

Philosophical Dimensions in Ai Qing's 1978 Poems: A Study of "Umbrella, Hope, Mirror, and Fish Fossil"

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Received : 31 July 2025
Accepted : 23 September 2025
Published : 30 September 2025

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Abstract

Ai Qing (1910–1996) is one of China's most celebrated poets, renowned for his deceptively simple yet deeply philosophical verses that resonate with everyday life. His poetic career was interrupted for over two decades due to China's turbulent political and social upheavals, culminating in his return to literary prominence in 1978. This period marked a stylistic evolution, as scholars have noted, wherein his works increasingly employed symbolism—such as Umbrella, Hope, Mirror, and Fish Fossil—to convey existential reflections. The study concludes that the four Ai Qing poems selected as the corpus employ figurative language—primarily personification and symbolization of everyday objects—to convey profound philosophical messages. These works advocate for: Altruism (being beneficial to others), Resilience (remaining hopeful in adversity), Truth-seeking (expressing reality unflinchingly), and Self-discovery (continuously exploring one's potential). This aligns with Ai Qing's 1978 poetic resurgence, where his style evolved to blend simplicity with existential depth, using objects like Mirrors and Fish Fossils as metaphors.

Keywords

Ai Qing; 1978 Period Poem; Personification; Philosophy; Symbolism

INTRODUCTION

Ai Qing (艾青) is one of the great poets whose works are very famous in China. He was born in Zhejiang Province on March 27, 1910 and died on May 5, 1996. In 1928 Ai Qing had the opportunity to study art and literature in France. Ai Qing returned to Shanghai in May 1932 and joined the Chinese League of Left-Wing Writers. His active work with progressive movements led to Ai Qing being arrested by KMT secret agents and languished in prison because he was considered to have joined the revolutionary movement [1]. Since being imprisoned on July 12, 1932, Ai Qing has not

stopped creating and continues to voice criticism through his poems [2]. In 1934, Ai Qing was transferred to Suzhou and was released only in October 1935. In May 1956, the Chinese government under Mao Zedong (1893-1976) issued a policy called the “Hundred Flowers Movement” [3]. This movement was intended to give Chinese intellectuals the opportunity to offer suggestions and criticism toward the Chinese government at that time. [4] Ai Qing also participated by writing his thoughts which were published in the daily *Renmin Ribao* and monthly *Wenyi Yuebao* with the title “A Flower Grower’s Dream” (*Yanghuaren de meng*), “Cricket Song” (*Chan de ge*), “The Hunter Who Paints Birds” (*Hua niao de lieren*), and “The Words of the Idol” (*Ouxiang de hua*). A year later, the Chinese government issued a follow-up policy in the form of implementing the “Anti-Rightist Movement” for intellectuals who were considered not in line with the party. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people from various social classes were labeled as rightists [5]. In 1958 Ai Qing was called a right-wing writer, and was forced to flee to Heilongjiang. *Renmin Ribao* on November 17, 1961 announced that Ai Qing had been cleared of right-wing charges, but he was living in Xinjiang.

The Cultural Revolution that occurred in 1966 again made Ai Qing was considered a right-wing writer, or “big rightist”. As a result of these accusations, Ai Qing burned all of his literary works and collections [6]. After the Cultural Revolution ended, Ai Qing ventured back to Beijing in late July or early August 1978 to rehabilitate his reputation and continue writing [6], after a 21-year hiatus from writing. Ai Qing's return was marked by the publication of his first poem in *Wenhui Bao*, namely the “Red Flag” (*Hongqi*). This incident even became the focus of a news agency in Paris, named *Faxinshe*, which states that Ai Qing has been actively writing literary works again [6]. The year 1978 is known as the “New Period” (*Xin Shiqi*) in the development of literature in China, because the publication of literary works was again freed [7]. The works that emerged during this period are known as the “New Period Literature” (*Xin Shiqi Wenxue*). In this year, many writers, political figures, and intellectuals who had been silenced, reappeared in public after being released from prison or exile. The writing style of literary works during this period was known to be more straightforward in speaking, and contained criticism of the Cultural Revolution that ended in 1976 [5].

Upon returning to the literary world in 1978, Ai Qing's poems underwent several changes and adjustments, some of which showed deeper philosophical tendencies [8]. Hung also stated that in 1978 and after, Ai

Qing still wrote in a patriotic style as the characteristic of Ai Qing in writing his poems. Ai Qing is a poet who is able to create forms and colors for intangible objects with strong symbolism, but with simple and modest words [9]. The form and subject of his poems are determined by his attitude, hopes, views, and life experiences [6].

Hung Eva Wai-Yee [6] in her work entitled "The Life and Works of Ai Qing (1910)", conducted a comprehensive study of Ai Qing's life history and works. The paper also included a direct interview with Ai Qing to reveal whether life in prison had influenced Ai Qing's works. From this paper, it is known that Ai Qing's poems published after 1978 are poems that have symbolic meanings, and talk a lot about the values of life. Thus, the poems written by Ai Qing after leaving prison are poems that describe his life experiences and the philosophical values he holds.

Wang Jinting [10] through his writing entitled, "The Collection of Famous Works of Ai Qing / Ai Qing the Writer" describes Ai Qing as a great Chinese poet who studied and was influenced by the West. Through observations of Ai Qing's poems, Wang explains that Ai Qing's poems are able to voice the conscience of the people and become an expression of his own inner voice. Wang reveals that one of the characteristics of Ai Qing's writing style is the perspective of life experience as a human being. Furthermore, Zhang Liquan [8] in his writing entitled "Modern Chinese Poetry in Post-Revolutionary Perspective - An Interpretation of the Development of Poetry in the Last 30 Years" discusses the development of post-revolutionary literary works and the Chinese poets who are called as Guilaizhe or "Returning Writer". In discussing Ai Qing, Zhang stated that Ai Qing's poems produced in 1978 contain deeper philosophical meanings, are simple, and involve things that are close to human life [11]. The three authors above discuss the symbolic style and philosophical values in Ai Qing's poems. The research they wrote also revealed the fact that Ai Qing's poems are works written according to his personal life experiences. In addition to these things, this paper found that Ai Qing's poems also use a strong personification style that he uses to convey philosophical values about life. To examine this, this paper selected four poems to be studied as this research, namely Umbrella (伞 san), Hope (希望 xiwang), Mirror (镜子 Jingzi), And Fish Fossil (鱼化石 yu huashi). These four poems written by Ai Qing in 1978 are all short, contain personification style, convey philosophical meaning about life, and contain strong symbolism.

How personification is presented in the poems, what symbolic meanings lie behind the lines, and what kind of philosophical messages Ai Qing

conveys are the research questions that will be answered through the analysis of the four poems. By examining the personification style in Ai Qing's poems, the symbolism that appears in the sentences, and the philosophical messages conveyed through the poems, it is expected that all research questions will be answered.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study will analyze the poems through the intrinsic elements contained in the poems, including diction, figures of speech, and imagery. Furthermore, this study collects library data through references such as books, scholarly articles, and relevant internet sources related to Ai Qing and his poetry, in order to produce a coherent and well-connected research outcome.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The poems that will be the main topic of discussion in this article are four poems by Ai Qing produced in 1978. These four poems contain a personification style, carry symbolism in their sentences, and all lead to philosophical values of life. The first poem that will be discussed first is a poem entitled Umbrella.

Table 1. Umbrella

伞	
Umbrella	
早晨，我问伞：	Early in the morning, I asked the umbrella
“你喜欢太阳晒还是喜欢雨淋？”	“Do you prefer the sun shining or the rain soaking you?”
伞笑了，它说：	Umbrella laughed, he said:
“我考虑的不是这些。”	“What I consider are not these things.”
我追问它：	I keep asking:
“你考虑是什么？”	“What are you considering?”
伞说：	Umbrella said:
“我想的是雨天，	“What I consider is,
不让大家衣服淋湿；	when it rains, I don't let people's clothes get wet

晴天，我是大家头上的云

When it's sunny, I'm a cloud above
their heads"

The poem Umbrella presents a short dialogue in the morning between 'I' and an umbrella. It is unclear whether this lyrical 'I' represents a human or another object like an umbrella. The first line that states "Early in the morning, I asked the umbrella", shows that this poem uses a strong figurative language which is personification because it is seen that the umbrella in the poem can be spoken to, as if it were a living creature, involved in conversation and even expressing its views on things that often happen in everyday life to the lyrical 'I'.

The 'I's question in the lyrics that reads "Do you prefer the sun shining or the rain soaking you?" is leading to the answer, "what do you prefer", which turns out the umbrella answered frankly that what was on his mind was, "What I consider is, when it rains, I don't let people's clothes get wet; when it's sunny, I'm the cloud above their heads"

The umbrella's answer to 'I' in the last two lines of the poem shows that the umbrella is thinking about those who take shelter under it. This line clearly emphasizes the umbrella's desire to be able to provide protection for others [12]. These two things are apparently what the umbrella is thinking about. It hopes to be able to provide protection to anyone who intends to take shelter under it. The dialogue in this poem shows that the umbrella is trying to position itself as a protector.

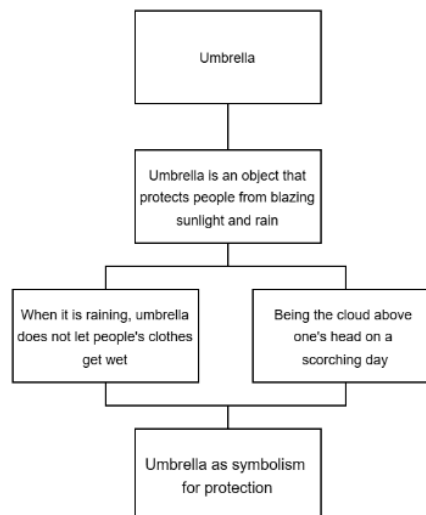


Figure 1. The contents of the Umbrella poem (Source: personal analysis), 2019

The diagram above is made based on the analysis of the poem to help understand the meaning of the Umbrella poem and the philosophical value in it. Ai Qing includes the conversation between the lyrical ‘I’ and the umbrella to show a moral message about life, that “protecting” is an act that puts aside personal comfort and benefit. The meaning of protecting in the poem is oriented towards fulfilling the needs of others. The answer given by the umbrella is a very philosophical answer. If even an object wants to be beneficial, then humans should also be able to provide the same benefits to others.

Table 2. Hope

	希望 Hope
梦的朋友	Friend of dreams
幻想的姊妹	The little sister of illusion
原是自己的影子	She is actually a reflection of you
却老走在你前面	But always walks in front of you
像光一样无形	Like a formless light
像风一样不安定	Like the wind that never stops
她和你之间	Between you and her
始终有距离	From the beginning to the end always at a distance
像窗外的飞鸟	Like a bird flying outside the window
像天上的流云	Like clouds marching in the sky
像河边的蝴蝶	Like a butterfly on the river bank
既狡猾而美丽	Cunning but beautiful
你上去，她就飞	When you go up, she will fly
你不理她，她撵你	You ignore her, she pushes you
她永远陪伴你	She will accompany you, forever
一直到你终止呼吸	Continue, until you stop breathing.

The poem Hope brings up a narrative about something called hope. This poem uses a personification by referring to hope as a woman. This can be seen from the use of the third person female pronoun (ta 她). The line of the poem that reads “Friend of dreams, the little sister of illusion” analogizes hope as something that is not real and like an illusion that is not present in

life. The next line, “She is actually a reflection of you, but always walks in front of you” shows that hope is something identical, just like the different shadows of humans. However, this hope will always walk ahead, just like imagination that precedes reality.

The poem says that hope is something that has no form like light and is never still like the wind. This line signifies the form of hope that is invisible and will always move in the human mind. Furthermore, the poem emphasizes through the line “From the beginning to the end always at a distance”, that there is always a boundary that stretches in human relationships to hope, which is the boundary between reality and fantasy. The poem analogizes hope to birds, clouds, and butterflies through the line, “Like a bird flying outside the window. Like clouds marching in the sky. Like a butterfly on the riverbank”. This line shows that hope is something that seems beautiful, and is within human reach, but in reality it is very far away. These three things look close to our eyes, but are actually difficult to reach. While hope is generally regarded as a beautiful and positive aspiration, in this poem, it is portrayed as something elusive and difficult to attain, which is in line with what is written in the line, “Cunning but beautiful”. The poem also states it through the line that reads, “When you go up, she will fly”. This seems to show that the more humans try to pursue hope, she will actually leave them and fly even higher. Although the narrative is built like this, the two closing lines are the key to the content of the poem by presenting the condition that even though it is difficult to gain, “She will accompany you, forever. Continue, until you stop breathing”. Hope becomes a symbol of a loyal friend who will accompany humans until the end of their lives. Although hope is difficult to grasp, humans become passionate about life because of hope that accompanies them. Hope will be extinct when humans die.

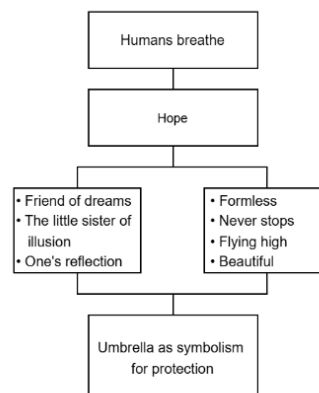


Figure 2. Contents of the Hope Poem (Source: personal analysis), 2019

The diagram above presents an analogy of the existence of hope based on the analysis of the poem in the previous paragraph. As depicted in the poem, hope will accompany until the last breath of a person. Hope is a dream that exists in human life and tries to be manifested. Although hope is a dream that seems far from reach, its existence is very important in human life. Through its content, the poem symbolizes hope as a loyal friend who is always present in human life. No matter how far hope is, humans will always have a reason to reach for it and try to make it happen. This poem shows the existence of hope that even though it is difficult to grasp, it is loyal and always present until the last breath of a person.

Table 3. Mirror

	镜子 Mirror
仅只是一个平面	Even if it's just a flat surface
却又是深不可测	But the depth cannot be measured
它最爱真实	He loves truth the most
决不隐嘴缺点	Doesn't cover up shortcomings from the mouth
它忠于寻找它的人	His loyalty lies with those who seek him
谁都从它发现自己	Anyone finds themselves from him
或是醉后酡颜	Maybe when the face is red from drunkenness
或是鬓如霜雪	Or when the hair has turned white like frozen snow
有人喜欢它	Some people like it
因为自己美	Because of their own beauty
有人躲避它	There are those who avoid him
因为它直率	Because he is frank
甚至会有人	There are even people who
恨不得把它打碎	Hates him to the point of destroying him

This poem presents the mirror as an object that seems to be alive like a human, and it is described as being able to reveal the truth. The personification has begun to appear in the third line of the poem, when it is stated

“He loves truth the most”. This seems to indicate that the mirror is a figure who will always say the right thing and act as he is. Through the sentence “Doesn’t cover up the shortcomings from the mouth”, it is clearly depicted that the mirror adheres to what is visible, rather than from the mouth which generally sugarcoats. Through this, the honest nature of the mirror is depicted in revealing something without having to reduce or exaggerate something.

Through the sixth line which reads, “Anyone finds themselves from it” describes the nature of the mirror that will display the human self according to the actual situation. This is also supported by the next line in the poem, “Maybe when the face is red from drunkenness, Or when the hair has turned white like frozen snow”. The mirror will display the truth that exists even in the worst conditions, so that humans can see themselves and find their true selves. Although the mirror always shows the truth, not everyone can like it. Truth or facts are generally liked by humans if they bring something good or benefit themselves. This is reflected in the line, “Some people like it, because of their own beauty. There are those who avoid him, because he is frank”. On the other hand, if the truth is something that is not in accordance with desires, it will be avoided and even tried to be destroyed.

Of the fourteen narrative lines in the Mirror poem, the contrast is present in the fifth and twelfth-thirteenth lines, namely: “His loyalty lies with those who seek him” and “The are those who avoid him because he is frank”. This is a symbolization of the mirror’s nature which reflects two individuals with differing traits.

Based on the analysis of the poem Mirror a diagram that classifies two characteristics of how people behave towards mirrors can be made. There are two behaviors that mirrors accept from its inherent drive to reveal the truth. People who like mirrors will find themselves from the mirror, and the mirror will also be loyal to them. The second attitude is the hatred of people who avoid the frankness of the mirror. This hatred of the truth drives them to destroy the mirror. The mirror will be destroyed because it is hated by those who do not like frankness.



Figure 3. Contents of the Mirror poem (Source: personal analysis), 2019

The poem Mirror becomes a symbol of truth in life. The mirror never lies about anything that happens. Although the honest nature of revealing the truth is not easy, the fifth and sixth lines of the poem say, “His loyalty lies with those who seek him, Anyone finds themselves from him”. These lines convey that humans can find themselves from looking in the mirror, which means that humans will only find their true selves when they are honest and find the truth in their lives. Through the depiction of the mirror, this poem conveys a philosophical message of life, which is although truth is a good thing, it is not necessarily liked. In life, there are times when truth is sought after, but sometimes truth is also avoided and becomes the target of hatred for some parties. However, a mirror is still a mirror, it is considered as a friend or an enemy, whatever the reality of a truth, that is still what it will reveal.

Table 4. Fish Fossil

鱼化石 Fish Fossil	
动作多么活泼 精力多么旺盛, 在浪花里跳跃, 在大海里浮沉; 不幸遇到火山爆发,	Moves with such agility With strength so fierce Leaping through ocean waves Swimming in the vast ocean But alas, you encountered erupting volcano

也可能是地震,
你失去了自由,
被埋进了灰尘;
过了多少忆年
地质勘探队员,
在岩层里发现你,
依然栩栩如生。
但你是沉默的,
连叹息也没有,
鳞和鳍都完整,
却不能动弹;
你绝对的静止
对外界毫无反应
看不见天和水
听不见浪花的声音。

凝视着一片化石,
傻瓜也得到教训:
离开了运动,
就没有生命。
活着就要斗争,
在斗争中前进,
即使死亡,
能量也要发挥干净。

Perhaps even an earthquake
You lost your freedom
Buried in dust
After going through years full of memories
A team of geological explorers
Found you among layers of stone
Still as real as life
But you don't budge
Not even a sigh
Your scales and fins are still complete
But can't move
You are completely still
No response to the outside world
Not seeing the sky and water
Not hearing the sound of the waves crashing

Staring at a fossil
Even a fool learns the lessons of the sea
If you leave the movement
There will definitely be no life
When life has to struggle
In struggle, one must strive forward
Even if it means dying,
Your potential must be fully explored

The poem entitled Fish Fossil is the second poem written by Ai Qing in 1978 [13]. According to Lee [14], the poem Fish Fossil is one of the poems that expresses Ai Qing's feelings and sadness experienced in his life. From here it can be seen that this poem is different from the previous three poems. The previous three poems, Umbrella, Hope, and Mirror, carry philosophical messages about life, but none of them are related to Ai Qing's life and feelings. The analysis of the poem Fish Fossil will focus on an extrinsic approach, which tries to link poetry to conditions outside literature, while analyzing the intrinsic elements as the main message.

This poem tells the story of a fish using personification figurative language, namely about a fish that was initially free in the ocean, but had to end up becoming a fossil rock. The first stanza of the poem describes the life of a fish that is free in the ocean. Furthermore, in the second stanza it is

written that a volcanic eruption and perhaps an earthquake buried the fish in dust. These two stanzas are an analogy of freedom that is taken away by unexpected circumstances. This is made clear by the line of the poem that reads, “You lost your freedom”. The fish that initially had freedom, finally had to experience limitations and experienced suspended animation due to unwanted circumstances. It is said, “Not seeing the sky and water, Not hearing the sound of the waves crashing” [14]. The vast ocean is a symbol of the place where the fish seek their freedom, but now the fish cannot swim freely, they can only stay still and be buried in dust.

At first, Ai Qing was an artist who freely expressed himself through his writings. He was a person who freely created and was passionate and dedicated himself to writing poetry [8]. However, in 1957 he was exiled because he was accused of being a right-wing writer [6]. After his name was cleared, apparently in 1966 Ai Qing was again considered a right-wing writer [6]. These two events restrained him from writing, and forced him to bury his feelings and talents for writing. Based on Ai Qing's life journey after being declared as a rightist in 1966, he decided to burn all his works. In line with what the poem says, Ai Qing's soul contained in his poems must be buried in dust.

For 21 years, from 1957 to 1978, Ai Qing was still alive and well-known, but he silenced himself in art [8]. Ai Qing no longer wrote. However, in 1978, with the help of several government agencies and other artists, Ai Qing was able to return to Beijing and undergo rehabilitation to be able to write again. Hung [6] in his interview with Ai Qing, stated that for Ai Qing, poetry was his need to express himself and speak up. So, in line with what poetry says, when Ai Qing's need to express himself and speak up was erased, it was the same as stopping Ai Qing's breath of life. The intact fish scales and fins may indicate that Ai Qing's body was still healthy, but for him it was useless when he could not “move” again to write and speak his heart into poetry. For 21 years Ai Qing was “silent” [6]. He did not publish his poems at all, Ai Qing chose to remain silent, not to see the real situation, and not to hear the “voices” outside as the poem says in the sentence, “No response to the outside world”.

The third stanza in the poem tells the story of a fish found by the Geological Exploration Team. The line in the poem that says, “Found you among layers of stone, Still as real as life”, explains that the figure of the fish still looks like it is alive. However, what is different is that the fish is now not moving at all. The body of the fish still looks real, but its soul seems to be gone. The fish shows no signs that it is alive. The line “No response

to the outside world” explains that the fish is still, unmoving, and the next line explains that the fish cannot see the sky, the water and cannot hear the crashing waves.

The poem explains through the line, “Staring at a fossil, even a fool learns the lessons of the sea”, that what the fish experiences is a life lesson for humans. Life without movement is a limitation. The line that reads “If you leave the movement, there will definitely be no life” implies the meaning that if you just stay still, silent, and have no movement, even though a human seems to be alive, he actually has no soul in that life. The poem expresses through the line, “In struggle, one must strive forward. Even if it means dying, your potential must be fully explored”, that life is something that needs to be fought for. In it there will be many disasters or circumstances that are never expected. However, humans need to continue to hone their abilities continuously. Only if humans move, will they be able to fight and continue to live. So, when humans live, only then can they strive and gain freedom. On the other hand, when humans are still, just like fish that become fossils, they will feel limitations and leave their real life.

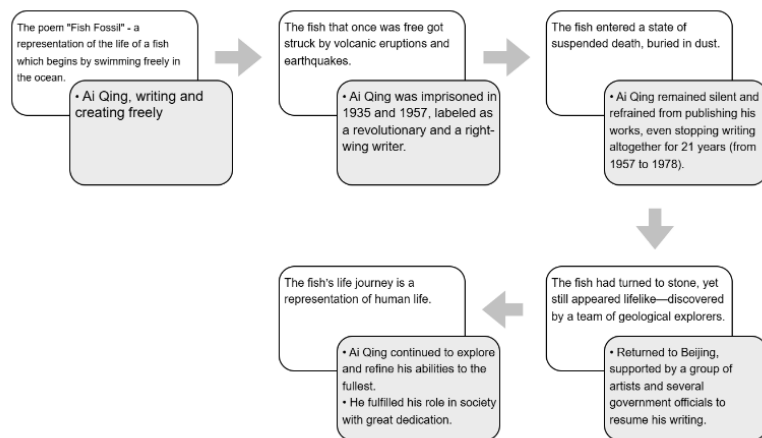


Figure 4. Contents of the Fish Fossil Poem (Source: personal analysis), 2019

The diagram above presents the life of the fish in the poem. The poem interprets the fossilized fish as a symbol of Ai Qing's own life. In an uncertain life, just like fish, humans need to continue to move forward by exploring their potentials to the fullest.

Through the analysis results, it can be seen that the four poems of Ai Qing above were written using a strong personification. The personification was deliberately raised by Ai Qing into his poems to convey the philosophy

of idealistic values in human life. The poems convey meaning through the symbolization of the umbrella, as a symbol of protection, hope as a symbol of a loyal friend of man, the mirror as a symbol of truth, and the fish fossil as a symbol of Ai Qing's personal life and convey his reflection on life.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the analysis, Ai Qing's four poems written in 1978, the poem with the title Umbrella, Hope, Mirror, And Fish Fossil can be called poems that record and convey the philosophy of life. The poem Umbrella shows that the umbrella is a symbol of protection. The poem Hope reveals that hope is truly the driving force behind human life. Although hope is difficult to grasp, it will always faithfully accompany humans. The poem Mirror describes the nature of the honest mirror in reflecting and symbolizing the truth itself. It never lies about what it reflects. The honest nature of this mirror is what makes it sometimes sought after and sometimes avoided by humans. The poem Fish Fossil, conveys the message that no life runs smoothly. Although life is full of trials, humans need to continue to explore their abilities in order to live in freedom. If humans stop living and moving, they will be like fossilized fish, even though they are still alive.

The personification used by Ai Qing in the poem feels close to everyday human life. These four poems with simple words convey the message that humans are able to be protectors for others, have hope in life, are able to express the truth, and continue to explore their abilities all the way through. These are the philosophical messages conveyed by Ai Qing.

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