

The Influence of the Spirit of Nature in Chinese landscape Poetry on Gary Snyder's Poetic Creation

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ABSTRACT. Gary Snyder is one of the most outstanding contemporary American poets and an environmentalist who loves the wild world of California. Meanwhile, Snyder's long-term and profound spiritual correspondence with Chinese culture and poetry is also well-known in the literary circle at home and abroad. Many of Gary Snyder's poems show a strong Chinese taste, in which his landscape poems are deeply influenced by the spirit of nature in Chinese landscape poetry. This article is aimed at exploring the influence of the spirit of nature in Chinese landscape poetry on his landscape poems.

KEYWORDS: the spirit of Nature, Chinese landscape poetry, influence

1. Introduction

Ancient Chinese landscape poetry, especially the landscape poetry in Tang Dynasty, is the most precious treasure in Chinese literature. There are many brilliant spiritual features in these poems, of which the spirit of nature is the most prominent one. In a sense, the spirit of nature has shaped the marvelous artistic realm of Chinese landscape poetry. It not only effects immense influence on many ancient Chinese poets like Tao Yuanming, Meng Haoran, Wanwei, etc. but also has a profound impact on some famous western poets despite the great cultural divergence of the East and the West. Of all those western poets, Gary Snyder is the most distinguished one who apparently assimilates this Chinese cultural heritage in his poetic creation.

Then what is the spirit of nature and how is it reflected in Chinese landscape poetry? And how does the spirit of nature influence Gary Snyder's poetic creation? This paper is aimed at exploring the answers to these questions.

2. The Spirit of Nature in Chinese Landscape Poetry

2.1 The Origin of the Spirit of Nature in Taoism

First originated from Taoism in the pre-Qin period, the spirit of nature has several key factors. First, Laozi, one ancestor of Taoism, regarded "Tao" as the basic order of the world and said that Tao follows nature, which means Tao is everything's natural, unique and independent way of existence in the world. Therefore, if we want to maintain the order of the world, we must follow everything's Tao, that is, we must respect and preserve everything's Tao as what they are in nature. However, people always encounter different kinds of obstacles imposed on their original nature in society and thus often deviates from Tao and their original nature. Hence, People should get rid of this exterior obstacles in society and find out the true nature within them to experience and respect everything's original Tao in the natural world. Based on this idea, Taoism highlights the importance of everything's original nature and thus advocates the aesthetic thought of natural beauty and people's restoring to nature to search for the spiritual paradise. Secondly, Taoism emphasizes the harmony between man and nature, just as Zhuangzi once said that Heaven, Earth and I come into being together, and all things and we are one. In other words, Heaven, Earth and all kinds of things, though different in the appearance, are all products of Tao. Man, is also only one of all things. Therefore, from the point of view of Tao, there is no reason for us to regard man as the master or commander of all things. Instead, man and all other things are equal. In this way, human beings can live in harmony with all other things in nature.

2.2 The Influence of the Spirit of Nature on Chinese Landscape Poetry

These Taoism ideas have a profound impact on ancient Chinese Poets. Among the great poets in Tang Dynasty, many of them are deeply influenced by the Taoist aesthetic thought of the spirit of nature, which are embodied in the following aspects: First, they accept the Taoist idea that the natural world, rather than the society, is the idealistic realm for them to follow and respect everything's Tao. By doing so in the natural world, poets can feel different spiritual aesthetic characteristics of different landscapes, which are usually implied in their description of the beauty of nature in their poems. In this way, the poets regard the mountains and waters in these Chinese poems not only as scenic spots, but also places with certain unique Chinese landscape spirits, which make Chinese landscape poetry shrouded in mystery. Secondly, Taoism advocates that myriad things and we are one. Instead of the master or the commander, man is equal to all other things in the natural world. And thus human should live equally and harmoniously with all other things in the world. Therefore, we could see the harmonious relationship between man and nature in the ancient Chinese landscape poems. Thirdly, Tao is the natural existence and spirit of everything in the world. Hence, we should follow everything's Tao and let things as what they are in nature. Influenced by this idea, Chinese landscape poets respect the nature of things and hardly impose their opinions on the objects described in their

poems. Instead, they just make the objects in the natural world express themselves in its natural form without the poets' explicit judgement or statement about abstract ideas in their poems, which is quite different from the western poets who usually illustrate their abstract ideas or feelings directly when describing the scenery. In *Aesthetic Consciousness of Landscape*, Wai-lim, Yip elaborates this characteristics:

“The Chinese poets want to structure nature in accordance with nature's way of structuring itself or to disclose nature in accordance with nature's way of disclosing itself. To do so requires the poet's removal of the conscious self... to focus attention upon objects not from the poet's point of view but from that of the object, a *noematic* awareness in which little conscious and intellectual activity is allowed to expand.”[1]

However, only depicting vividly the scenery doesn't mean the landscape has no spirits in their poems. On the contrary, the Charm of the Chinese landscape poems lies in the fact that every poem has its definite unique spirit, or the “Tao”. Instead of directly showing them in the poems, the poets skilfully intergrate them into the natural surroundings. Although they are invisible, the reader cannot but become involved and identified after reading these poems.

2.3 One Example to Show the Spirit of Nature in Chinese Landscape Poems

Here is one example from Wang Wei, who was the most famous poet of Chinese landscape poetry in China. This poem is translated by Gary Snyder.

空山不见人， Empty mountains: /no one to be seen.

但闻人语响。 Yet-hear/human sounds and echoes.

返景入深林， Returning sunlight/enters the dark woods;

复照青苔上。 Again shining/on the green moss, above.

In this poem, instead of the controller or the commander of the things in the mountain, the poet is the observer of the scene: he just observes the scene in the mountain closely and describes everything that he has seen and heard in the mountain. In this way, he let everything in the mountain follow the nature's way of disclosing itself. To remove the subjective judgment, the poet avoids using the subject “I” or “he” in the poem. Instead, the presence of the poet and someone in the mountain is skillfully disclosed by the word “seen” and “human sounds” in the first couplet of the poem, which means that though people are invisible in the poem, the reader could feel their existence. The first half of the couplet “no one to be seen in the mountain” implies that the poet is taking a walk in the mountain without seeing

anyone. This description will obviously arouse the readers' imagination: what will the poet see in the empty mountain if nobody is there? The poet might be walking alone along the long and winding streams with the water flowing. The craggy rocks, the deep ditches and the clear waterfall on the cliff are in sight. When he looks up, he sees the white clouds floating slowly in the sky. Far away from the noise of the world, he feels the serenity of nature in the mountain. At this time, the poet's soul is immersed in the quiet and beautiful scenery. By depicting "no one in the mountain", the spirit of serenity is revealed implicitly by the poet for the first time. However, there is a dramatic turn in the second half of the couplet: "yet hear-human sound and echoes". "human sound" proves that the poet has misunderstood that there was no one in the mountain before. As a matter of fact, though no one is invisible, the poet could hear someone's voice. It appears that "human sounds" have broken the serenity in the mountain. However, the second half is the linguistic subtleties of the two lines, which requires the readers to further experience this spirit beyond the words. First, the phrase "no one to be seen" and "human sounds" mean that though people are invisible, we can hear the human voice in the mountain, which implies that the empty mountain is too vast for the poet to see anyone. In this way, the poet conveys the spirit of emptiness to the reader. Second, "但" "but" is the key word in the sentence, indicating the dramatic turn that the spirit of serenity in the mountain has been disturbed by "human sounds" on the surface. However, if we explore the matter in depth, "human sounds" may stop at any time. Compared with the long silent night, "human sounds" are short and temporary. After the short sounds disappear, the empty mountain will return to its long and complete serenity again. Therefore, the short and temporary human sounds constitute a sharp contrast with the overall and long serenity and emptiness in the mountain. After the disappearance of human sounds, people's feeling of serenity and emptiness in the mountain is far more prominent than before due to the contrast just now. In this way, the spirit of serenity stands out vividly on the paper.

The last two sentences describe the scenery of the reflection of sunset into the deep forest with some light falling on the moss. In the deep forest, the reflection of the sunset shooting into the deep forest on the moss brings a ray of light to the gloom in the evening. At this point, what the reader could feel is the light and warmth brought by the reflection. However, the sunset reflection is doomed to disappear in a very short time. After the disappearance of the sunset reflection, there will be a long time of darkness. Sometimes if a person stays in the darkness for a long time, his eyes and body will get used to the dark surroundings so well that he even can't feel the place is so dark. Nevertheless, what will you feel if a sudden flash of lightning lights up in the sky for a second? The sharp contrast between the light and the dark will make such a strong impression on you that your lazy faculties must be aroused and thus can feel the darkness even more after the disappearance of the lighting. For the same reason, if some beams of sunlight are shining into the dense forest and reflecting the mottled tree shadow on the moss under the tree, the temporary beams of warm and bright sunlight reflection will contrast sharply with the large areas of cold and gloomy trees and moss, thus making the cold and gloomy colors in the mountain stand out. In other words, Contrast in the poem makes the gloom of the forest appear more prominent than when seen alone. And gloom in the

evening implies the coming of night when everything will become quiet. In this way, though the word “gloom” and the word “serenity” doesn’t appear in the poem, the poet reveals the spirit of serenity and gloom in the mountain vividly.

In this poem, Wang Wei just lets the things in the mountain disclose itself, thus vividly pictures the beautiful sunset scene in the mountain and skillfully hiding the natural spirit of serenity and gloom in the words, which is also the poet’s philosophical quietness and state of inner clarity. Like Wang Wei, Chinese landscape poets pursue the spirit of nature in their poems, which make the scenery in these poems a place full of profound natural interests. At first glance, it appears like a meaningful picture of natural beauty gradually unfolded before the reader. However, after reading, beyond the beautiful pictures, you can feel its rich and brilliant spirits in the poems deeply in your heart. This is the artistic essence of Chinese landscape poetry.

3. The Influence of the Spirit of Nature on Gary Snyder’s Poetic Creation

Gary Snyder is a renowned poet in America today. Up to now, Gary Snyder has published 16 poetry books, including *Riprap & Cold Mountain*, his first collection Poems, *Turtle Island*, the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1975, and *Nature*, a finalist for the National Book Award in 1992, etc. Of all his poems, he has written a lot of landscape poems, in which we find Snyder has been deeply influenced by the spirit of nature in Chinese landscape poetry.

3.1 The Chinese Spirit of Nature in his Landscape Poems

Many poems in western literature describe the natural world, too. In these poems, the natural world is mostly the setting or atmosphere of the story unfolding or the symbol to illustrate abstract ideas, which has no independent existence value. However, unlike western poems, Snyder has been deeply influenced by the spirit of nature in Chinese landscape poems. He once said:

“I even thought for a time that simply because Chinese had not been Christian, and had not been spared an ideology which separated human kind from all other living things (with the two categories of redeemable and unredeemable) that it naturally had an organic, process-oriented view of the world.”[2]

Under the influence of the aesthetic Chinese thought, Gary Snyder regards life in the natural world as part of his own life and describes the beautiful natural scenery as the main object in his landscape poems. More importantly, like Chinese landscape poets, he advocates people’s returning to the natural world, too. In his mind, only in this way can man gain insight into the spirit of nature and attain the spiritual paradise.

Here is one example of Cold Mountain poems, which is translated by Snyder:

今日岩前坐，	Today I sat at the root of a cliff.
坐久烟云收。	Sat until the mist and clouds drew apart
一道清溪冷，	Clear cold water formed one solid stream
千寻碧嶂头。	Thousands of feet from the jade-green ridge.
白云朝影静，	The still morning light shines through the white clouds.
明月夜光浮。	Under the bright moon, luminous evening mist adrift
身上无尘垢。	My body is free of dust and strain;
心中那得忧。	What cares could trouble my mind?

In this poem, the person harmoniously gets along with everything in the surroundings. Only as the observer of the natural environment, he watches the waterfall, the mist and clouds and totally submerges himself in the beauty of the natural world. Sitting in meditation from morning till night in the beautiful scenery, the person finally looks into his inner heart, thus cleanses his mind and frees him from all the mental entanglements.

Snyder writes like this in the poem of "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain look out", the opening poem in *Riprap*[3].

Down valley a smoke haze
Three days heat, after five days rain
Pitch glows on the fir-cones
Across rocks and meadows
Swarms of new flies.

I cannot remember things I once read
A few friends, but they are in cities.
Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup
Looking down for miles
Through high still air.

The first half describes the scenery in the Mountain. But it's not the setting or atmosphere of a story. Everything in the picture just discloses itself naturally. In the second half, the poet severs his ties with the mundane world, namely, the realm of boiling red dust: "I cannot remember things I once read, a few friends, but they are in cities." Also, he appears not as the controller or the commander of the wilderness. Instead, like Cold Mountain, it seems that he gets along with the environment harmoniously and integrates himself into the beauty of nature: what the poet does is just letting things in the mountain disclose itself in nature's way while he is drinking snow water and looking down the mountains leisurely. Everything in the mountain is natural and quiet. The image of the poet is like a reclusive Chinese landscape poets who do not care about the trouble in the mundane world. Regarding the

mountains as a paradise, he appreciates the beauty of nature leisurely. In this poem, we can feel the poet's leisurely and complacent mood when he sits in seclusion in the mountains. The last two lines remind us of a sentence written by Wang Wei, a famous Chinese poet: “坐看云起时”. “Then I'll sit and watch clouds rise in that clime.” In the valley, both poets do not force the environment and others to conform to their own needs, they just sit down and watch the clouds and the beautiful scenery in meditation. All the tangles in the mind disappear and the poets finally achieve enlightenment and perches on his solitary spiritual height: the water is clear, the air is high and still. What he sees miles through is not only high still air but also a clear and uncluttered mind. Thus the spirit of nature at that time in the poem is vividly disclosed by the poet: both the state of a quiet and beautiful realm in the valley and the poet's clear state of mind. It's just like what Cold Mountain says: “My body is free of dust and strain; What cares could trouble my mind?”

There are some other examples of depicting his spiritual paradise in nature: the harmonious relationship with all other things, his free mind wanders and cleansing of minds in the natural world. For example, in the following poems, Snyder travels through a million summers and thus attains a clear mind: “The mind wanders./ A million summers night air still and rocks/Warm. Sky over endless mountains. ”, or he flies back to a hunting scene ten thousand years ago: “They came to camp. On their/Trails. I followed my own /trails here. Picked up the cold-drill, / Pick, single jack, and sack / of dynamite./Ten thousand years.”

3.2 Imitating the Chinese Skill of Disclosing the Spirit of Nature in his Poems

However, as I've analyzed before, another characteristics of Chinese landscape poem is that instead of directly disclosing the spirit of nature in the poems, Chinese poets usually removes his conscious self and let everything in the natural world follow nature's way of disclosing itself. But the reader can feel the spirit of nature that the poet wants to reveal through the juxtaposition of objects described in the poem. This is the charm of Chinese landscape poems, because rather than tell its readers the spirit by words, it implicitly invites the reader to view, feel and experience the spirit of nature and the poet's mood hidden in the poems. Wang Wei's poem “Lu Zhai” is an excellent example to show this aesthetic thought as I've analyzed before. This poetic device has a great impact on Snyder's poetic creation. For example, in his poem “Pine Tree Tops”, he says:

In the blue night
Frost haze, the sky glows
With the moon
Pine Tree tops
Bend snow-blue, fade
Into sky, frost, starlight.
The creak of boots.
Rabbit tracks, deer tracks

The state of stillness and the void, which refers to both the stillness of the environment and the philosophical state of inner quietness and clarity, is one of the spirit of nature that many Chinese landscape poems pursue. As I've analyzed in part one, Wang Wei has vividly disclosed this spirit of stillness to us in "Lu Zhai". By hiding the hero skillfully in the poem, the poet unrolls a beautiful and quiet sunset scene, which makes the reader enter an empty, quiet realm beyond realistic utility, or we call it the spiritual stillness.

We can see the profound influence of this Chinese technique on Snyder in this poem. It reads like Wang Wei's poems. To reveal the state of stillness, the absence of intellectual interference is obvious in this poem. In the first six lines, we can't see anyone. The poet just depicts a harmonious, quiet moonlit night: the blue night sky, a light mist, the pouring down moonlight, the stars all over the sky. All create the atmosphere of stillness and haziness. In this harmonious, quiet, hazy and illusory world, everything "follow its nature" and disclose itself naturally: the pine crown is covered with a thin layer of frost. Against the blue sky, the moon presents a light blue arc, which blends into the background. Like the scene depicted in "Lu Zhai", though the poet doesn't say any word about stillness, the reader can feel the state of stillness and emptiness in their minds. Also to disclose the state of emptiness, the poet imitates Wang Wei's technique in "Lu Zhai": the voice in the empty mountain indicates that the empty mountain is too vast for the poet to see anyone. Here in Snyder's poem, the invisible man is revealed by the boots. The sound of the boots, Rabbits and deer suddenly breaks the emptiness in the mountain, yet the temporary sound in the silence even more highlights the long quietness and emptiness. In this way, by hiding the conscious self, the poet conveys the spirit of stillness and the void vividly to the readers.

4. Conclusion

Snyder's long and deep spiritual correspondence with Chinese culture and poetry is well known to men of letters at home and abroad. He can be said to be a literary giant with the "literary heart" of Chinese literature in America. Many of Gary Snyder's poems reveal a strong Chinese flavor, of which his landscape poems are the group greatly influenced by the spirit of nature in Chinese landscape poetry. This influence, on one hand, is revealed by the expression of the Chinese spirit of nature in his landscape poems, which is often mentioned in the literary circle; on the other hand, it is also shown by Snyder's imitation of the Chinese skill of disclosing the spirit of nature in his own poems.

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