

# Comparative Analysis of Xu Zhimo's "In Search of a Star" and Whitman's "Leaves of Grass"

Yuxin Liu

Capital Normal University, Beijing, 100048, China  
Corresponding author: 1220109203@cnu.edu.cn

## Abstract:

This paper researches from a comparative literary perspective based on the context of literary revolutions in the 19th century in the United States and the 20th century in China. Considering the social and historical background, a comparative analysis was conducted between Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" and Xu Zhimo's "In Search of a Star." This article first summarizes the social and cultural backgrounds of the two countries during that period in concise language, collects data, and argues for the possibility of Xu Zhimo being influenced by Whitman's works. Secondly, this study will compare the similarities between the two works in image selection and writing techniques. Finally, this article also points out the differences between the two works. The similarities and differences between the two works are that Xu Zhimo was influenced by Whitman and the cultural background and social thinking differences between China and the United States.

**Keywords:** Walt Whitman; Xu Zhimo; The Leaves of Grass; In Search of a Star.

## 1. Introduction

The 20th century was a period of rapid development in Chinese new poetry. Xu Zhimo was a contemporary writer who later gained much attention. His poetry has been praised as a „modern reconstruction of classical ideals“ [1]. As a student studying abroad in the United States, Xu Zhimo's poetry creation was deeply influenced by English poetry while also considering the social situation in China at that time. He has translated English poetry. His creations are also very innovative, becoming one of the founders of Chinese new poetry. His poem „In Search of a Star“ is worth studying due to its strong personal style.

Walter Whitman was an American writer who received much attention in China at that time. Many poetry societies emerged then were dedicated to translating and studying Whitman's works. Xu Zhimo has previously translated Whitman's works. Moreover, his poem „To Find a Star“ also expresses similarities from multiple perspectives with Whitman's famous poetry collection „Leaves of Grass.“ Xu Zhimo was clearly influenced by Whitman and created a series of extraordinary works. The manifestation of romanticism and humanitarianism in his poetry injects strong vitality and high enthusiasm into his poetry.

This paper will analyze the poetry works of Xu Zhimo and Whitman through comparative research methods. Firstly, this paper will provide an overview of the development of

new poetry in China in the 20th century, pointing out that the development of new poetry was complementary to the political situation in Chinese society at that time and the influence of foreign ideological waves on Chinese new poetry. Secondly, this paper will compare Xu Zhimo's poetry with Whitman's poetry from multiple perspectives, analyzing the commonalities of the imagery groups used in their writing and explaining it from the perspective of the political and social backgrounds of both countries. In addition, the similarity of writing techniques is also within the scope of this paper's discussion. Both poets coincidentally used writing techniques such as repetition and exclamation. This includes Xu Zhimo's inheritance of Whitman's writing style and poetic characteristics. Thirdly, the differences in the works of the two poets are also mentioned. Xu Zhimo's use of words with strong Chinese contextual characteristics differs from Whitman's choice of words in English. Due to the detailed differences in social situations between the two countries, the deep emotions in the works of the two poets are also different. The protagonist in Xu Zhimo's poetry is the image of a martyr. He failed and died on the path of pursuing noble ideals. The images of the protagonists in Whitman's poetry are more diverse and closer to ordinary people. The emotional tone of poetry is not entirely heavy. Finally, this paper will provide a concise summary of the above content, elucidating the similarities and differences between the works of

Xu Zhimo and Whitman, studying the two from the perspective of comparative literature.

## 2. The Development of the Romanticism in China: The Birth of the Crescent School

Firstly, this paper will briefly summarize the main developments of Chinese new poetry in the 20th century. The so-called „new poetry“ refers to a genre that emerged during the May Fourth Movement and was written in vernacular, different from traditional Chinese classical poetry. New poetry is an important attempt in the history of Chinese literature. The new poem uses vernacular Chinese to replace ancient Chinese for writing while also breaking free from the strict format of various traditional Chinese poems. These new poems often carry strong subjective emotions from the creators and are combined with the social situation in China at that time. In other words, New Poetry also played an important role in leading the revolutionary development of Chinese society during that period.

In this social context, a new poetry club called Crescent School was established in 1923. The Crescent School is mainly composed of a group of intellectuals from 20th-century China with overseas study experience as members. They are ambitious and eager to drive revolution through writing. They believed in bourgeois democratic individualism and pursued poetry theory and creation, naturally forming a school of literature [2]. Reading works by foreign writers, translating foreign poetry, and creating new Chinese poetry are all included in the daily activities of Crescent School. They allowed Chinese people to learn more about new theories from abroad and combined foreign poetry styles to create many excellent Chinese new poetry works. It can be said that Crescent School was one of the most important writing groups during the Chinese New Poetry Reform period.

The poetry writing of Crescent School members usually has a strong lyrical color and is influenced by foreign romanticism. These poems abandoned classical Chinese poetry's serious format and pursued a writing style of freedom, romance, and nature. The members of Crescent School are often willing to try various fresh and bold words. However, they also oppose excessive emotional abuse and pursue restrained beauty. The ideas they advocated laid the theoretical foundation for the New Rhythm School and directed the subsequent development of new poetry in China.

Xu Zhimo is well-known as one of the main members of the Crescent School. One of the main activities of Crescent School is to translate foreign poetry. Whitman is a

poet whose works have been translated by many members of the Crescent School. This paper will mainly analyze Xu Zhimo's poetry work „In Search of a Star“ and Whitman's poetry collection „Leaves of Grass.“

The academic community generally believes that new Chinese literature was born during the May Fourth period, a new type of literary work written in modern Chinese. This batch of new literary works established the important position of modern Chinese [3]. There is a significant difference between modern Chinese and ancient Chinese. To promote the use of modern Chinese in literary works, writers during the May Fourth period intentionally introduced Europeanized languages to transform Chinese. They hope to expand the expressive ability in Chinese through this method.

In addition to the changes from ancient Chinese to modern Chinese, the flourishing development of literature during the May Fourth period was also closely related to the ideological environment at that time. Before this, China was in a state of isolationism. Writers are limited by traditional and outdated ideas in China, making it difficult to create new literary works. After the May Fourth Revolution, the government was busy suppressing revolutionary forces in various regions and had no time to focus on literary creation, leading to a period of loose control over ideology. So people were able to focus their attention on new ideas from abroad. Chinese people read a large number of foreign literary works through various channels. Translated works and Europeanized literary works began to appear in China. Due to this trend's influence, this period's literary style often possessed modern ideas and emotional experiences. It has had a huge impact on the development of literature. Modern Chinese literature has begun to exhibit diverse characteristics.

Walt Whitman, an important poet during the American Romantic period, influenced the emergence of new literature in China during the May Fourth Movement. Whitman pioneered in breaking through traditional forms of poetry and writing free-form poetry. The rebellion against traditional poetry will inevitably lead new poets to favor foreign forms of poetry because, after being separated from traditional poetry, they must rely on a new form of poetry to support their poetic ideas and express the spirit of the times [4]. Whitman's lively and positive poetic style was exactly what Chinese society needed then. Whitman's works praise the nation's excellent character and align with the social environment in which the Chinese people yearn for democratic liberation. Therefore, it is inevitable that there will be a connection between Chinese literature and Whitman at that time. Guo Moruo, the main leader of the May Fourth Movement in the field of literature, once commented on Whitman as follows. When he first read

Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, his soul felt an immensely powerful shock. The volcano that controlled his thoughts began to erupt, and all emotions in his heart found an outlet [5]. As one of the earliest foreign poets studied by Chinese writers, many of Whitman's poems have been translated into Chinese. Many Crescent School poets have also begun pursuing Whitman's creative spirit.

### 3. Xu Zhimo's Literary Creation

Xu Zhimo is one of the most well-known members of the Crescent School and an important pioneer during the literary revolution period. He left his hometown to study abroad in 1918. Influenced by Western education and romantic and aestheticist poets in Europe and America, he began to write new poetry. At the same time, he also began translating literary works, including poems by Byron and Shelley.

Xu Zhimo returned to China in 1922. After returning to China, he carried out a series of literary works, including translating many foreign poems and creating new Chinese poems. On March 1st, 1924, Xu Zhimo published a fragment from his translated Whitman poem „Song of Myself“ in the magazine „Fiction Monthly.“ Chinese people have widely read this poem through his translation. The simple and lively translation style quickly brought this poem into the public eye and sparked their love for it. On February 26th of the same year, Xu Zhimo published a poem called „A Golden Light Trace.“ This poem is written entirely in his hometown's vernacular dialect, and the poem's theme is also based on the daily lives of ordinary people. This is very rare in Xu Zhimo's early creations. The significant transformation of Xu Zhimo's creative style can be attributed to the influence of a group of foreign poets, including Whitman. In October 1925, Xu Zhimo was appointed a professor at Peking University. He went to Europe to continue his studies during his teaching period and traveled to many countries, including Italy, France, and Germany. His experiences in Europe imbued his poetry with many Europeanized grammar and vocabulary, making it conform to the style of romanticism. As a Chinese writer influenced by many Western cultures, there is no doubt that Xu Zhimo's creations possess both Eastern and Western poetry characteristics. After returning to China, he developed a critical-thinking attitude towards traditional Chinese culture. However, his growth in the Chinese context has given him a profound foundation in traditional Chinese classical literature, enabling him to possess a collective unconsciousness [6]. Xu Zhimo's poetry presents an elegant and rustic tone, influenced by Western thought, especially modernism. His poetry embodies unique research value in inheriting Eastern culture

and transplanting Western culture.

### 4. Wilderness and Endless Night: The Similarities of Image Groups

Understanding the image groups is essential to writing and reading a poem. The image groups revolve around the author's creative intention, combining scattered, isolated, and unclear vocabulary into a whole [7] and externalizing them into language forms. When comparing and analyzing *Leaves of Grass* and „In Search of a Star,“ it can be found that the image groups used in them exhibit astonishing consistency from multiple perspectives. These consistent imagery groups not only make the styles of these two poems tend to be similar but also reflect the consistency of the thoughts of the two authors who wrote the text.

Firstly, it is noteworthy that Xu Zhimo's poem „In Search of a Star“ uses a first-person perspective in its writing. In previous Chinese poetry, most poets intentionally avoided the direct appearance of the word „I.“ However, Xu Zhimo not only used this word bluntly but also repeatedly. This writing technique highlights the protagonist's identity directly from the poem. The poet's emotions can be presented to the reader without any obstacles. For example, in the first sentence of „In Search of a Star,“ Xu Zhimo wrote: „I rode a blind horse with a crooked leg, whipping towards the darkness.“ The poet emphasizes the protagonist's identity at the beginning of the poem. „I“ can refer to a fictional protagonist in poetry or the poet himself. The poet's emotions are presented to the reader through first-person confession. In such a reading environment, readers engage in one-on-one conversations with the protagonists in the poem. At the same time, they also integrate with the protagonist in the poem's call, and their influence is more direct. One of the significance of poetry lies in its ability to express emotions straightforwardly, and this writing technique further exposes the emotions of „In Search of a Star.“

In Whitman's poetry, self-awareness is also a very important point of expression. For example, in the poem „Song of Myself,“ Whitman also uses a large number of sentences with „I“ as the protagonist. These sentences all describe the subjective behavior of „I“; for example, „I call myself, and sing myself“ occupy a large part of the poem. Whitman always makes the protagonists in his poetry do various things ordinary people think they cannot achieve. In Whitman's poetry, „I“ is a character with strong subjective initiative, full of vitality and courage to challenge, almost omnipotent. Such a protagonist with distinct personality traits is not commonly seen in poetry. The „I“ in poetry constantly takes various proactive actions, elevating his identity to a high level. Anything „I“ want can be

achieved to the fullest.

Whitman and Xu Zhimo exhibit consistency in the dimension of self-awareness. Xu Zhimo inherited Whitman on this point. During the development of Chinese literature in the 20th century, one of the most obvious characteristics of literary works that emerged was their close connection with the historical background. „In Search of a Star“ is written during the most perplexing period of Xu Zhimo's life. As an intellectual from the bourgeoisie, he wanted to call for a change in the feudal and backward situation in China through his abilities. However, the situation in China then did not allow him to do so. So Xu Zhimo wrote this poem amidst contradictions. He hopes to move people who struggle and lose direction in suffering through passionate language and emotions, including himself. He appealed from a first-person perspective and portrayed a tenacious and fearless warrior image. This fighter possesses the supreme ability to pursue the stars in the universe. To analyze the reasons for Whitman's creation, the writing time of this poem is very worth studying. As a result of scanning and often misunderstood document evidence from the period leading up to the publication of the first leaves, many scholars have registered the book's genes as an insoluble mystery [8]. Although the exact time when Whitman wrote „Leaves of Grass“ cannot be verified, most of his works were produced in the mid-19th century. The unrestrained and soaring spirit of romanticism in poetry ushered in a new era in the American poetry scene. Like many Romantics of the 19th century, Whitman was influenced by Eastern mysticism represented by Hinduism. In his view, „God“ is an omnipotent existence, and „God“ and „self“ are closely connected. So, the „I“ in Whitman's poetry embodied the entire universe and even „God.“ The image of a fighter who never gives up is depicted in Xu Zhimo's, which is very similar to the character image created in Whitman's poetry. They all have unlimited potential and firm determination to transform the world with their strength.

In addition to the similarities in the protagonists' images, the similarity in their poetry is also reflected in natural imagery. In Xu Zhimo's „In Search of a Star,“ he used an image of wilderness. The wilderness in the darkness is the environment in which poetry occurs and develops. The image of wilderness is frequently used in literary works to shape the atmosphere. Wilderness is often regarded as a mysterious and unexplored realm, often accompanied by danger. However, at the same time, the wilderness also represents unknown possibilities and is a place where miracles occur [9]. In Whitman's poetry collection, multiple poems also feature imagery of open fields. In his poem „Earth, My Likeness,“ he uses three adjectives in succession: „Impassive,“ „example,“ and „spherical“ to describe

this land. In another poem, „On the Beach at Night,“ as its name suggests, the poet describes the black beach shrouded in autumn nights. By comparing and analyzing the poems of the two poets, it is evident that they both created scenes of vast and dark soil. It is worth noting that they also shape the image of „light“ simultaneously. The bright sky or distance often appears in the later verses describing the wilderness. They are often far away and difficult to reach. These images related to light bear the responsibility of symbolizing a better future in poetry. Poets use them to express their confidence and determination towards the world while encouraging readers.

The two poems' imagery similarity can be attributed to similar historical backgrounds. At that time, both American and Chinese societies were in a state of confusion. People are at the intersection of the old and the new, lacking the determination and courage to break away from the old era and embrace the new one. Images of wilderness often replace the dark social environment, and the „light“ in poetry represents a bright future. So, both poets chose to use poetry to call on the people. They look forward to seeing people with vitality unite towards a new era. The similarity of the times created the similarity of literary works during that period. As pioneers, poets take the initiative to awaken people's thoughts and encourage them to keep moving forward.

### **5. Repetitive Lament: The Similarities of Writing Techniques**

From the perspective of writing skills, these two works also share similarities. Whitman's poetry collection and Xu Zhimo's use repeated sentences multiple times. In „In Search of a Star,“ each stanza's first and last lines are extremely similar or even identical. In „Pioneers! O Pioneers!“, a poem belonging to Whitman's poetry collection „Leaves of Grass,“ each stanza ends with the same line: „Pioneers! O Pioneers!“. „Beat! Beat! Drums!“ is also included in the poetry collection, with each stanza starting with „Beat! Beat! Drums! - blow! Bugs! Blow!“.

When a poet uses repetitive techniques, it usually represents his desire to enhance the emotional expression of the poem. The three poems mentioned all have appeal: the fighter in Xu Zhimo's poem wants to pursue an immensely shining star, while Whitman's poem expresses praise for Pioneers. By using repeated techniques, the two poets enhanced the beauty of rhyme and rhythm in reading and emphasized the expression of emotions. When facing changes in the times, poetry is a tool of thought that can drive social progress. Both poets were keenly aware of this and used poetry to express pure emotions. Such poetry gives the world infinite encouragement and hope. The

torch guides the direction of the times, burning endlessly.

## 6. Divergent Endings: Xu Zhimo and Whitman's Poetic Protagonists

Comparing the works of the two poets reveals differences in details. As mentioned earlier, Xu Zhimo and the protagonists depicted in Whitman's poetry share similarities, but they choose to give them opposite endings. In Xu Zhimo's „In Search of a Star,“ the protagonist's final ending can be a failure: he died on the path of pursuing stars. His body was buried in darkness. In Whitman's „Leaves of Grass,“ most protagonists have a good ending. Whitman would not choose to let them die or fail but to add infinite openness to poetry.

In contrast, Xu Zhimo's poetry portrays the protagonist as a sacrificial figure, calling for the progress of society in this way. On the other hand, Whitman is more optimistic than him, as the emotions of his poetry end in a constant spray of upward enthusiasm. This difference is likely due to differences in literary traditions between the East and the West. American literature has been influenced by anthropocentrism. Many American writers believe humanity is the center of everything [10]. This thinking has led poets, including Whitman, to choose the protagonist's success as the ending of their poetry. In contemporary Chinese literature, literary history narratology was standardized as a branch of revolutionary discourse, and the recognition of works by the public was the best praise for a writer [11]. Chinese writers use emotions in such a social environment to move readers and achieve revolutionary goals. Whitman's poetry greatly influenced Xu Zhimo, but he still maintained the habits of classical Chinese literature. This also established the uniqueness of his poetry.

## 7. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the poetry of Whitman and Xu Zhimo, it can be seen that their creations are greatly influenced by the social background of their respective countries. Meanwhile, Xu Zhimo, as one of the pioneers of the Chinese literary revolution, was also influenced

by Whitman's works. Whitman praised various positive spirits in the era through his poetry, making his poetry passionate and full of vitality. In addition to passion, Xu Zhimo's poetry also carries an emotional appeal, attempting to promote the progress of the Chinese revolution in this way. This paper applies the perspective of comparative literature and can be used to study comparative analysis of Chinese and American poetry. At the same time, this paper also combines history and literature, which can help subsequent researchers have a deeper understanding of their connections. Due to various factors, the analysis of the works of the two poets in this paper is somewhat vague. Subsequent researchers can start from this point and conduct more detailed comparative studies.

## References

- [1] Li Yi. *Modern Chinese New Poetry and Classical Poetry Tradition*. Chongqing: Southwest China Normal University Press, 1994.
- [2] Z. Yin. *The Birth of the Crescent School: One of the Studies on the Crescent School*, Sichuan University, 1983.
- [3] J. Yuan, *Reexamining the Origin of Europeanized Vernacular Writing: On the Influence of Western Missionaries on Chinese Literature*, Fudan University, 2007.
- [4] Q. Ai, *The Prose Beauty of Poetry*, Shanghai Literature and Art Press, 1985.
- [5] M. Guo, *Guo Moruo's Discussion on Creation*, Shanghai Literature and Art Press, 1983: 213.
- [6] G. Mao, *Xu Zhimo's Poetry from the Perspective of Chinese and Western Cultures*, Nanjing Normal University, 2011.
- [7] S. Yu, *The Dual Combination of Poetic Imagery*, Yunnan Normal University, 1987, (6): 42.
- [8] M. Miller, *Composing the First Leaves of Grass*, Book History, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.
- [9] J. Yang, *On the Imagery of "Wilderness" in American Literature*, *Foreign Literature Studies*, 2000: 59.
- [10] H. Lu, *A Study on Ecological Thought in Different Periods of American Literature*, Guilin University, 2021.
- [11] F. Nan, *Quartet: Literature, Revolution, Intellectuals, and the Masses*, Fujian Normal University, *Literary Criticism*, 2003, (02):40.