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*The Geese, Swans, and Eagles; The Pine Trees, Mulberry Trees, and Oak Trees and The Flowers
in American Literature and Chinese Literature: A Comparative and Argumentative Study*

There are vast differences between the primary focuses of the literary devices used to convey cultural proprieties throughout American and Chinese literature. In American literature, they mainly emphasize power, strength, and independence. On the other hand, Chinese literature places most of its stress on family, togetherness, and consistency. In this research paper, I will address the American symbols of eagles, oak trees, and roses as well as the Chinese symbols of geese, swans, pine trees, mulberry trees, chrysanthemums, and Lotus to form a clear distinction between the two and acknowledge how the separate cultures prioritize what is imperative to their respective societies through literary representations. My thesis is that the primary focus of the literary devices used to convey cultural proprieties throughout Chinese literature is preferable to American literature because of the concepts of family, togetherness, and consistency over those of power, strength, and independence.

Starting with the American literary symbol of the eagle as the first representation of American culture and society, the American Bald Eagle is explicitly the country's national animal and a beacon of power, strength, and independence. The Bald Eagle, especially a bird of prey, nods to the American glorification of showing its predator-like qualities to the rest of the world. I have found a literary example of this in the poem Eagle Plain by Robert Francis: "The

American eagle never says he will serve if drafted, will dutifully serve etc. He is not at our service. If we have honored him, we have honored one who unequivocally honors himself by overlooking us.” (Francis, Lines 10-15) One of the things that I find necessary to highlight in this excerpt is the mention of war and how, when drafted, it is a duty, which I see shows pride in fighting for the country in America. I also see it essential to note the independent personality that Francis gives the American Eagle in this poem, showing that the country’s national animal marches to the beat of its drum and does not consider others, which points to the American cultural idea of virtue in individuality and honoring independence.

I will put it together for the Chinese literary symbol of swans and geese since the Chinese word 鵞 is often translated interchangeably for either. The goose and swan are symbols in Chinese literature that represent the family whenever they are present. A goose or swan is depicted alone in a Chinese literary work, a sign of something terrible that happened. The Chinese cultural concepts of the agricultural society are evident through the swan and goose since they are friendly herding animals. An example of this is in Ma Chih-yuan’s play Autumn in the Palace of Han, where it says, “Honking, the other geese have flown across the weed encumbered banks; one lonely bird still lingers by the Phoenix Hall of State.” (Birch 447) In this play, the lonely bird is the same as the emperor, and the goose angers him with its cries because it represents him and his loneliness since the other “geese” have already crossed the bank. This single goose indicates the separation from the emperor and the other people that were in his life who were close to him like family; in this case, one of the ones that “crossed” and left him lonely was likely the beautiful Han woman whom he married but then passed away by committing suicide.

The next American literary symbol that I will discuss is the Oak Tree. Similarly to the Bald Eagle, the Oak tree is a representation of power, strength, and independence by extension. Oak trees are iconic and resilient, speaking to strength in that way and having the power needed to do so. Independence comes in by being able to do so without any help. In Stanley Kunitz's poem *The Testing Tree*, he describes the view of an Oak tree in American Literature. He wrote, "There I stood in the shadow, at fifty measured paces of the inexhaustible oak, tyrant and target, Jehovah of acorns, watchtower of the thunders, that locked King Philip's War in its annulated core under the cut of my name." (Kunitz 3, line 13-21) In this description, Kunitz emphasizes the inexhaustible characteristics of oak trees in American culture and says they have an annulated core that alludes to the tree's long life, which also requires power and strength to continue living so long. The power and strength are there, all while still being independent, since there are no mentions of help, just helping with the watchtower of the thunders part, among many others similar to America.

Following one of the two significant trees in Chinese literature, the Pine tree is similar to the American Oak tree when you look at the descriptive aspects of each that are similar to one another, but there are significant differences in the intended goals of the usage of the Oak and Pine tree symbols in literary works in American literature and Chinese literature respectively. In the *Biography of Po Yi and Shu Ch'i*, Confucius says, "When the year becomes cold, then we know how the pine and the cypress are the last to lose their leaves." And adds, "When the whole world is in foul and muddy confusion, then is the man of true purity seen." (Birch 105) The fundamental idea that makes it different from the American oak tree is that the evergreen concept is different. In Chinese literature, the Pine tree symbol emphasizes the benefits of consistency

and being unchanging, resulting in a long life, more than just power and strength alone, carrying an Oak tree throughout its life and constantly being a source of giving.

The second most significant and arguably most prevalent tree in Chinese literature is the Mulberry tree. In Chinese literary works, if there is ever a mention of a Mulberry tree, there is a connection to a family. Like the goose and swan referenced, a family is there when there is a representation of a Mulberry tree in any piece of Chinese literature. An example of this is in Tao Ch'ien's Peach Blossom Spring, which describes the fisherman in this short story from the period of division section who discovered where the grove ended at a spring, and then there came a hill. The short description says that "In Imposing buildings stood among rich fields and pleasant ponds all set with mulberry and willow." (Birch 167) In this example, even though it is not explicitly there, there is an apparent reference to families because of the reference to the Mulberry tree. The buildings could be the houses these families live in, and maybe even the fields and ponds could be where the members of the family work. The small detail holds much meaning whenever it is present in a Chinese literary work without stating family; the cultural reference to the family is still due to the literary symbol.

The last American symbol I will address is what Roses represent in American culture. Roses can have several meanings, but I will focus on the aspect of love that Roses represents. The different colors of Roses in American literature can give the symbol of the Rose a different meaning in the literary work. Red typically represents love and is the most popular, but pink, white, black, blue, and yellow represent very different things. The use of the symbol of a Rose in a piece of American literature is in 'A Rose for Emily' by William Faulkner. In this work, the Rose represents several things, from the idea of a funeral to life, loss, loneliness, and the absence of love. The Rose symbolizes the hope she carried since she still believed in love even though

nobody ever bought her any roses. (Faulkner) Roses relate more to individuality in American culture than independence, power, and strength. However, it is still a significant aspect of literary symbolism in American Literature and essential to note. Love is a very personal thing. Even though it involves someone else, it is still an experience you have within yourself and ties into the enormous self-interest in American culture and the pursuit of the American dream that I mentioned before in the section on the Bald Eagle.

For the last two Chinese Literary symbols, I will write about two culturally impactful flowers, the first being the Chrysanthemum. The Chrysanthemum is comparable to the Mulberry tree reference in Chinese Literature, meaning they both represent the family. Chrysanthemums are more elaborate than Mulberry trees in what they stand for because they include the togetherness concept. The Ritual Cycle of The Songs of Ch'u says, "The rites are accomplished to the beating of the drums; The flower-wand is passed on to succeeding dancers. Lovely maidens sing their song, slow and solemnly. Orchids in spring and chrysanthemums in autumn shall continue until the end of time." (Birch 66) The symbolism of the chrysanthemums not only pays homage to the family but also to what the life cycle of a chrysanthemum represents in Chinese Literature. When chrysanthemums bloom, they all bloom together, and when they wilt, they do so together. Garden mums grow in a looser habit and reliably return year after year, so some come back together as well.

The second flower I will touch on before I conclude is the Lotus flower. From what I remember learning in our class, In the life of Buddha, the prince left his life behind, became enlightened at age 35, and lived out the rest of his life on earth until he was 80 and reached nirvana. In this, his life became a religion-like way of living to avoid temptation, accumulate good karma, and end the suffering of going through the circle of life. I bring this all up to

emphasize that Buddha is culturally significant and has impacted Chinese literary works. The Lotus flower comes in because Buddha would sit on top of a Lotus flower, which used to grow in muddy, murky, swamp water upon the unclean earth; it was still pure. The Lotuses Newly Planted at the Municipal Headquarters show the general opinion of Lotus flowers. It talks about the muddy ditch filled with dirty water that the Lotus flowers come from and how green slime came up from below to foul them, but they were flowers that smelled fresh and sweet with clear and bright colors. (Birch 270)

In this research paper, I addressed the American symbols of eagles, oak trees, and roses and the Chinese symbols of geese, swans, pine trees, mulberry trees, chrysanthemums, and Lotus. I clearly distinguished between the two and acknowledged how the separate cultures prioritize what is imperative to their respective societies through literary representations. The primary focus of the literary devices used to convey cultural proprieties throughout Chinese literature is preferable to American literature because of the concepts of family, togetherness, and consistency over those of power, strength, and independence. After analyzing several examples of Chinese cultural priorities, I have concluded that they value positive, not aggressive, and personally preferable things. Still, some positive American priorities exist, such as parts of the symbolism of the Oak tree and Roses.

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