

Comparison Between Natural Poems in China and England

Xintong Cai^{1,a,*}

¹Jilin University, Qianjin Street 2699, Changchun, Jilin, China

a. caixt9921@mails.jlu.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: This article mainly compares the works of Chinese landscape and pastoral poets with those of early British Romantic poets, with the foremost comparison poets being Wang Wei, Meng Haoran, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. The similarity of their works lies in their shared theme of nature. However, they use different images and have dissimilar attitudes towards nature, which stem from the era and cultural background in which they live. In the Tang Dynasty of the ninth century, Chinese poets enjoyed describing birds, forests, and musical instruments in their poetry. They are first and foremost politicians and then considered poets. Influenced by traditional Chinese culture and Buddhism, they yearn for the unity of heaven and man and the world's transcendence. In 19th century England, English poets tended to depict clouds, grass, and water waves in their works. They only have the identity of poets, dislike industrial cities, and love nature. This article will compare the selection of natural intentions, attitudes towards nature, and the factors behind their aesthetic pursuits by poets from two countries through reasoning and analysis.

Keywords: Natural poems, Wangwei, Wordsworth.

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the differences and causes of nature poetry between Chinese and English. The landscape and pastoral school represent China during the prosperous Tang Dynasty, while Britain is defined by the romanticism of the 19th century [1]. The differences between them mainly lie in the use of imagery and attitudes towards nature, and the reasons for promoting these differences lie in the differences between Chinese and Western cultures and the times they lived in.

2. Comparison of Imagery in Chinese and English Natural Poetry

The most apparent difference between Chinese landscape pastoral poetry and British lyrical ballads is their imagery. The Chinese landscape and pastoral school mainly emerged during the Wei and Jin dynasties and went through two generations of poets, represented by Tao Yuanming and Xie Lingyun. Its creation reached its peak during the prosperous Tang Dynasty when Wang Wei and Meng Haoran lived. This school constitutes one of the two major groups in the literature of the prosperous Tang Dynasty [2]. Their theme is the Shanshui Tianyuan School, which mainly describes natural landscapes such as mountains and waters, sings about rural life and primarily focuses on rural scenery and the labor of farmers, herdsman, fishermen, etc. It reflects leisurely and tranquil thoughts and emotions with elegant colors and profound artistic conception. They like to adopt the form of five characters ancient script and five characters quatrain. Meng Haoran and Wang Wei represented the

Tang Dynasty's landscape and pastoral poetry school, as well as Chu Guangxi, Chang Jian, Zuyong, Pei Di, Qi Buqian, and others. Among them, Wang Weicheng was particularly outstanding. He was both a poet and a painter, able to apply painting principles to poetry, painting within poetry, and painting within poetry, significantly influencing later generations.

The imagery used by landscape and pastoral poets represented by Wang Wei is very concentrated. Taking Wang Wei's three nature poems as an example:

After the new rain in the empty mountains, the weather is late in autumn.

The bright moon shines among the pine trees, and clear springs and rocks flow upwards.

The bamboo noise returns to the washing woman, and the lotus moves down the fishing boat. Rest freely in spring, Wang Sun can stay.

Sitting alone in a secluded bamboo grove, playing the piano and letting out a long howl.

The people in the deep forest don't know that the bright moon will shine upon them.

In 'Deer and Wood', no one is seen in the empty mountain, but one can hear the sound of people's voices.

Return to the deep forest, moon's shining on the moss again. (Translated by the author)

It can be concluded that Wang Wei mainly describes the scene imagery of "mountains" and "bamboo forests", and the bright moon, moss, and qin are also his commonly used choices. His poems have no obvious plot, mainly depicting a quiet and ethereal environment, typical Chinese mountain and forest environment, and the poet's lonely chanting in it [3]. This not only embodies the typical characteristics of Tang Dynasty landscape and pastoral poetry but also showcases Wang Wei's spirit, as evidenced by Meng Haoran's poetry:

Passing through the Old Man's Village, the old man with chicken and millet invited me to home

The green tree village borders, and the green mountain wall slopes outward

Open the Xuan Noodle Field Garden, drink and talk about mulberry and hemp.

On Double Ninth Day, come back with chrysanthemums.

(Translated by Author)

Night Return to Lumen Mountain Song

The bell of the mountain temple rings, and the day is already dim. The sound of the fishing beam crossing is noisy.

People followed the sandy shore towards Jiangcun, while Yu also took a boat back to Lumen.

The moonlight shining on the deer gate opened the smoke tree and suddenly arrived at Pang Gong's hiding place.

The path of the rock gate pine is long and lonely, only secluded people come and go.

(Translated by Author)

The representative writers of early British Romanticism are the "Lakeside School" poets. From the subsequent distinction between positive and negative Romanticism, the "Lakeside School" belongs to negative Romanticism. Poets Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey reminisced about medieval and patriarchal rural life. Faced with the rise of industrial civilization at that time, they held an attitude of disgust and opposition, passionately praising rural life and nature and describing lakes, mountains, and fields. Wordsworth is representative of this aspect, and the images he selects are often natural, fresh, simple, and harmonious.

Written in Early Spring

*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.
Through primrose tufts, in that green bower, The periwinkle trailed its wreaths
And 'tis my faith that every flower Enjoys the air it breathes.
The birds around me hopped and played, Their thoughts I cannot measure: —But the least
motion which they made It seemed a thrill of pleasure.
The budding twigs spread out their fan, To catch the breezy air
And I must think, do all I can, That there was pleasure there
If this belief from heaven be sent, If such be Nature's holy plan,
Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man?*

I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud

*I wandered lonely as a cloud That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd, A host, of golden daffodils
Beside the lake, beneath the trees, Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.*

Combining these two-representative works of Wordsworth, we can see that he outlined a pure and thriving natural environment. He mainly chooses "flowers", "grass", and "breeze" as imagery. Compared with Wang Wei's poetry, it can be said that Wordsworth conveys the most incredible feeling to readers, not silence and emptiness, but freshness and freedom. Wordsworth's images are primarily new and dynamic, while Wang Wei's images tend to be ancient and static. In comparing imagery, we can see some cultural differences between the East and the West. The nature that Britain advocates is fresh, beautiful, and rural. Nature is an independent object, and people are born from scenery and emotions [4]. The nature that Chinese people like is quiet, distant, and in the mountains. Nature is unspeakable and can only be understood. It is a beautiful place of spiritual republicanism with people. It combines heaven and man and expresses feelings through scenery.

The second difference between Chinese and English nature poetry lies in their attitudes towards nature. Although both of them are describing nature, it is evident that due to differences in social and cultural backgrounds, there are different needs and positioning for 'nature'. The unity of heaven and man has been the pursuit of Chinese culture since ancient times. The philosophical idea of "Heaven and Earth coexist with me, and all things are one with me" has been expounded in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, indicating its important position in Chinese culture. Human beings are immersed in nature, their personality and greed are lost in the mountains and rivers. They do not pursue independence, but long to be in sync with nature. Nature is me, and I am nature. The cycle of life and death is endless, with no desires or desires. The cultural pursuit of "unity of heaven and man" guides poets to seek "realm" in nature, rather than "beauty" or "pleasure". In ancient Chinese poets' descriptions of nature, there were relatively few lines that directly described or praised natural scenery, which generally served the needs of romantic poets. However, for poets of the landscape and pastoral school, they tended to "create scenery". Not directly describing scenery or narrative, creating a picturesque atmosphere for readers.

Taking Wang Wei's '*In the Mountains*' as an example,

*White stones emerge from the Jingxi River,
and the red leaves are sparse in the cold weather.
There is no rain on the mountain road,
and the air is green and wet.*
(Translated by Author)

Wang Wei uses human sensory functions to create an autumn scenery of white stones, red leaves, and flowing streams. If readers are in the mountain road, they can feel both the absence of rain and the emptiness and coldness of the mountain road [5]. There is no direct expression of emotions, but readers naturally feel lonely, slightly cold, but leisurely in the artistic conception. Wang Wei's other poem '*Birds Singing in the Stream*' also reflects the extreme skill of Chinese poets in creating landscapes.

*When people are idle, osmanthus flowers fall
when the night is quiet, the mountains are empty
When the moon rises, it startles the mountains and birds, and when they sing in the spring
streams.*
(Translated by Author)

He still used language to construct a painting like scenery, without the "I" in the painting, only all moving animals and nature. Birds are chirping, osmanthus flowers are drifting, but the artistic conception is extremely peaceful. This is what Chinese poets call "using movement to complement stillness", where movement is used to write about objects and stillness is used to create scenery. This is what Chinese poets pursue in nature, where the two forget and merge into one[6].

Wordsworth treated nature as a relatively independent subject in his poetry, and the connection between humans and nature is the relationship between "appreciation" and "being appreciated". Watching nature is Wordsworth's "hobby" and a way to escape from industrial society. In nature he shapes and towns have names, scenery has specific shapes, and there are distances between objects. He has his own actions, such as "riding a horse" and "going...", and he will experience the process of inference and action, with a relatively clear overall description of the actions. And in his poetry, there will be bystanders and dialogues.

*Composed Upon Westminster Bridge
Written by William Wordsworth (1770-1850)
Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty;
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:*

*Dear God! The very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!*

Wordsworth selected famous scenery with names and sincerely praised the scenery with exclamations. There are many buildings in this city, and in these magnificent landscapes, the author developed his own feelings: love, and then expressed his love directly. In Wordsworth's works, the poet's attitude towards nature is mainly praise, using more outward language.

3. Behind the Differences

What causes Chinese and English poetry to have the same theme of nature, but present different effects? Firstly, Chinese poets have been educated in Confucian culture since ancient times. Even when they were involved in Buddhism and Taoism, Confucianism remained the mainstream system of the cultural class during the Tang Dynasty when Buddhist temples were flourishing [7]. Even Wang Wei, when he was young, passionately pursued fame and fortune. Before creating landscape poetry, his main writing content was frontier poetry, praising the soldiers who defended the border and the scenery of the desert, and expressing his patriotic feelings. He began to create landscape poetry on a large scale when he entered society for some time and finally became tired of external things. His family has influenced Wang Wei and has always held Buddhist beliefs. Meng Haoran, who created during the same period as Wang Wei, can serve as an example of the influence of fame on landscape poets. Meng Haoran lived in seclusion in the mountains and was highly respected, but he has always held a grudge against himself for not being able to achieve fame and serve the country. Therefore, although mountains and waters can comfort Meng Haoran's soul, one thing cannot be ignored: it is one of the ways Meng Haoran pursues fame and fortune.

The poem '*Returning to the South Mountain at the End of the Year*' is a lyrical work in which he is unable to seek fame, immerses himself in nature, and feels self-pity:

The northern gate rests and submits a memorial, while the southern mountain returns to my humblabode.

Not being wise and abandoning the master, being sick and distant from old friends.

White hair accelerates old age, while green sun drives the end of the year.

Always holding onto worries and unable to sleep, the window is empty on a moonlit night.

(Translated by Author)

Secondly, Chinese poets were influenced by Taoist culture and enjoyed pursuing abstract philosophy in their poetry [8]. Since the Warring States period, natural phenomena have become an environment where philosophy can be expressed. For example, when spring comes, all things give birth, and poets feel the cycle of all things. Alternatively, the autumn rain hitting the leaves and branches, the annual cycle of reincarnation, makes the poet feel the sadness of his insignificance in the vast universe and the impermanence of all things. Tang dynasty landscape poets continued this tradition.

For example, Meng Haoran's '*Spring Dawn*'

Spring sleeps without waking up, and birds sing everywhere.

After one night of wind and showers, how many are the fallen flowers? (Translated by the author)

On a rainy spring night, the poet heard the chirping of birds and the sound of wind and rain, and thus pondered how many flowers of this season would be blown down by the wind and rain? A short

poem can be described as reaching the pinnacle of creation and containing philosophy, which elevates daily life and scenery to an aesthetic level.

Finally, the natural landscapes of China and the West should be considered. Therefore, China's reclusive areas are often characterized by mountainous terrain or riverside areas, and the commonly seen images are "mountains", "forests", and "bamboo"[9]. The natural landscape of the UK consists of plateaus, hills, mountains, plains, and basins, hence the frequent expressions of "grassland", "flowers", and "streams".

4. Conclusion

Although both focus on nature as their central theme, there is a gap of nearly a thousand years between the two. The society in which Tang Dynasty nature poets lived was the pinnacle of Chinese feudal society, especially during the prosperous Tang Dynasty when Wang Wei and Meng Haoran were in high demand for fame and even became a means of seeking fame and fortune [10]. The British naturalist, in the early stages of industrial society, had already focused on themes that were very different from those of medieval feudal poets. They are contrary to Chinese poets who are enthusiastic about fame serving the country and staying away from the world. They devote their physical and mental enthusiasm to the countryside, yearning for the rural life of the past era and expressing doubts about the prevailing civilization. So, compared to Chinese poets, they are outside the tide of the times. Even if Chinese poets venture into the mountains and forests, it is not fundamentally a departure from mainstream culture. The difference in Chinese and English translations has influenced the differences in poetry with the same theme. Chinese and English poetry use different imagery and have different attitudes towards nature, mainly due to the troubles faced by poets in feudal society and capitalist industrial civilization. The inward-leaning and philosophical nature of Chinese culture and the tendency towards straightforwardness and objective praise of nature in British culture are also reasons for the differences between the two. Secondly, the influence of Buddhist and Taoist culture plays an undeniable role, and the natural landscape and traditional culture of the country also influence the artistic style of poetry.

References

- [1] Gao Mi. *Chinese landscape pastoral poetry and British romantic poetry from the perspective of heterogeneous civilizations* [J]. *Journal of Lanzhou Institute of Education*, 2017, 33 (06): 27-28+31
- [2] Li Jing, Liu Fengshan. *The Natural Poetry View of "Harmony of Heaven and Man" in Chinese Classical Landscape Pastoral Poetry and British Romantic Poetry* [J]. *Journal of Jixi University*, 2013, 13 (12): 118-120. DOI: 10.16792/j.cnki.1672-6758.2013.12.042
- [3] Zhang Rugui. *The Causes of the Inner Spiritual Differences between Chinese and Western Pastoral Poetry* [J]. *Journal of Chongqing Institute of Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2008, 22 (12): 126-128
- [4] Ma Hanqian. *An Analysis of the Influence of Cultural Differences on the Artistic Style of Poetry: A Comparison between Wang Wei and Wordsworth* [J]. *Science and Technology Information*, 2009, (14): 113
- [5] Yin Shaoping, Zhang Yong. *"Cognitive Understanding of Ecological Discourse in Pastoral Poetry: A Case Study of Wordsworth's 'The Lonely Clover Girl'"*. *Modern English*, 2020, (08): 88-91+99
- [6] Yang Bo. *Comparison of Aesthetic Consciousness between Chinese Classical Landscape Poetry and British Romantic Natural Poetry* [J]. *Journal of Beihang University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2004, (01): 72-76. DOI: 10.13766/j.bhsk.1008-2204.01.015
- [7] Tang Quanyu, Li Daming. *Nature and Mind: A Brief Discussion on the Two Commonalities of the Influence of British Romanticism on Wordsworth and Chinese Metaphysics on the Writing Styles of Xie Lingyun and Tao Yuanming*. *Science and Education Review (First Half)*, 2006, (11): 128-129
- [8] Li Zhenwei. *The Timeliness of Landscape Painting Creation* [N]. *China Art Journal*, September 2, 2024 (004)
- [9] Zhou Luhong, Wang Bei. *Wang Wei's Landscape and Rural Poetry and Healthy Lifestyle* [J]. *Modern Distance Education in Traditional Chinese Medicine*, 2024, 22 (16): 151-154
- [10] Sun Shuangjin, Wang Na. *Only the moon understands my heart*. *"Colorful Chinese"*, 2024, (33): 28-31