

**Original Research Article**  
**An Analysis of Volition and Self-identity  
Construction in Ai Qing's Poem**

**ABSTRACT**

The Chinese poet Ai Qing (pen name of Jiang Zhenghan) advocated expressing one's innermost thoughts directly through poetry, and his poems often used straightforward language to convey strong volition. This article examines Ai Qing's poetry from the perspectives of form and the process of imagination, using Coleridge's theory of imagination and Ai Qing's own poetic philosophy. It seeks to explore the volition embodied in Ai Qing's poetry and how he constructs his own identity through poetry. In terms of form, Ai Qing adhered to "the prose beauty of poetry," expressing the hope to break free from constraints, liberate thoughts, and assert personal will. Through the unconventional imagination process in his poems, Ai Qing reveals the unconscious self-agent of the poet to speak for the people and an active perspective on the interplay between the poet's self-agent and the external world. It is the combination of poetic form and the creative process of imagination that constructs Ai Qing's identity as a national poet yearning for freedom, revolution, and yet filled with a sense of concern.

*Key words: Ai Qing; volition; self-identity construction; Coleridge; theory of imagination*

**1. INTRODUCTION**

As a famous modern poet of China, Ai Qing (1910-1996)'s poems have innovative power from form to content. This innovative power may be attributed to literary community's general atmosphere following the May 4th Youth Movement, but also to himself. Ai Qing moved to Paris, France, while he was a young man to study painting there as a student. There, he read much, explored a wide range of literature, and was exposed to a lot of modern poetry and cutting-edge ideas by Marx, Lenin, and others [1], which served as the inspiration for his subsequent poetry. This also implies that the fundamental ideas of Western poetics can aid in our comprehension of contemporary poets like Ai Qing, especially after returning to China, Ai Qing has gradually formed his own poetics in his constant poetry practice.

The key findings of Ai Qing's research, which have been noted by several domestic scholars, include the discovery of images in his poems, his declaration of the "prose beauty of poetry," his connection to symbolism, the relationship between his poetry and painting. There is also research involving the will of Ai Qing embodied in it, for example,

Ding Xiaoni points out that Ai Qing kept distinctive his individual will, but also expressed the emotion of groups. Furthermore, Ai Qing's poems create a distinctive poetic landscape with the combination of self-consciousness and national identity, according to Duan Congxue, because of the close relationship between the personal identity construction of Ai Qing and the nation's fate during the Anti-Japanese War. Both of these articles discuss Ai Qing's personal consciousness reflected in the poem, but they begin by examining the historical context, Ai Qing's upbringing, and the relationship between Ai Qing and the collective feeling and national survival. This article will begin by examining Ai Qing's poetic creation from the two perspectives of form choice and poetic imagination process to explore Ai Qing's volition in poetry, as well as his self-identity construction during poem creation.

## 2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FORM AND VOLITION

Since Opium War facilitated Chinese exposure to the Western world, the social and intellectual climate in China was chaotic and desperate. It was in such an atmosphere that the "literary revolution" first took place. As poetry has evolved, there have been arguments regarding its structure. In April 1939, Ai Qing published his famous poetic treatise "The Prose Beauty of Poetry" in *South China*, the supplement of *Guangxi Daily*.

"It is a progress from appreciating verse to appreciating prose: and it is much easier for a poet to write a poem in verse than in prose. But ordinary people can only use verse as poetry, and even like to use this view to distinguish poetry and prose. Such a view can only be used by the authors of poetic practices to satisfy the naive schoolboy. Some people write beautiful prose without knowing that it is poetry; There are people who write ugly poetry and don't know that it is the worst kind of prose". [2]

And from the standpoint of contemporary poetics, the notion of considering form as "both the 'signature' and the creator of the self"[3] is pervasive. It is simple to comprehend because one organizes, comprehends, and communicates the world's unprocessed sensory input through one's self, and poets utilize poetry to do just that. Accordingly, the telling process also entails showing and constructing one's own self.

The bugler has risen from his bed of rice-straw on the ground,  
Harboring no grudge that he had to sleep on this damp mud floor.

He quickly ties on his leggings,  
With ice-cold water he washes his face.  
He looks over at his weary comrades snoring,  
Then extends his arm to take up his bugle  
(Translated by Eugene Chen Eoyang).

吹号者从铺散着稻草的地面上起来了，  
他不埋怨自己是睡在如此潮湿的泥地上，  
他轻捷地绑好了裹腿，  
他用冰冷的水洗过了脸，  
他看着那些发出困乏的鼾声的同伴，  
于是他伸手携去了他的号角[4]；

“The Bugler”, one of the earlier masterpieces of Ai Qing, was written in late March 1939, roughly simultaneously with his poetics declaration “The Prose Beauty of Poetry”. He was free in his words, and it is clear that it has moved away from being overly concerned with rhythm.

“Ever since we discovered the hypocrisy of verse, the artificiality of verse, the refinement of verse, we have been hostile to it; And when we become acquainted with the unadorned beauty of prose, the unpainted nature, the health full of life, it seduces us physically”[5]. Ai Qing abandons the traditional verse writing method because he hates the carved beauty of verse. In other words, Ai Qing sees the natural beauty in prose and thinks that this is the beauty that poetry needs.

At the same time, unlike many poems that propel the poetry forward with emotion, what drives “The Bugler” forward is the narrative. Firstly, the whole poem is divided into five sections and narrated the bugler’s warfare procedure in order of time and space. The quoted passage is the beginning of the poem. The bugler gets up, puts on his clothes, washes his face, looks at his companions, and then reaches for the horn. A setting and a tale are being described by the poet. According to what is referred to as “stylistics,” this approach is also frequently used in prose narrative.

Poetry is a lyric art, but all emotions are produced by the world because all “emotions” come from “things.” The things that are depicted in the poem are only contingencies, forms of ego. “Via Lacan, the dependence of self as construct upon the gaze of the other, but we might add to the resulting contingency of self the complex alchemy of emotional and imaginary life as it transforms self and other as participants in an erotic process”[6]. Because choosing narrative over outright lyricism is highly materialistic, describing the life of the bugler—especially the delicate depiction of getting out of bed—is likewise a process of self-construction. This also fits in perfectly with Ai Qing’s self-described identity as a staunch Marxist.

In addition to the freedom of rhetoric, sentence pattern, description and structure, this poem also has the freedom of language choice:

Then, he gets down from the mountain slope,  
And loses himself  
In the numberless gray-uniformed throng standing at attention.  
After he has finished sounding the call to breakfast,  
He blows the call for assembly;  
Later, in the glorious radiance that rains down from the sun,  
Dazzling every reach of the overarching sky,  
With fervor and urgency,  
He sounds the call to arms  
(Translated by Eugene Chen Eoyang).

于是，他离开了山坡，  
又把自己消失到那  
无数的灰色的行列中去。  
他吹过了吃饭号，

又吹过了集合号，  
而当太阳以轰响的光采  
辉煌了整个天穹的时候，  
他以催促的热情  
吹出了出发号[7]。

“Finish sounding the call to breakfast”, “blows the call for assembly”, those are colloquial expressions, “Spoken language is beautiful, it exists in people’s daily life. It has a human flavor. It makes us feel very intimate, and the spoken word is the most prose”[8]. The primary reason Ai Qing chose oral vernacular is that it is derived from people’s daily lives and is vibrant, making the emotion represented by this language also simple.

Ai Qing said “We must persist in the revolution brought into poetry by Whitman, Verhaeren, and Mayakovsky. We must make poetry into something that adequately meets the needs of a new era, without hesitating to use whatever poetic form is most suitable for this purpose”[9]. He has chosen to write the poetry in this manner, the act of choice is the representation of volition. To sum up, Ai Qing’s poems focus on narration and daily life, and at the same time use vernacular language. The new literature of the Chinese revolution adapts free poetry to the needs of conveying new times, new thoughts, and new feelings. And Ai Qing’s poems have expressed from the form that he stands with the people, and every choice is for more freedom to describe the folk affairs.

### 3. THE PRIMARY IMAGINATION: SELF AND WORLD

Ai Qing “reconstructs the aesthetics of poetry and the external world with the poetic language of sensuality.” [10] About the creation of poetry, Ai Qing said, “The problem is not what you write, but how you write, in how you see the world, in what perspective you see the world, in what attitude you embrace the world”[11]. His idea of organizing raw data and creating poems recalls Coleridge with his dual sense of imaginative agency as outlined in his *Biographia Literaria*: the self as co-creator of the world and the self as co-creator of “the self.” The primary imagination explains the activity of subjectivity in a more general sense, whereas the secondary imagination describes the activity of the “emplastic” force [12]. Both serve as forms of creative agency. The following two sections in-depth examine the imaginary world constructed in Ai Qing’s poems, his imaginary process and his self-identity construction in it.

According to Coleridge, “The Imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary Imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I Am” [13].

So the “finite mind” is the mind of people, and the “infinite I am” is the world. As Hong Fang explains, “the first imagination is actually unintentional imagination. It is the cognitive ability that everyone has to shape chaotic perceptual materials. It comes from the irrational imagination of instinctive feeling”[14]. People are not completely in the position of being perceived; rather, they interact with the outside world and choose from a variety of perceptual elements that the outside world offers. Because of this, people face the same perceptual material, but can get different perceptions. When analyzing

Coleridge's poems, many scholars often take "Kubla Khan" as an example, and equate the primary Imagination with unrestrained imagination[15]. But in essence, the nature of the primary imagination should be the part of the poet's direct perception of the external world, especially in contrast to the second imagination, so the primary imagination is the kind of direct imagination without processing.

In his poems, Ai Qing often expresses his feelings directly. However, as a symbolist poet in his early days, Ai Qing is accustomed to employing the technique of image thinking to communicate his emotions: "The way of the imagination is poetry, and it is the basic tool in the creation of poetry as well as other literature" [16]. Yet in "Facing the Sun", the poet, in a rare moment, allows his imagination to flow naturally:

The sun  
Makes me think of the French and American Revolutions  
Of "Liberté, Egalité et Fraternité"  
Of democracy  
Of the Marseillaise, the Internationale,  
Of Washington, Lenin, Sun Yat-sen  
And all the names of those figures  
Who delivered mankind from misery.  
(Translated by Peng Wenlan and Eugene Chen Eoyang)

太阳  
它使我想起 法兰西 美利坚的革命  
想起 博爱 平等 自由  
想起 德谟克拉西  
想起 《马赛曲》 《国际歌》  
想起 华盛顿 列宁 孙逸仙  
和一切把人类从苦难里拯救出来的  
人物的名字[17]

We can see that the primary imagination drove Ai Qing to make a succession of imaginative works when he saw the sun in April 1938, a time of intense anti-Japanese fervor, and they were all focused on figures and objects associated with revolution. Why is Ai Qing's primary imagination different from Coleridge's in "Kubla Khan"? The essence is that Ai Qing binds himself to the people from the beginning to the end. "The poet's 'I' is rarely his own. On most occasions, a poet should use 'I' to convey the feelings and aspirations of an era"[18]. He himself later wrote, referring to criticism of the poem by Yao Wenyuan (1932-2005) and others, "I wrote the long poem "Facing the Sun" in April 1938 in Wuchang, then under Kuomintang control. That was the period when the Kuomintang showed passive resistance against Japan, but active opposition to the Chinese Communist Party. Was I wrong, then, at that time, to talk about freedom and democracy?"[19]

It can be seen that the "I" in this poem is also expressed by the poet himself, so Ai Qing's own will, the emotions of the group, and the external world have come into contact, resulting in the poem produced by the process of imagination, and then reflects Ai Qing's self-identity: a revolutionary, a people's poet.

#### 4. THE SECONDARY IMAGINATION: THE MANIFESTATION OF UNCONSCIOUS SELF-AGENT

As was already mentioned, while Ai Qing was young, he spent some time in Paris, France. His early artistic concepts were greatly affected by symbolism, and as a result, his subsequent poems placed a high value on image-thinking.

“The activity of the human mind, which produces the imagination and the ability to associate ideas, is nothing but a synthesis of life’s experiences. In the course of synthesizing these experiences, metaphors occur. The object of metaphor is for one experience to corroborate another experience”[20].

In Loi's view, Ai Qing's "Frenchization" is the end point of the Westernization of Chinese new poetry. She argues that "Ai Qing was the last "French poet" [21]. And in *On Poetry*, he also expressed this view in poetic language, “for the object of fire in his own heart, burn up his feelings, and then use the fire to melt the object”[22], which is in keeping with Coleridge’s idea of secondary imagination.

The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and tounify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead [23].

Here, imagination is likened to a laboratory that melts, breaks down, and disperses the perceptual materials obtained by the first imagination for the purpose of re-creation. It idealizes and unifies the object even when reinvention is completely impossible. Even if the object it faces is fixed and rigid, imagination will give it life.

Only through this one window  
that I could --  
See the rushing, iron-red glow of the dawn;  
See the seashell-like clouds scattered over the flat sand after the tide;  
See the haze poured out like thick ink on plain silk;  
See the neon color of crimson tulle draped over a lady’s body;

(My Trans.)

只能通过这唯一的窗，  
我才能——  
看见熔铁般红热的奔流着的朝霞；  
看见潮退后星散在平沙上的贝壳般的云朵；  
看见如浓墨倾泻在素绢上的阴霾；  
看见如披挂在贵妇人裸体上的绯色薄纱的霓彩； [24]

This kind of processing is the embodiment of the poet’s self-agency. The clearest illustration of this point is that Ai Qing wrote “Behind Bars” when he was in prison in his early years. It is through this small window that the poet begins his imagination. In contrast to “Facing the Sun,” where the primary imagination is unadorned, “I” in “Behind Bars” faces a fixed window and starts the creative processes. Although there are clouds

outside the window, he used four different words to refer to the thing as a “cloud”: dawn, clouds, haze, and neon color. He also used more than ten other adjectives to describe the cloud's color, light, texture, dynamics, and shape. It's not just about the cloud itself. An object is both a presentation and a propelling item. It is in this concrete image that the poet merges his strongest feelings and his deepest thoughts.

Through these cloud imaginations, he thought of the outside world, the freedom, and his imagination drifted further and further away; he contemplated the clouds in his hometown, the sky over the French painting; and then he thought of spring, summer, autumn, and winter, but “Summer is wild, spring is melancholy, and autumn is bleak” 狂热的夏的天, 抑郁的春的天, 飘逸而又凄凉的秋的天[25]. Not the autumn is sad, but the poet's mood at the moment is sad because he misses his hometown's “mountain of flame like rhododendron back in autumn”对于家乡的满山火焰般杜鹃花的怀念[26].

He links the idea of looking back to the past and his hometown with the season of autumn, which is also linked to the window. The window then represents hope in the final verse. The window establishes connections with the world, this river of time, and a sense of hope.

Only through this one window  
that I could --  
lift up my eyes of imagination,  
.....  
expecting autumn in summer,  
then expecting spring in winter.  
This constant expectation makes me feel the existence of the world.  
(My Trans)  
只能通过这唯一的窗,  
我才能举起仰视的幻想的眼波,  
.....  
在炎夏希冀凉秋,  
在严冬又希冀新春,  
这不断的希冀啊,  
使我感触到世界的存在;  
带给我多量的生命的力。[27]

All the poet does is look through a window. What drives the poem forward is the poet's constantly working imagination. Clouds seen through the window, adding artistic processing to give emotion, fully into the poet's subjective feelings, is the embodiment of will, the process of soul-making. Ai Qing sees the window as a conduit to the outside world, and he frequently thinks back on the past and envisions the future when imagining the view outside the window. He clearly expresses his desire to escape the prison and find freedom in these images and thoughts.

This secondary imagination emerges also through an invisible process. In 1941, Ai Qing created “Era”, which he thought is “the kind of poem that clearly celebrates the era, an era for which we fought and gave our lives”[28]. The poet, on the one hand, fanatically adheres to the shining era: “I am faithful and devoted to the era”, “I should still have

rushed into its arms, With all the fervor that life can possess"[29]. However, he occasionally predicted that there would be "a sight more bloody than a thousand slaughterhouses"[30]. Unwillingly, He keeps silent, "like a captured prisoner/Who is silent before he is escorted to the execution grounds"[31].

It is noticeable that this should have been the finest days of the poet's life[32]. To produce literature and art, the poet came to Yan'an, the center of the revolution. "The characteristics of Ai Qing's poetics can be summarized as the juxtaposition of revolutionary poetics and landscape aesthetics" [33]. But at this very moment, the poem's words hold a certain amount of grief and sadness. The poet realizes the eternal destiny of life, "Before it I will so humble myself/As to lie supine on the ground/And let it, like a horse's hooves, trample on my chest"我在它的前面显得如此卑微/甚至想仰卧在地面上/让它的脚像马蹄一样踩过我的胸膛[34]. So this sense of solemn and stirring does not come from the background of his time, or from his situation at the present, but from the original pain caused by the conflict of volition in Ai Qing's being.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In that turbulent time, Ai Qing used his poems to express his thoughts and write the stories of the time, and in the process of composing poems, he also developed his own identity. The innovation of form, the pursuit of prose beauty, colloquial language, and the narrative of poetry expressed his expression close to the people, implying the recognition of equality and freedom; the imaginative process of the poem not only shows the relationship between Ai Qing and the world, but also implies his philosophical thinking about life, reflecting his desire to break the shackles, and unconsciously revealing the tragic sense of the times, which describes the identity of a national poet who is concerned about the country and the people.

## NOTES

1. Ai, "Selected Poems", 228.
2. Ai, "On Poetry", 153-154.
3. Bond, *Plurality and the Poetics of Self*, 37.
4. Ai, "Selected Poems", 73.
5. Ai, "On Poetry", 153-154.
6. Bond, *Plurality and the Poetics of Self*, 36.
7. Ai, "Selected Poems", 74-75.
8. Ai, "On Poetry", 154.
9. Hsu, *Twentieth Century Chinese Poetry*, 274.
10. Li, "The Models and Evolution", 86.
11. Ai, "On Poetry", 81.
12. Bond, *Plurality and the Poetics of Self*, 37.
13. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 304.
14. Hong, "Imagination theory", 14.
15. Nangong, "Coleridge's imagination theory", 79-81.
16. Ai, "Selected poems", 16.

17. Ibid., 58.
18. Ai, "On Poetry", 38.
19. Ai, "Selected poems", 21.
20. Ibid., 15.
21. Pan, "Ai Qing's French Translation and Reception after 1979", 83.
22. Ai, "On Poetry", 38.
23. Bond, *Plurality and the Poetics of Self*, 304.
24. Ai, "Collected Works," 60.
25. Ibid., 60.
26. Ibid., 60.
27. Ibid., 61.
28. Ai, "Selected poems", 19.
29. Ibid., 19.
30. Ibid., 19.
31. Ibid., 19.
32. Hsu, *Twentieth Century Chinese Poetry*, 274.
33. Wei, "The Juxtaposition", 263.
34. Ai, "Selected poems", 19.

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14. Wei Tianwu. "The Juxtaposition of Revolutionary Poetics and Landscape Aesthetics: On Ai Qing's Poetics." *Central China Humanities* 15, no. 3 (2023): 263-277.

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