture. In the second, it is a perspective and perspective scholars apply that focuses on the symbolic process by which visual artifacts perform communication, as the culturally specific characteristic can be used to achieve a deeper, dynamic articulation and examination of the non-western culture.

Besides bringing into the textual-only objects for comparative studies, the method of visual interpretation, be offering a much bigger range of possibilities and dynamics, may also solve the methodological dilemma of starting to study another culture “with a set of principles or concept external to the culture but familiar to the researcher” (Mao 406) by visualizing the concept, making it familiar to both cultures. Freer from the decoding process which all texts require in meaning making, there is profound potential in the visual sign as a much more universal language than language itself to promote broader understanding in cross-cultural communication. Communication scholar Kostelnick also pointed out the similar approach in information design: “Visual language seems particularly well suited to bridge cultural gulfs—it is malleable and resilient, it is presumably accessible to anyone with the ability to see, and technology now empowers us to variegate and manipulate it” (182).

“We compare rhetoric that we may understand the limits of the term and our own conceptual frame for it. As we denationalize and denormalize our notions of rhetoric, we search for understanding of the power of communication in an era defined by new
communication technologies, increased mobility, displacements of people, and cultural clashes” (Hum and Lyon 162). Being both the subject and the perspective, the product and the process, visual signs will further swing open the door leading to different possibilities and opportunities, both in understanding certain culture and also in the academy of comparative rhetoric itself. Besides assisting translation, visualization also supports the way by which we learn language—“a systematic investigation into senses” (Richards 129). As an important approach in education, visual signs in cultural studies confirm that “the fruit of comparative studies should be in an increase in our own powers—a systematized general technique by which to avoid confusion” (Richards 130).

### 3. The combination of visual and comparative rhetoric makes the rhetorical theory more comprehensive and inclusive

The most important reason for studying visual rhetoric is to develop rhetorical theory that is more comprehensive and inclusive.

In 1971, the National Conference of Rhetoric called for an expansion of the study of rhetoric “to include subjects which have not traditionally fallen within the critic’s purview; the non-discursive as well as the discursive, the non-verbal as well as verbal” (Foss 142). The systematic study of visual signs besides linguistic signs has really been on its way when rhetoric was defined by Kenneth Burke as “a study of symbolicity, which includes both textual and non-textual elements such as mathematics, sculpture, painting, dance, architectural styles, and so on” (Burke 141).

The employment of the visual sign in rhetorical studies also echoes the notions of the new age linguistic scholars. For instance, Fox assumes that “the most important kind of meaning is constructed from personal interaction with images; we use images, often mediated by language, to make sense of our world, and this activity resides at the core of thinking and literary development” (Fox xi). Image products and processes are just as important as language products and processes in the making of meaning. Besides, New London Group highlights two principal aspects of the current multiplicity of education: 1, to extend the idea and scope of literacy studies to account for the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalised societies; 2, the literacy pedagogy must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies (New London Group 9). Fox “tends to regard images as artifacts that have been preserved within literary texts—exquisite porcelain to dust off, admire, and place back on the shelf” (Fox xiii).

Communication scholars has defined visual rhetoric as intensively inter-disciplinary, which “is strongest if it combines the conceptual resources of rhetorical tradition itself—the lexicon of terms that rhetorical scholars have developed over time to help them understand the nature and functions of persuasive communication—with the conceptual resources
developed by scholars in other fields” (Olson, Finnegan and Hope 2). Such inclusiveness was demonstrated in this thesis by the employment of related theories in linguistic, rhetoric, psychology, art and design, anthropology, etc.

The most recent comparative rhetoric theory also points out that, in order to further progress in the discipline, we need the “openness to new definitions, methods, and understandings of ourselves and our cultures” (Hum and Lyon 161), and the application of visuals definitely falls into this category. This framework is not simply a framework for an understanding of visual rhetoric, however, but also for transforming discourse-based rhetorical theory. To quote Foss again, “As rhetorical theory opens up to visual rhetoric, it opens up to possibilities for more relevant, inclusive, and holistic views of contemporary symbol use” (Foss 313).

The more we study the visual, the more we realize that what we see and how we interweave images with texts depend on the cultures, times, and places we live in. However, I do not wish to claim that visual signs will replace linguistic signs in literacy studies; rather, I advocate that visual signs should be recognized as a necessary part and perhaps the catalyst to cross-cultural communication. A better awareness, study, and employment of visualization will considerably broaden the landscape of the studies of linguistics, rhetoric, and literacy, and open up a new set of possibilities, and thus encourage traffic in the paths leading to a productive dialogue among different cultures.
Works Cited


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