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The Three Dimensions of Imagination: A Review of Xie Youshun's *Imagination Is More Important Than We Think*

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Abstract: Imagination designates the act of rendering present what is otherwise absent. Literary writing represents an accomplishment that integrates imagination, critical thinking, and innovative spirit, wherein imagination fulfills an indispensable role. This paper delineates three interrelated dimensions of imagination: sensation as the foundation of imagination; awakening as the proper function of imagination; and Pondering as the abode of imagination. It contends that imagination functions as the keystone in the process of literary composition. Imagination further enables literature to inherit the lineage of traditional spirit, traverse the inner pathway of the soul, and respond to existential questions concerning life and the world. In the end, imagination allows literature to remain grounded in reality while reaching toward transcendence.

Keywords: imagination; Xie Youshun; imaginative capacity

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标题: 想象力的三重面相——评谢有顺的《想象力比我们想象的更重要》

摘要: 想象是使本身不出场的东西出场，作文是以集想象力、思辨力和创新精神于一身

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的成果，想象在其中发挥着极其重要的作用。本文梳理了想象力的三个面相：感觉—想象力之本；觉悟—想象力之职；神思—想象力之家。认为想象力在创作文学的作文过程中有着拱心石的作用，同时，想象力使文学上承传统精神之脉，中通灵魂之途，下应身世之问。最终使文学脚踏实地并仰望星空。

关键词：想象；谢有顺；想象力

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Xie Youshun's work *Imagination Is More Important Than We Think* was published in 2025 by Shaanxi People's Education Press as part of the Short Essays by Distinguished Writers series edited by Wang Jiuxin. The contemporary era is pervaded by a culture of speed, epitomized by the widespread prevalence of short-video media. To remain engaged with the times rather than being marginalized, the literary field has witnessed a subtle shift: a turn from voluminous monographs to concise essays by prominent authors, a trend to which the series responds. The series is designed to enable literary readers to utilize fragmented time to read short essays by distinguished writers, thereby broadening intellectual horizons, nurturing spiritual wellbeing, overcoming intellectual and emotional impoverishment, and engaging in intellectual dialogue and affective exchange with great writers. Literary works serve as the medium for such exchange, yet imagination occupies a pivotal position in the creative and compositional process. By unpacking the three dimensions of imagination, this paper demonstrates that imagination constitutes the fusion of subject-objectification and object-subjectification, as well as the reconciliation between illuminating the Dao (道) through humanity and comforting humanity through the Dao.

1. Sensation: The Foundational Ground of Imagination

Faulkner once observed that experience, observation, and imagination constitute the three pillars of writing. Within the creative process, Faulkner privileged experiential sensation, for sensation represents humanity's most natural and originary capacity. "The depth attained by sensation is inaccessible to purely cognitive deduction or logical reasoning" (Xie Youshun, 2025, p.27). Writers achieve depth of sensation through literary memory accumulated via extensive reading. Such memory functions as an artistic endowment: the greater its accumulation, the richer the reservoir of sensation, the broader its scope, and the more vivid its content. Works animated by such sensation exhibit fuller emotional resonance, more intricate plotting, and more vividly realized characters. By contrast, impoverished literary memory and depleted sensation "confine writing merely to the immediate present, the visible, and the self. Confinement to the present precludes spiritual connections to the past and future; confinement to the visible leads to entrapment in the wilderness of

phenomena and experience; confinement to the selfhinders comprehension of a broader life within the coordinates of the other and the world” (Xie Youshun, 2025, p.22). As “the scope of sensation expands, so do the boundaries of writing and the horizon of imagination. What was once unthinkable or unexperienced becomes available through the restructuring of the sensory world” (Xie Youshun, 2025, p.23). Thus, grounded in accumulated literary memory, sensation opens up greater possibilities, complexity, and imaginative space for literary creation.

Beyond literary sensation forged through extensive reading, there exists physical sensation closely bound to “eyes, ears, nose, tongue—the sensory realm” (Xie Youshun, 2025, p.41). Both forms are subsumed under the category of sensation, marked by individuality, subjectivity, and concreteness. These characteristics furnish abundant resources and potentials for literary creation and critical interpretation.

As the preceding analysis indicates, sensation underpins writing, and “writing is an experiment of imagination” (Xie Youshun, 2025, p.29). Imagination thus flourishes on the fertile ground of sensation, growing richer as the scope of sensation expands. Sensation presupposes a sensory world, rooted in human and mundane life—the lifeworld—which together form the material exterior of literature. This material exterior contains the experiences, details, and materials within literary works. Readers apprehend the imaginative space inscribed by the author through these details, thereby accessing the author’s spirit and the work’s inner soul. By contrast, contemporary literature shaped by fast culture often prioritizes tense, sensational plots and rapid pacing with relentless suspense, delivering a roller-coaster reading experience yet lacking rhythmic subtlety and descending into superficial sensationalism. Hence, the experiences, details, and material elements in superior literary works are not mere physical presences; they serve as markers of affective arousal, outlets for emotional expression, and bridges of affective communication between author and reader. While seemingly depicting objects, they essentially embed emotion. In this sense, the material world in a work constructs its physical exterior while sustaining its “spirit” and “soul,” lending authenticity and resonance, stimulating sensation, and enriching imagination.

The material exterior of literature cannot be divorced from the present. The “present” here is not a moment severed from past and future, but one dynamically interconnected with them, thereby possessing “presentness.” The present thus integrates past, present, and future, acquiring both temporality and spatiality—the spatialization of time. The spatialization of time in literature allows for the juxtaposition and superimposition of time and space, ensuring that literature’s engagement with, insight into, and articulation of the present avoid superficiality, vacuity, and isolation. Instead, it grasps the complex and polysemous reality of the present. Literature may appear to turn away from the present, yet in truth it approaches and illuminates the present more profoundly.

As a product of imaginative experimentation, literature enriches its affective and spiritual dimensions through the expansion of imagination. The expansion of imagination, in turn, relies on the expansion of

sensation, which originates from the material exterior of literature. Although matter and literature belong respectively to the material and spiritual realms, “things are not mere things; they embody human affection and ethical relations. To portray humanity through things, transcending the distinction between self and object, is a perennial literary theme” (Xie Youshun, 2025, p.40). The boundary between the world of things and the world of humanity blurs, granting literature tangibility and verisimilitude. The material world thus constitutes the origin of literary creation and vitality. Sensation mediates between matter and literature: it draws nourishment downward from the abundant world of things and enriches literary imagination upward. In this regard, diversified sensation is the source of manifold imagination, and imagination is the artistic experimentation of diversified sensation in literature.

2. Awakening: The Proper Function of Imagination

As the resource base of imagination, sensation supplies ample content and space for imaginative activity. The expansion of sensation not only broadens the horizons of imagination but also enriches its content and extends its scope. In other words, sensation provides the materials and resources for imagination, while imagination digests and appropriates these materials to expand its terrain and deepen its significance. Two core functions emerge: first, transformation—absorbing and converting sensory materials into imaginative resources; second, preservation—on the basis of transformation, the dissolution of the old imaginative framework generates new imagination, which embodies the preservation of transformation. Collectively, transformation and preservation are termed awakening or enlightenment. Awakening discharges two interrelated functions in literary creation and expression: constancy and change, and vulgarity and elegance.

2.1 Constancy and Change

Qian Mu remarked that innovation must be preceded by the preservation of tradition, meaning that enduring literary and cultural legacies must be upheld before transformative innovation is pursued. Since the early twentieth century, the dominant ethos of Chinese literature has been the pursuit of change, which has served as its overriding motif. Hu Shi, a pioneering anti-traditional figure, and Lu Xun, renowned for his critique of the “man-eating” old society, both championed the rejection, opposition, and even repudiation of tradition. By the 1980s, more radical, avant-garde writers emerged in Chinese literary circles. They assigned characters symbolic labels such as “1, 2, 3, 4” or “A, B, C, D” (Xie Youshun, n.d., p.66), completely stripping characters of the profound cultural meaning and heritage embedded in proper names. In this respect, such avant-garde or modernist Chinese literature slid toward historical nihilism, becoming a tree without roots or a stream without a source. Yet as Qian Mu suggests, change and constancy are mutually implicated and interdependent. Twentieth-century Chinese literature prioritized change; the future of Chinese literature lies not in mere adherence to tradition, but in the coexistence of constancy and change—constancy within change, change within constancy.

To uphold constancy is to draw intellectual resources from tradition in order to understand and inherit it. It is not uncritical dogmatism, but selective preservation: absorbing the essence while discarding the dross. Tradition constitutes a vast living organism; each literary tradition is a living entity, and every individual life aspires to merge into this greater organism, achieving individual expression and existential wholeness. Similarly, each literary form seeks survival, development, and fulfillment within tradition.

Insight into the dialectic of change and constancy forms a function of imagination, yet not its ultimate end. The telos is their synthesis—innovation. Change unfolds within the horizon of constancy to avoid vacuity and rootlessness; constancy operates within the context of change to avoid rigid imposition and uncritical affirmation. The interplay of constancy and change actualizes the ideal of “upholding integrity while pursuing innovation” in literary creation and practice.

2.2 Vulgarly and Elegance

The dialectic of vulgarity and elegance parallels that of constancy and change. Whereas constancy and change concern literary engagement with tradition and the utilization of inherited intellectual resources, vulgarity and elegance address the layers of emotion, value, and artistic ambition embodied in literary works. Higher emotional and value registers correspond to elegance; lower registers correspond to vulgarity.

Like constancy and change, vulgarity and elegance are not rigidly dichotomous or mutually exclusive. In reality, vulgarity enfolds elegance, and elegance implicates vulgarity, for both are grounded in the emotion, value, and artistic ambition of literary works. Literary “vulgarity” here denotes not coarseness or obscenity, but accessibility and popular appeal. Such works “are readily received by diverse readers and can be integrated with film, television, animation, and games to form a cultural industrial chain” (Xie Youshun, 2025, p.96). Vulgarity contains the potential for elegance—a “minor elegance” or the germ of true elegance. To actualize this potential, three steps are required: “first, craft and complete a compelling narrative; second, portray universal emotions and shared values; third, innovate discursive forms, especially through linguistic refinement” (Xie Youshun, 2025, p.99). Through these measures, “even popular literature can effectively transcend its own limits”—the classical idea that “extreme vulgarity is elegance, and extreme elegance is vulgarity” (Xie Youshun, 2025, p.100).

Commonly, “elegance” is associated with lofty, esoteric themes that isolate emotion, value, and taste from ordinary readers, resulting in obscurity and self-enclosure. This represents a narrow and dogmatic understanding. Authentic elegance does not alienate readers, but educates and transforms them, enabling them to perceive universal emotions, shared values, and profound artistic taste beyond superficial appearances. In so doing, works abandon elitist, self-enclosed elegance and dismantle the invisible barrier between elegance and the reading public. Ultimately, literature opens onto a path of “shared appreciation by refined and popular tastes alike.”

The tension and reconciliation of constancy and change, vulgarity and elegance, all depend on the exercise of imaginative function, ultimately realized through the power of awakening.

3. Pondering: The Abode of Imagination

Pondering constitutes the abode of imagination. This abode is not a physical shelter for the body, but a spiritual home that protects the mind from alienation and harm (Wang Yongbing, Yao Yuanyuan, 2025, p.40). As contemporary men of letters, writers should integrate poetry, calligraphy, and painting. Literary works—as experimental products of imagination—concentrate the writer’s temperament, spirit, and creative energy; in short, they embody the writer’s ‘connotation’(yi,意)—the spiritual home. This ‘connotation’ likewise animates the writer’s poetry, calligraphy, and painting. The appreciation of these artistic forms reveals the writer’s temperament and spirit; through ‘connotation’ on spirit and temperament, one reaches the abode of imagination—the writer’s ‘connotation’. Within the realm of ‘connotation’, writer and reader attain not only affective and value resonance but also insight into the resilience of life and “the truth of the world” (Xie Youshun, 2025, p.118).

As contemporary literati, writers’ calligraphy “often bears literary grace, unpolished charm, or untrammelled vigor, through which temperament flows forth” (Xie Youshun, 2025, p.103). Compared with professional calligraphers, they may be less skilled in technical execution, yet the ‘connotation’ concealed within their literary, unpolished, and untrammelled style far surpasses that of professional calligraphers. Thus, literati calligraphy possesses less technical virtuosity but greater artistic conception. Such conception is both the object and the outcome of Pondering; Pondering is artistic conception—the ultimate tranquil destination of imagination. Similarly, literati painting, like literati calligraphy, serves as an artistic medium to manifest the literatus’s temperament and conception. This temperament and conception are refracted not only in calligraphy and painting but also in literary works as experiments of imagination.

Concluding Remarks

Imagination renders present what is absent, encompassing “recollection and association, creative imagination, and fantasy” (Zhang Shiyong, 2004, p.1). As the keystone of literary creation (Yan Fuping, 2003, p.115), imagination takes sensation as its ground, expanding its possibilities as sensation deepens, intensifying its dimensions by internalizing sensory materials through awakening, and finally returning to its abode through pondering—constructing a “dwelling place” for humanity. This dwelling place does not retreat from the integrated material exterior of past, present, and future. It is not a secluded chamber, but an open wilderness, “a meditation that transcends finitude and contemplates the infinite void” (Zhang Shiyong, 2005, p.21). Thus, the abode of imagination is both the realm of pondering and the place of human dwelling.

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