

Studies on the Differences Between Chinese and Western Nature Poems

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Received 6 September 2014; accepted 11 February 2015

Published online 25 March 2015

Abstract

Poetry is an important part in culture, which therefore is the indispensable object for cultural research. Either in the East or West, poetry has displayed great charm. Since poetry is a broad concept, including various categories, this paper gives special focus to nature poems, with the purpose of exploring the differences between Chinese and Western culture through the comparative study of Chinese and Western nature poems. Three parts are included in this paper, with part one introducing the development of Chinese and Western nature poems, part two demonstrating the differences in themes, images and poet-nature relationship, and part three exploring causes behind the differences from the perspective of religion, aesthetic concept and philosophical idea.

Key words: Comparative study on Chinese and Western poetry; Nature poems; Development; Differences; Causes

Liu, L. (2015). Studies on the Differences Between Chinese and Western Nature Poems. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 10(3), 83-88. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/6741> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/6741>

Nature poems, also called pastoral poems, do not refer to poems that describe nature or landscapes but poems in which nature or landscapes act as the major aesthetic objects. As a major category of poetry, nature poems play an important role in both Chinese and Western literature. As the British historian, Arnold Joseph Toynbee pointed out, among the twenty-six civilizations that have

existed in the human history, only three have developed understanding and appreciation of nature, which include the Chinese civilization, Western civilization and Indian civilization (Luo & Bai, 1996, p.63). Among the three civilizations, India shows limited understanding and appreciation, while Chinese and Western civilization show great appreciation of nature and even make artistic creation of nature. Nature poems are the result of artistic creation. The comparison study on Chinese and Western nature poems is of great significance to the comparison study of Chinese and Western literature. Despite the fact that both Chinese and Western nature poems regard nature as the aesthetic object, they are different. Chinese and Western nature poems have their own development path, and have differences in themes, images and poet-nature relationship. These differences are closely related to the different religious culture, aesthetic concept and philosophical idea of the Chinese and Western civilization.

1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATURE POEMS

Both Chinese and Western nature poems regard nature as the major aesthetic object, which however have different development process. Either for the Chinese or Western civilization, the nature poem is a late comer in the poetry history. As Zhu Guangqian wrote, "in both China and the West, poets' love for nature develops late and poets are inclined to focus on mundane matters rather than nature. Even when they mention nature in the poems, nature serves as the background rather than the focus" (p.113). Although both Chinese and Western nature poems are the late-comers in the poetry history, Chinese nature poems develops earlier than Western nature poems.

1.1 The Development of Chinese Nature Poems

In Chinese poetry history, the nature poem is a late comer. In *The Classic of Poetry* of 6 BC, various subject

matters such as society, politics, history, war and love are mentioned while nature is not included. However, it is worth mentioning that although nature poems are not included in early poems, natural awareness can be found out. Taking *The Classic of Poetry* as an example, nature poems are not included while description of nature or landscapes can be easily found out. With the development of natural awareness, poems describing nature increase greatly, promoting the development of natural ideas such as Taoism's unity of man and nature. These natural ideas, in turn, enhance the development of natural awareness, thus contributing to more descriptions of nature in Western Han and Eastern Han Dynasties.

Till the Eastern and Western Jin Dynasties, natural awareness develops into the natural literature, manifested by the mass creation of nature poems. The representative poets during this period include Tao Yuanming of 4 AD and Xie Lingyun of 6 AD. Since Xie Lingyun is the first poet who is mainly devoted to the creation of nature poems and has produced a great number of nature poems, the Chinese academia considers the emergence of Xie Lingyun as the formation of Chinese nature poems. Since then, nature poems develop rapidly with representative natural poets emerging in every period. In particular, poets in Tan and Song Dynasty such as Wang Wei and Meng Haoran promote nature poems to a new height with the production of a great amount of famous nature poems. It is in this period that nature poems finally sets its place in the poetry history. Later in Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasty, the creation of nature poems is even considered as the great entertainment.

To conclude, despite the fact that nature poems develop late in Chinese poetry history, natural awareness develops early, which, combined with the promotion of natural ideas, finally contribute to the rapid development of nature poems. Since the Western Han and Eastern Han Dynasties, nature poems develop steadily, which never lag behind and even surpass such poetry category as love poetry.

1.2 The Development of Western Nature Poems

Like Chinese nature poems, Western nature poems are also the late comer in its poetry history. As early as 5 BC, the West has witnessed the emergence of great poets and dramatists as well as the great varieties of subject matters, including society, politics, war, family, etc. However, there is not one subject matter that focuses on nature.

Both as the late comers, Western nature poems develop even later than Chinese nature poems. The 14th and 15th century have seen the collapse of European feudalism and the budding of capitalism. At that time, the Renaissance campaign led by the bourgeoisie liberated human, enabling poets to gain the freedom of creation, thus promoting the emergence of works describing nature. At that time, Bagley (1475-1552) led the creation of nature poems, who therefore is noted as the father of British pastoral poets. Later, more poets such as Edmund

Spenser (1552-1599) and Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) continued the creation of nature poems, promoting the further development of nature poems. However, in the 17th and 18th century, European feudalism relapsed, and humanism advocated by the Renaissance was subjected to neoclassicism. In this case, the development of nature poems suspended. It is not until the late 18th century that the Enlightenment movement advocated by the bourgeoisie as well as the Romanticism movement enabled the second liberation of human, contributing to the upsurge of returning to the nature. Thus, the creation of nature poems continued with the emergence of great natural poets like William Wordsworth (1770-1850). It is also in this period that Western nature poems were finally formed and eventually set its place in the Western poetry history. With the further development of the Romanticism movement, more great natural poets emerged, including George Gordon Byron (1788-1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) and John Keats (1795-1821). Therefore, compared to Chinese nature poems, Western nature poems develop later. Bagley, father of British pastoral poems, is 1,100 years later than China's Tao Yuanming, while Wordsworth, founder of British nature poems, is 1,300 years later than China's Xie Lingyun.

Besides, compared to Chinese nature poems, Western nature poems do not develop steadily, which tend to be intermittent. During the one and two centuries after Bagley, Spenser and Marlowe, there is no production of nature poems. It is not until the emergence of poets like Blake and Wordsworth during the romanticism period that the continuous creation of nature poems came true. Moreover, either in the number of natural poets or nature poems, the West lags behind China. Nevertheless, Western nature poems do witness great poets like Wordsworth and great nature poems.

To conclude, Western nature poems have embraced great achievements since its formation. Compared to Chinese nature poems, Western nature poems develop later with intermittence, and the number of poets and poems lag behind that of Chinese poets and poems.

2. DIFFERENCES IN CHINESE AND WESTERN NATURE POEMS

Due to different cultural background, Chinese and Western nature poems take their own characteristics. In spite of regarding nature as the major aesthetic object, Chinese and Western nature poems present different views. In face of the same nature, different charm is displayed by Chinese and Western nature poems, which are mainly, represented in three aspects, namely, themes, images and poet-nature relationship.

2.1 Themes

Nature poems are the combination of the poet's subjective emotions and the objective nature, the themes of which

are of great varieties, not limited to the description of nature (Chen, p.112). Chinese and Western poetry have something in common in the themes such as appreciation of nature, seclusion, individual fate, life thoughts, etc. However, differences are obvious with regards to the themes of Chinese and Western nature poems. Specifically speaking, Chinese nature poems prefer themes related to politics and history, while Western nature poems prefer themes of love and religion.

Most Chinese natural poets are greatly influenced by Confucianism, who tend to devote themselves into the development of the country, concerning about the fate of the people and the nation, with the goal of making a contribution to the rise of the country. However, it turns out that few of these poets have chances to display their ability and fulfill their goal, some of whom even live a quite miserable life. In this case, they convert their great aspiration into the nature or the landscapes. Thus, the themes of Chinese nature poems are always related to politics. For example, unable to fulfill the goal of saving the society, Tao Yuanming turns to the nature and writes many nature poems such as *Returning to My Farm*. As for Xie Lingyun, Meng Haoran and Wang Wei, they, without exception, express their aim to save the people and inability to change the society in the nature poems. Later, more poets take nature poems as the platform to express their political experiences. Not only do poets express their political experiences in the nature, they also make comments on the history in the nature. In this way, Chinese nature poems are also related to the history. Su Shi's *Reflections on the Ancient Red Cliff — To the Tune of Niannujiao* is the representative of Chinese nature poems with the theme of history.

Compared to Chinese nature poems, Western nature poems are more inclined to themes of religion and love. According to Zhu Guangqian, Chinese poets can see nature in the nature while Western poets can see a huge mysterious force in the nature (p.110). Here "the huge mysterious force" refers to the force of god, which can be found in many Western nature poems. For example, from Alfred Tennyson's *Flower in the Crannied Wall* (Tennyson, 2015), he wrote that

Little flower-but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

From these sentences, god's control over nature can be felt. More examples can be found in Wordsworth's nature poems. Besides the theme of religion, love is also the eternal theme of Western nature poems. Despite the fact that love poems and nature poems are two different categories of poetry, Western nature poems dexterously interweave nature and love. As Lafcadio Hearn, British scholar has pointed out, love is the first priority of Westerners and literary works without love relationship will not sell well (Chen, p.114). Therefore, even the

nature poems cannot leave the theme of love. In nature poems, love is often reflected through nature. Taking Wordsworth's *Lucy* as an example, the beauty of the girl is reflected by the willow, cloud, grass and orchid in the nature. In Byron's *She Walks in Beauty*, beauty of human beings and human minds are also demonstrated through the beauty of nature.

2.2 Images

The image is an important concept in literary creation and appreciation. Images can be understood in two aspects, one of which refer to the subjective emotions and ideas of the poet while the other are the things in the poems. The combination of various images forms the poetic world. There are various images taken from nature in both Chinese and Western nature poems. Taking from the same nature, the images are different in Chinese and Western nature poems, leading to different poetic world.

In the selection of images, Chinese nature poems are inclined to those tender, gentle and feminine in the nature while Western nature poems prefer those grand, sublime and masculine parts of the nature. Professor Liao Yiqing of Jimei University once made a statistics of the feminine and masculine images of 50 nature poems archived in *100 Great English Poems*, pointing out that the masculine images are twice more than the feminine ones, which mainly include the sea, universe, wave, sun and forest (Liao, p.62). At the same time, he did a research on the nature images of 53 nature poems archived in *300 Great Tang poems, Song Lyrics and Yuan Dramas*, finding that feminine images are of the greatest number, which include the stream, tree, mountain, cloud, water, flower, grass, moon and breeze (Liao, p.63). Even for the same image, Western nature poems choose the masculine side while Chinese nature poems choose the feminine side. Taking the wind for example, wind in Shelly's *Ode to the West Wind* is forceful and destroying while wind in Meng Haoran's *From Qin Country to the Buddhist Priest Yuan* is tender and gentle. Even Zhu Guangqian has pointed out that Chinese poems have the masculine and feminine side, which, compared to Western poems, tend to be more feminine (p.112).

The selection of different natural images leads to the different poetic world. Combined feminine images formed a gentle poetic world while combined masculine images formed a sublime poetic world. Therefore, the poetic world of Chinese nature poems is usually gentle while the poetic world of Western nature poems is sublime. For example, Tao Yuanming's *Returning to My Farm* depicts a tranquil and gentle poetic world while Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* show a picture full of sublimity.

Although Chinese nature poems have the masculine side and Western nature poems have the feminine side, the images of Chinese nature poems are usually feminine while images of Western nature poems are often masculine.

2.3 Poet-Nature Relationship

Wang Guowei, master of Chinese culture, has pointed out two concepts in his masterpiece, *Jen-Chien Tz'u-Hua*. One is “self-realm” and the other is “selfless-realm”. Self-realm refers to that things are the feelings of self when seen through self’s eyes. Selfless-realm refers to that things are seen through themselves rather the self. Chinese nature poems tend to create the selfless realm in which nature is seen through the nature without the interfere of the poet himself. In the selfless realm, despite the absence of the poet, the poet has integrated into the nature. Instead, Western nature poems tend to create the self-realm in which nature is seen through the poet and therefore carries the emotions of the poet. In the self-realm, the poet is always observing the nature and therefore is separated from the nature. The difference of the two realms can be seen in Wordsworth’s *Lines Written in Early Spring* and Wang Wei’s *Deer Park Hermitage*.

The first two stanzas of *Lines Written in Early Spring* (Wordsworth, 2015) are as follows,

I heard a thousand blended notes,
While in a grove I sate reclined,
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.
To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man?

From the two stanzas, it can be found that it is the poet’s view rather than the nature’s view that leads the development of the poem. In other words, things are seen through the poet himself rather than the nature. Here nature is the major aesthetic object, which however is the manifestation of the poet’s emotions. In fact, the real aesthetic object is the things injected with the poet’s emotions.

As for Wang Wei’s *Deer Park Hermitage* (Hermitage, 2015), it goes as follows.

Empty mountains, no one to be seen.
Yet hear human sounds and echoes.
Returning sunlight enters the dark woods.
Again shining on the green moss, above.

In the poem, human beings are hard to be found and nature is the absolute focus. The poem is the combination of various images in the nature without the intrusion of the poet. It seems that the poet hides somewhere in the nature, being integrated with the nature. Therefore, this poem is the result of seeing things through nature instead of self. Besides, here nature is the real aesthetic object while the poet hides in the nature and becomes part of the nature.

Therefore, with regards to poet-nature relationship, the difference between Chinese and Western nature poems can be easily seen. In Western nature poems, poets take part in the nature and inject their emotions and feelings into nature, thus making nature subject to poets. For example, the west wind, wave and thunder in Shelly’s *Ode to the West Wind* as

well as the nightingale, tree and moonlight in Keats’ *Ode to a Nightingale* are all injected with the poet’s emotions and carry symbolic meanings. To put it simple, all the images act as the instruments to express the poet’s emotions and feelings. The images are separated from the poet and just make short communication with the poet. However, in Chinese nature poems, the poet is integrated with nature, who hides in the nature and enables nature to express itself.

3. CAUSES OF THE DIFFERENCES

Based on the above analysis, Chinese and Western nature poems are different in themes, images and poet-nature relationship, which is deeply rooted in the different cultural background of China and the West. Here three aspects, namely, religious culture, aesthetic concept and philosophical idea are explored for the causes of the above differences.

3.1 Religious Culture

As an important part of culture, religion is one major cause of the differences between Chinese and Western nature poems, especially the difference in themes.

Religious culture plays a crucial role in every aspect of Western life. Due to the deeply rooted religious concepts, religion becomes a major subject matter of literature, including poetry. Therefore, it is without doubt that religion serves as one major theme of nature poems. Besides, for individuals, the god possesses a mysterious force. Thus, in the creation of nature poems, poets consciously or unconsciously put the mysterious force on the objective nature. In this case, nature, in Western nature poems, is divine. Therefore, religion becomes the eternal theme of Western nature poems.

Unlike the West, China is a country without fixed religious belief. Chinese people pay more attention to man rather than god. Therefore, Chinese nature poems give more focus to people’s life such as individual fates. Besides, with the lack of religious belief, a great number of Chinese people rely on Confucianism which puts great emphasis on individuals’ involvement into and contribution to the nation. In this case, influenced by Confucianism, Chinese natural poets are inclined to themes related to politics and history.

In a word, due to the difference in religious culture, Chinese and Western nature poems are different in themes.

3.2 Aesthetic Concept

The different aesthetic concepts are another cause for the differences between Chinese and Western nature poems, especially the difference in images.

The aesthetics of the West emphasizes the beauty of sublimity, which mainly refers to the beauty that can bring a sense of astonishment. In *On the Sublime*, Cassius Longinus, a Hellenistic rhetorician advocates the beauty of “the extraordinary, the exquisite and the grand” (Zhu, 1984, p.115). The aesthetic concept of Cassius

Longinusa coincides with that of Hermann Kant, who also emphasizes the beauty of sublimity, especially the quantity and power of sublimity. Edmund Burke, British literary theorist in the 18th century, has also emphasized the concept of sublimity in his works. In nature poems, the beauty of sublimity is mainly reflected in the selection of sublime images. In other words, influenced by the aesthetic concept advocating the beauty of sublimity, Western nature poems mainly include images that are sublime, grand and masculine, thus creating the sublime poetic world.

Unlike the West, China advocates the beauty of modesty. As Li Zehou points out in his masterpiece entitled *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, the Chinese aesthetic tradition is mainly based on Confucianism and the essence of Confucianism is modesty (p.V). Therefore, the beauty of modesty is the major aesthetic concept of China. Actually, the beauty of modesty is contrast to the beauty of sublimity, which refers to the beauty that is ordinary, gentle and tender. Besides, influenced by Taoism, Buddhism and Metaphysics, China tends to pursue the beauty that is natural and tranquil. Under the influence of the aesthetic concept that advocates the beauty of modesty, images in Chinese nature poems often come from the ordinary things that are tender, gender and feminine in the nature, thus creating the poetic world that is modest and tranquil.

Due to different aesthetic concepts, Chinese and Western nature poems have differences in the images and the poetic world created by the images. Chinese nature poems prefer ordinary, tender and gentle images while Western nature poems prefer sublime, grand and forceful images.

3.3 Philosophical Idea

The different philosophical idea is also one reason causing the differences between Chinese and Western nature poems, especially the difference in poet-nature relationship.

The philosophical tradition of the West advocates the separation of the subject and object in which man is the subject while the world is the object. As the subject, man regards the world as the object for perception and aims to conquer and change the objective world. This philosophical tradition can be dated back to Protagoras, an ancient Greek philosopher, who holds that man is the measure of everything on the earth. Then, Aristotle put forward a set of philosophical theories to enable man to know, conquer and change the objective world. Later, Descartes and Hegel also agree on the separation of the subject and object, holding that confrontation exists between the subject and object. Francis Bacon also supports the idea that man as the subject can know and change the objective world. Therefore, it can be seen that the Western philosophy insists on the separation of the subject and object, which is reflected by the separation

between the poet as the aesthetic subject and nature as the aesthetic object in nature poems. Hence, in Western nature poems, poets are always beyond nature and can be seen in the poems.

By contrast, Chinese philosophical tradition emphasizes the unity of the subject and object, that is, the unity of man and nature, which originates from the world views of the ancient times. It is *The Classic of Changes* that firstly mentioned the forces of nature. Then, Confucianism advocates the harmony between man and nature. Besides, Taoism also emphasizes the unity of man and nature. Later, the Buddhism also stresses the unity of man and nature. Therefore, it can be seen that Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism all advocate the philosophical idea of the unity of man and nature, which is reflected in the unity of the poet and nature in nature poems. In Chinese nature poems, the poet is in the nature but not influences nature.

Based on different philosophical ideas, Chinese and Western nature poems are different, especially in poet-nature relationship. The West's separation of subject and object leads to the separation of poet and nature in Western nature poems, while China's unity of man and nature contributes to the unity of poet and nature in nature poems. In Chinese nature poems, poets are not beyond nature but in the same place with nature, who are integrated with nature.

CONCLUSION

Due to different cultural background, Chinese and Western nature poems take their own characteristics, playing a great role in both national and world literature. Based on the above analysis, the differences between Chinese and Western nature poems are mainly displayed in three aspects, namely, themes, images and poet-nature relationships. Chinese nature poems prefer themes of politics and history as well as images of the gentle and feminine, advocating the unity of the poet and the nature. In contrast, Western nature poems prefer themes of religion and love with images of the sublime and masculine, advocating poet over nature. Various causes lead to these differences. Specifically speaking, the difference in themes is caused by the different religious culture in which China emphasizes man while Western emphasizes god. The difference in images is resulted from the different aesthetic conception in which China upholds beauty of modesty while the West upholds beauty of sublimity. As for the difference in poet-nature relationship, the cause is the different philosophical idea in which China advocates the unity of man and nature while the West advocates the separation of the subject and object. In a conclusion, in face of the same nature, Chinese and Western nature poems show differences in such aspects as themes, images and poet-nature relationship, which however display different charm.

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