



Twilight Cosmologies: A Comparative Literary and Cultural Analysis of Japanese and Chinese Shadow-Journey Poems

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Abstract

This study provides a comparative analysis of two modern poems, Kage no Michiyuki and Ying Dao Xing, each of which uses classical Japanese and Chinese poetic idioms to imagine the journey through shadow toward indeterminate light. Composed in different languages and cultural contexts, the poems overlap in their symbolic vocabulary provided by twilight, divine withdrawal, and the lone moral agent. Drawing on symbolic and aesthetic analysis, this paper aims to examine in what way each poem builds up its world of shadow, how spiritual presence appears or is obscured, and how its protagonist reacts to ambiguity. The Japanese poem speaks for emotional refinement and nuances of atmosphere, together with the silent approximation of fate, while the Chinese poem offers a more cosmic vision, one that is rooted in the clarity of morality and cosmic resonance. By setting these works beside one another, the study discloses a shared East Asian grammar of twilight that underpins divergent emotional and philosophical orientations. Convergence and divergence are displayed equally well in the comparison, highlighting both how common symbols can yield different modalities of meaning without erasing cultural specificity.

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1. Introduction

Shadow journey stories are an important part of the literary imagination in East Asia. Whether in the Japanese tradition or in Chinese tradition, the theme of the shadow journey is often associated with the image of the dusk of divine revelation itself. The poems “Kage no Michiyuki”^[1] and “Ying Dao Xing” are modern creations cast in the forms of classical Japanese waka poems or Chinese poems in the form of regulated verse. Despite the two poems being in unrelated languages, both trace the journey in the darkness towards the uncertain light.

Although comparisons between the Japanese and Chinese forms of poetry, in relation to form and cosmology, have existed, there has been little examination of contemporary works of poetry which engage the classical style to investigate the shared symbolical topographies. The examination of the two poems will take place through the means of the symbolic-comparative method, located within the wider concern of cross-cultural poetics.

However, it should be noted that the modern poems written in these classical styles have been noticeably absent from studies involving comparative scholarship. Although many studies have been done involving Heian waka poetry or High Tang regulated verse, it is difficult to find analyses concerning modern poems written in these classical styles.

It is even harder to find comparative cross-cultural studies involving these modern poems written in classical styles, especially those concerning displaced cosmologies expressed in symbolic vocabularies inherited from these ancient cultures. The current research thus holds a unique place in combining not one, but two modern poems written in these classical styles involving displaced twilight cosmologies. In doing so, the study further dignifies the continued relevance of classical meters in modern poetic expression.

The study evaluates how each poem builds its world of the dark, the presence of the divine as it intersects and disappears, and how the moral agent resolves his/her way in the world of fate as it draws near in silence. Through literary critiques, this study demonstrates not merely the stylistic and linguistic points of divergence but, instead, reflects how each tradition views destiny, emotion, and distinct notions of the sacred^[5, 6, 14].

The study intends to explore how each of these two poems shares, in its own distinct fashion, this common East Asian language of symbols as twilight marks this point of transformation, of disclosure.

The analysis shows that despite differences in aesthetic and philosophical traditions, common symbolic grammar emerges in both poems, wherein the twilight zone is recognized as a significant space to define a transition between the human and the sacred realms. While working with comparison, both similarities and differences are emphasized, and each poem can thus serve to explain the other without undermining the distinctiveness offered by each cultural context^[21]. The comparison thus works with symbolic ordering, as it does not primarily focus on the impact of history, and thus, a comparison can be accomplished to identify a shared motif without undermining the distinctiveness presented by a particular culture.

2. Structural and Formal Considerations

2.1. Japanese Poem: Layered Narrative and Embedded Waka

Kage no Michiyuki assumes a complex structure by blending narrative prose with lyric interludes. The prose-like opening suggests classical Japanese diction and creates a mood of dusk, declining deity, and nervous susceptibility. The poetic frame narrative taken incorporates four imbedded waka sequences, each serving as a point of direct reflection and emotional focus.

Similar pattern is followed by the uta monogatari tradition, as in the case of the Ise Monogatari, in which narrative episodes were intermingled with short poems that articulate the emotional essence^[3, 5, 7]. Such a change between prose and waka carries out, harmonically, the moments between external description and inner reflection. The final passage releases itself again into the mode of narrative; finality is reached, but the quiet uncertainty of the poem remains. The waka and prose alternation reflects Heian narrative conventions, while the regulated verse of Ying Dao Xing belongs to the moral and cosmological poetics of the High Tang.

2.2. Chinese Poem: Continuous Regulated Verse

The following poem, 《影道行》 (Journey of Shadows), in figure 1, illustrates the above structural and thematic elements. Written in regulated verse, even this poem forms an entity regarding the subject of twilight, ethics, and universal harmony.

影道行

| | |
|---------|---------|
| 暮色沉山气欲昏 | 影断似闻星外步 |
| 古祠残照落埃尘 | 风停如觉道前根 |
| 幽眸破黯生红焰 | 世情深似千峰坠 |
| 旧咒随风动石轮 | 幽意浓于一倍昏 |

| | |
|---------|---------|
| 怨脉久侵连永昏 | 怨者迷途沉暗海 |
| 微光犹在向天分 | 善人守志托神魂 |
| 山魂寂寂听风语 | 古声隐隐随云散 |
| 野魄冥冥逐月轮 | 旧事依依向夜昏 |

| | |
|---------|---------|
| 善念不移尘世昏 | 影与光交成异象 |
| 柔心长在影中存 | 悲和喜合化新文 |
| 天途淡淡分阴翳 | 愿将此调传千古 |
| 命响迟迟近劫轮 | 长照人心到永春 |

Fig 1: 《影道行》 (Journey of Shadows), a modern poem composed in the style of Tang regulated verse.

Ying Dao Xing is structured as a consecutive couplet sequence based on Tang regulated verse. This type of poetry is famous for its tonal rhythms, parallelism, and balanced phrases and is centered on equilibration and condensation of imagery^[2, 6, 8]. The poem is structured with a flow that continuously preserves a rhythm that is both a narration and a lyric.

The introduction of regulated verse also establishes the worldview of the poem. The structure of the parallel couplets establishes order in the cosmos even when the poem portrays the threatened order of the world and the spiritual deviation. Yet the Chinese classical thinkers established that there is an inclination between moral order and the cosmos in unison^[16, 18]. Unlike the progressive structure of the poem on the emotional experiences in Kage no Michiyuki^[1], the poem Ying Dao Xing portrays order.

Contrastive reading reveals the structural disparity in both texts in terms of progressive patterns from episodic to continuous narrative forms and from prose to waka to poetical patterns. Additionally, there are disparities in narrative emotion in terms of crystallization and morally symmetrical patterns. The contrasts are presented in table below.

Table 1: Formal contrasts between Kage no Michiyuki and Ying Dao Xing, highlighting differences in structure, emotional mode, and narrative rhythm.

| Feature | Kage no Michiyuki | Ying Daoxing |
|------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Structure | Episodic, alternating prose and waka | Continuous regulated verse |
| Emotional Mode | Introspective crystallization | Moral and cosmic symmetry |
| Narrative Rhythm | Shifting, atmospheric | Steady, unified |

3. Thematic Parallels

3.1. Twilight a Threshold

In both poems, the state is dusk, which has a symbolic meaning as a transition from clarity to obscurity. In East Asian cultures, dusk embodies a “transitioning state where the forces dividing the known and unknown are reduced, and the unseen can be discerned factually [2, 3, 14].” The first poem illustrates dusk as a reflective and pessimistic state, typical of *mono no aware* [3, 10]. The second poem illustrates dusk as a dramatic state, anticipating the beginning of a disorderly universe [2, 6, 17]. The two scenarios reflect the two quite distinct cultures' viewpoints toward a state characterized by

uncertainty and transformation. The state, dusk, is a place of transformation as defined by Turner, a place “where boundaries are relaxed and transformation is possible [8]. The state has a connection to the long history behind the association between dusk and enhanced awareness or consciousness observed within East Asian cultures.

These thematic themes can be observed in a clear manner if they are contrasted one after another. The following table 2 captures the overall thematic differences in both poems that relate to twilight, withdrawal of God, and the role of the moral agent in the shadowy realm.

Table 2: Comparative thematic contrasts between Kage no Michiyuki and Ying Dao Xing, highlighting differences in twilight symbolism, divine presence, and the construction of the moral agent.

| Feature | Kage no Michiyuki | Ying Daoxing |
|------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Structure | Episodic, alternating prose and waka | Continuous regulated verse |
| Emotional Mode | Introspective crystallization | Moral and cosmic symmetry |
| Narrative Rhythm | Shifting, atmospheric | Steady, unified |

3.2. Divine Withdrawal and Lingering Echoes

Both poems portray a world in which the disappearance of divine or spiritual presences has taken place. This disappearance of the divine in Kage no Michiyuki is a gentle process of atmospheric detail, as in classical Japanese literature the withdrawal of the kami is so gentle as to be almost imperceptible [3, 5, 12]. The withdrawal of the divine in Ying Dao Xing is one of stark picture where a light extinguished and a shrine abandoned, accords with Chinese cosmologies of dynastic decline [2, 6, 17]. Both poems, however, imply a remnant of the divine.

3.3. The Moral Agent

Both poems involve a protagonist who embodies purity of intention in the face of darkness. The protagonist in the Japanese poem is defined through emotional sensitivity as well as sincerity. This reflects the emphasis on refined emotion in Japanese literature [3, 7, 10]. The protagonist in the Chinese poem is defined through his determination of intention. This reflects the emphasis on the alignment of ethics with the wisdom of the universe in classical Chinese culture [2, 6, 18]. The protagonists in the Japanese as well as Chinese poems embody affective sincerity in the form of “makoto” as well as “cheng” respectively.

4. Imagery and Symbolism

4.1. Shadow and Light

Both poems use the contrast between the light and the darkness to convey the metaphysical conflict. While the light is very distant in “Kage no Michiyuki”, the darkness is separated and in movement. Light is light in name only. “Fate draws near almost imperceptibly, ” and the light is so weak in “Kage no Michiyuki”.

Shadow fractures and light burst upwards to heaven, conveying monumentality and universality in Ying Dao Xing

[2, 6, 18]. Destiny is linked to broad cyclical patterns and not to individual insights. The imagery projects oppositions between order and disorder.

4.2. Sound and Silence

Sound is an integral symbolic part of both poems. In the Japanese poem, there are whispers of faint voices carried by the wind that are personal and spiritually resonant [3, 5, 11]. Silence becomes a space for listening. Emphasis on sound in Japanese aesthetics is often subjective and relates to interiority in emotions, whereas it relates to objective resonance described as “ganying” in Chinese aesthetics and poetics [6, 20].

In the Chinese poem, sound operates on a vast scale: wind carries ancient spells, mountains listen, spirits move across the landscape. This expansive soundscape reflects a cosmological orientation [2, 6, 19]. Imagery is such that Silence as a potential, where universe before transformation.

5. Emotional Cadence and Aesthetic Philosophy

5.1. Japanese Tradition: Mono no Aware and Ritual Tenderness

The emotional tone of Kage no Michiyuki is shaped by *mono no aware*, the sensitivity to transience and quiet sorrow [3, 5, 10]. Emotions take subtle shifts here rather than dramatic declarations. The embedded waka reinforces this sensibility, capturing moments of supplication, hesitation, and reflection. This reflects broader tendencies in classical Japanese literature, where emotional refinement is often valued more than moral certainty [7, 12, 13]. The protagonist’s gentle heart becomes the axis of meaning, conveyed through soft imagery and muted sound.

While the Japanese poem cultivates emotional subtlety, the Chinese poem turns toward a more expansive and morally charged emotional register.

5.2. Chinese Tradition: High Tang Grandeur and Moral Dualism

In these ways, Ying Dao Xing derives its emotional power and philosophical meaning from the traditions of high Tang poetry [2, 6, 16]. The world of that poetry is one of greatness, moral simplicity, and a notion that human nature harmonizes with larger patterns of the universe. The protagonist of this poem is not moved by subtle currents of emotion, but by a definite sense of purpose. His world is one of sharp contrasts of light and darkness, of a sense of disorder, when it threatens, that must be made right.

All this is reflected in the imagery of the poem. There is an ascendance of light, an atomization of shadows, and a nature that reacts to the moral state of the world [2, 6, 18]. These contrasts engender an emotion that is less sensitive and reserved than that in Kage no Michiyuki. The final behest of the hero to light the way for posterity carries an implication of confidence in the ability of virtue to shape the course of history [17, 18]. Such is the rhythm of this poem.

6. Narrative Arc Comparison

Both poems follow a narrative arc moving from uncertainty toward illumination, reflecting a common East Asian pattern in which the journey through darkness becomes a metaphor for spiritual or moral testing [2, 3, 14]. Yet the emotional tone and philosophical implications differ.

The descent into twilight is gentle and introspective in the Japanese poem, dramatic and cosmic in the Chinese. Ominous forces appear as subtle disturbances in Kage no Michiyuki but as signs of moral disorder in Ying Dao Xing [2, 6, 17]. The moral agent responds with emotional sensitivity in the former and ethical resolve in the latter. Fate approaches quietly in the Japanese poem and as a cosmic cycle in the Chinese.

The Japanese resolution is contemplative, suggesting acceptance; the Chinese resolution is assertive, pointing toward renewal [3, 6, 18].

Contrasting resolutions here reveal how each tradition perceives the movement from shadow to illumination as a moral renewal or a contemplative acceptance.

7. Cross-Cultural Synthesis

Together, the two poems feel like a quiet conversation between Japanese and Chinese literary traditions. Each turns into the shadowed journey as a place where uncertainty, destiny, and the elusive sacred can be felt and reflected upon. Their shared reliance on twilight and divine recession reflects a cultural inheritance in which transitional light marks thresholds between visible and concealed structures of meaning [14, 21]. Rather than seeking equivalence, this comparative approach shows how shared symbols can generate distinct emotional and cosmological structures within each tradition.

The Japanese poem approaches this threshold with emotional refinement and ritual attentiveness, emphasizing nuance, restraint, and transient beauty [3, 10, 12]. The Chinese poem situates the same landscape within a broader cosmological vision, linking personal virtue to cosmic harmony [2, 6, 17, 18].

These divergences reveal complementary modes of engaging with shared symbols. Both treat darkness as generative, light as fragile, and the human heart as the axis between shadow and divinity. Whether expressed through tenderness or resolve, the individual's response to uncertainty shapes the

passage through the shadowed world.

8. Conclusion

Kage no Michiyuki and Ying Dao Xing are not translations of each other but are parallel meditations that are influenced by different traditions. Both texts engage in symbolic journeys in the realm of shadow in an attempt to comprehend uncertainty, destiny, and holiness. The overlap in both texts in terms of twilight imagery and the solitary moral actor reflects an analogous symbolic language of East Asia [2, 3, 14]. The Japanese poem expresses this journey through emotional refinement and sensitivity to impermanence [3, 5, 10]. The Chinese poem frames it through cosmic struggle and moral clarity, aligning personal virtue with universal rhythms [2, 6, 17, 18].

In spite of the differences, both texts convey that light is fragile and valuable, and that the human heart is the central pivot between darkness and divinity. Such parallel trajectories convey a unitary yet culturally diverse vision of the search for meaning that characterizes humanity.

In this way, the journey loops back around to twilight, where once again the frontier of human and sacred is suspended, challenging the reader to linger within ambiguity. In this way, scholarship again loops back around to its origin, where its concern is with how shared symbols produce divergent, yet congruent, visions of the journey of the shadow.

As future expansion perspective on other East Asian poetic traditions, including Korean *sijo* and Vietnamese *Đường luật*, engage with comparable twilight cosmologies and symbolic journeys.

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