

## Nature Writing in Contemporary Poetry

### --Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature

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#### Abstract

**Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature** is a collection of poems on nature by ten contemporary poets, including Shen Wei, Hu Xian, Li Yuansheng, Li Shaojun, Chen Xianfa, Xin, Jiannan, Lin Li, Bei Qiao, and Feng Na. With the persistent pursuit of life and the return of poetry to nature, the poets, in their silent observation of nature and in-depth gaze, mingle with the natural objects in their hearts and minds, and are sensually one with them, comprehending the way of nature and questioning the true meaning of life. From this, we can see that some contemporary poets uphold the creative concepts of poetic law and nature, and the aesthetic interests of simplicity and daily life, and construct the realm of poetry and beauty of real touching and true feelings with plain and simple poetic language.

#### Keywords

Contemporary poetry; nature writing; everydayness; Above the Peaks.

#### 1. Preface

Nature is an eternal theme in Chinese literature, especially in poetry. It can be said that the tradition of ancient Chinese poetry was gradually established on the basis of "nature". "In the past, when I was gone, the willows were still clinging to me; today, when I am here, the rain and snow are falling." Since the *Poetry Classic*, nature has been an important resource for poets to recite over and over again. However, people nowadays are becoming more and more distant from nature, and poetry has gradually become separated from its original intimate nature. Poets in modernized cities, whose thoughts have been eroded by the post-industrial era and consumerism, lack the life experience of intimacy with nature, and have lost their soaring and vigorous imagination. In the poems, alienated, grotesque and irrational life experiences replace natural scenery as the main elements. However, while poetry is gradually moving away from the tradition of natural writing towards the so-called modernity, its inner vigorous vitality is diminishing. As a result, the demand for reflection on modernity, the desire to rebuild the relationship between human beings and nature, and the call for the return of natural elements in poetry have become the conscious pursuit of some contemporary poets. *Above the Peaks* contains ten contemporary poets' nature poems, which show that the attraction of nature to poets has remained unchanged throughout the ages. When poets who are in a hurry in their fast-paced lives walk towards nature, they will still involuntarily stop and gaze at it, forgetting themselves, feeling the vastness of the universe and the boundlessness of the earth, and realizing the smallness of life and the slowness of the chances of their own existence, sighing at themselves for their humbleness and flattered by the experience.

## 2. Returning to nature, the home of my heart

The ancients were close to the mountains and the water, with their misty waves, cold forests and mountain streams, flowing water and flowers, smoke and clouds, and the list of natural features in classical poetry is endless. The ancients were friends with nature, wandering freely in the vast landscape, gazing at the mountains and the water, observing the outside world, and letting their hearts go free. Today's poets in the city, on the other hand, are unable to come and go as they please between the mundane and the natural, as Shen Wei says: "The ancients wrote in the light of nature, while today we think in the light of man-made things, and the writing is hard and the words are hoarse."<sup>1</sup> In *Above the Peaks*, the poet has a strong desire to rebuild the relationship between human beings and nature, and the poem presents a strong sense of returning to the countryside, i.e., an obsessive pursuit of the return of life to nature. This realization is mainly presented through the contrast between urban and rural areas, the present and the past, human nature and naturalness.

### 2.1. Spiritual convergence of mind and matter

*Wenxin Diao Long - Ming Poetry* said: "People are endowed with seven emotions, should be things Sense, the sense of things to express their aspirations, nothing is natural."<sup>2</sup> Poets feel the silent attribute of natural objects in their quiet observation of nature: "We are silent together / Waiting quietly for the flowers to fall in our tea and the grass to grow in our hearts."<sup>3</sup> Infected by natural objects, they enjoy the state of silence and listen attentively to the original color notes of nature. And then the eyes from the outside to the inside, to the natural quiet to stabilize the chaos of my heart, and in the quiet thinking, understanding, meditation, emptiness, almost unconscious state so that the poet free from the rationality of the boundaries, the idea of galloping in the sky and the earth, arriving at the heart and the object, the spirit of the state of freedom of the mind.

The pre-Qin Taoist philosophy of "man is the law of the earth, the law of the earth is the law of the sky, the law of the sky is the law of the road, the law of the road is nature" made the pioneers realize that man is a part of nature, the only way to comply with nature, in order to achieve the great realm of impunity. The Buddhist concept of "color and emptiness", "everything is mind", and the Zen Buddhist concept of "understanding the mind and seeing the nature", "transmitting the mind with the mind", "not making words", and "not writing words", have made us realize that human beings are part of nature. The concepts of "no writing" have influenced poets' aesthetic taste. Contemporary poets feel the stillness of nature and my heart in quiet observation, and ultimately through meditation and other ways to achieve the blending of things with me, the way of sensing things has an allusion to the Buddhist concept of spiritual cultivation. In the blending of things, poets realize the "Tao" of everything and create pure and simple poems. This kind of poetry is nature, and the aesthetic interest of not carving and sculpting is similar to the concept of Zen Buddhism, which is "epiphany" and "no writing", while the poetic way of thinking that follows nature and takes the Tao as the poem is also in line with the Taoist thought.

### 2.2. Returning to Nature with Poetry

Although most of the poets active in the poetry world nowadays live in the city, most of them spent their teenage years in the countryside, and had the experience of living in close contact with nature. When poets who have witnessed the vast and mysterious wilderness, the clean and untainted sky, and the birds flying freely enter the city, they immediately feel the huge gap between the urban and rural areas, and they are disappointed by the heart of the divide, feel

<sup>1</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> LiuXie, 《The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons》, Shenyang: Wanjuan Publishing Company, 2008 p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 260.

the weightlessness and difficulty of life, and cannot help but miss the countryside, where they can put their hearts. Their poems often contrast the crowded, noisy, contradictory and fast pace of the city with the openness, serenity, harmony and slow life of the countryside: "We ate meat, drank wine, and made a lot of noise / The oak tree stood upright, stood still, and didn't move"<sup>4</sup>. With a strong sense of returning to their hometowns, the poets reflect on people's pursuit of "modernity" by contrasting urban and rural areas, the present and the past, and human nature with nature. If modernity represents the alienation of man and nature, the technological leap and the numbness of people's hearts, as well as the loss of the poet's imagination, then this modernity should be questioned. Poets also reveal a strong ecological awareness in their poems. Shen Reed's call is deafening: "Lop Nor is dying/..... part of us/is——dying——going! ——"<sup>5</sup> This borderland poet experienced the increasingly sharp contradiction between man and nature, and criticized the arrogance and ignorance of man's desire to conquer nature with his poems.

### 3. Melting in Nature, Thoughts of Life

Mr. Nan Huaijin pointed out in *The Analects of Confucius*, "Chinese culture after the Tang and Song dynasties is to be described as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, which means that it has become three big stores. Buddhism is like a department store, Taoism is like a drugstore, and Confucianism's Confucius and Mencius thought is a grain store."<sup>6</sup> The three schools of thought of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism are the three great spiritual halls of Chinese culture for people to enter and exit at different times and to adapt to different needs, in order to adjust their bodies and minds and live with ease. Confucianism advocates the preservation of the heart, Taoism emphasizes the cultivation of the body, and Buddhism seeks to understand the heart and see the nature, with the exploration of life being the most fundamental proposition of each school. Formed on the basis of agricultural civilization, the ancient Chinese consciousness of life, which is a continuation of the ideas of the three schools of thought, emphasizes not only profound sensual experience, but also rational contemplation of individual life. Throughout the ages, poems of all generations have carried the national brand of life consciousness. Contemporary poets have not only inherited the consciousness of life in ancient poems, but also continued the pursuit of intellectual poetic beauty in modernist poems of the 1930s and 1940s, and injected the connotation of the current era into their poems, questioning the true meaning of life in the process of looking at nature, and strengthening the philosophical penetration of their poems.

#### 3.1. Finding the meaning of life in nature

Nature is an infinite container, which embraces all things in the world and all emotions, when the poet, who is trapped in the trivial personnel to the extent that his mind is confused, walks into the nature, as far as the eye can see is as soft as silver satin valleys, the quiet blue river; as far as the ear can hear is the crickets' lonely chirping, the rustling of the leaves. In this mysterious and profound nature, the poet can not help but feel the impatience and shallowness of the human heart: "I would like to be a worm, a word / read this vast book of the desert"<sup>7</sup>.

The poets recognize the form of life in nature, and while lamenting their humility, they do not confine themselves to self-pity for the individual, but strive to transcend it. Their poems are characterized by the rationale of relativity, that is, the size, length, height, and proximity of everything in nature are all relative: "The spring mountains are made up of tiny wonders."<sup>8</sup> If

<sup>4</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Nan Huaijin, 《The Analects of Confucius》, Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2003 p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 74.

there were no gravel, there would be no desert, and human beings, along with all living beings, participate in the shaping of nature. When poets look at all things with a level head, they not only discover the meaning of life, but also realize its power. Linley writes, "This is the silent plant / This is, on the earth / The word that cannot speak, that renews itself with force."<sup>9</sup> The poets walk into nature with a posture of silence, listen to the teachings of the voice of nature, and are amazed by the vigorous power of life, but also moved by its patience and burden.

### 3.2. Realizing the Wheel of Life and Death in Nature

*Zhuangzi - Grand Master* has the following words, "Death and life, destiny, and the constant of night and day, heaven." Contemporary poets realized the law of reincarnation in nature: "Winter will chill every branch, every leaf, and the earth never feels the loss."<sup>10</sup> Their understanding and attitude towards life and death are in harmony with Taoist philosophical thinking.

Buddhism emphasizes that there are eight sufferings in life, and that only by transcending birth and death and attaining nirvana can one get rid of the cycle of karma and return to freedom and peace. Throughout *Above the Peaks*, it can be found that the poets look at life and death in a similar way to the Buddhist concept of life and death. "To live, stale and banal / Love is a death"<sup>11</sup>. In the poets' eyes, death is the beginning of the next reincarnation. Chen Xianfa writes, "How I long for the irregular reincarnation / to come sooner, my brothers and sisters who inhabit the body of a stork / the body of a toad, the body of a fish, the body of a pine and cypress / to be reunited."<sup>12</sup> The poets are immersed in the vast nature where eagles strike and fish fly, they are aware of the Taoist mind, they are aware of the Buddha's principles, and they look down on the world's troublesome restraints, illnesses, and deaths.

## 4. Poetic Nature, Plain Everyday

Is the so-called feeling in the word said hidden, form overflow is currently said show, "hidden, the text of the emphasis; Show is the only one in the story."<sup>13</sup> This statement reveals the essence of the poem, that is, with words to express the unspoken realm, all the logic, decoration, elaboration is the destruction of the poetic meaning. When the poet's mind is in harmony with the nature, the poetic feelings will gush out uncontrollably, and the poem will naturally show the most essential simplicity and plainness, with the truth and true feelings that can touch the heart the most. Li Yuansheng said in his talk on creation, "What nature opens to me by chance determines the appearance of my poem."<sup>14</sup> To know the silence by words and to follow the nature of poetry are the common creative concepts and poetic pursuits of the poets in *Above the Peaks*.

### 4.1. Simple, plain, everyday language

Bateson once said, "The characteristics of the times in a poem should not be sought in the poet, but in the language of the poem."<sup>15</sup> Harmonious sound and neatly arranged dialogues were the aesthetic pursuits of the ancients; intelligible and clear, close to the daily life are the aesthetic expectations of the contemporaries. Throughout *Above the Peaks*, it can be found that most of the poems are characterized by everyday vocabulary and colloquial expressions. For example, Shen Reed's poem: "Every drizzly day, his old cold legs / ache so much that he can't cross a

<sup>9</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 252.

<sup>10</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 327.

<sup>11</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 151.

<sup>13</sup> LiuXie, 《The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons》, Shenyang: Wanjian Publishing Company, 2008 p. 376.

<sup>14</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> Vellek Warren, 《A Theory of Literature》, Beijing: Life-reading-Xinzhishi Sanlian Bookstore, 1984 p. 174.

short horse"<sup>16</sup>. He doesn't avoid the use of everyday words such as "old cold legs", which is close to the life and emotion of modern people.

Contemporary poets pay attention to the modern transformation of traditional imagery, they refine poetic meaning in ordinary and tiny nature, and the imagery is characterized by detailing, living, and rationalization. For example, Hu Xian's "Pebbles": "You are constantly losing, first the hard edges/then the smooth, increasingly submissive body"<sup>17</sup>. It expresses the philosophical understanding of life and humanity with objects that can be found everywhere.

The poets' pursuit of poetic nature is also reflected in their restraint of emotion. The "blanks" in the poems become the poets' secretive means, calling on the readers to fill in the gaps of meaning. As Chen Xian says, "Clarity of insight occurs only in reading"<sup>18</sup>. A large number of questions appear in his poems, such as: "Where are the trees that take the beauty of being withered / Where are the people who abandon me and never stop walking"<sup>19</sup>. This reflects his understanding of "Emptiness", as he says, "Those empties are never empty, those empties have different faces."<sup>20</sup>

#### 4.2. Real and authentic everyday situations

The sentimentalization of nature began in the Wei and Jin dynasties, and Zong Baihua pointed out that "the Jin discovered nature outwardly, and their own deep feelings inwardly"<sup>21</sup>. The sentimentalized view of nature emphasized the poet's heartfelt understanding of landscape. As a result, the poets were touched by nature and created a beautiful realm of poetry by their feelings. Li Shaojun said that the core of situation poetry lies in "devotion, concentration, focus, and framing, focusing on the so-called sense of scene, scene and camera."<sup>22</sup> The poet's feelings born out of an epiphany in nature are difficult to figure out, and the only way to make them into art is to freeze them in the realm.

In *Above the Peaks*, the poet's poetic environment is shaped without any trace, and the sensitive poet is able to obtain the emotional experience of striking the heart and objects in the daily life, and then focuses and fixes the subject-object unity in the form of poetry. The poetic environment is often fresh and simple, with the true feelings of calling others by their own heart. Beiqiao writes: "These flowers and grasses, pressed by me / Is it pain, or is it luck / Cows, sheep, are looking forward to my departure / I sit on the hillside, legs coiled / In those years, Grandfather used to sit under the tree like this"<sup>23</sup>. The plain language portraying the scene of the plateau of leisure can be seen in the attachment to the natural countryside, and the true feelings can be seen in the plainness.

### 5. Concluding remarks

People who are physically and mentally exhausted in the fast-paced city of traffic and horseback riding only focus on rushing, but forget to look up at the sky. Looking at *Above the Peaks*, we can find that some contemporary poets are striving to regain the heart-to-heart relationship between man and nature in the modern society where nature is gradually disappearing. They travel in nature, resonate with mountains, rivers, grasses and trees, flowers, birds, insects and fish, abandon mundane distractions, unload the heart of the shape of the service, understand the laws of nature, and contemplate the significance of life. They uphold the aesthetic interest

<sup>16</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 32.

<sup>17</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 57.

<sup>18</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 189.

<sup>19</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 171.

<sup>20</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 181.

<sup>21</sup> Zong Baihua, 《The Complete Works of Zong Baihua: Volume 2》, Hefei: Anhui Education Press, 2008 p. 273.

<sup>22</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 145.

<sup>23</sup> Li Shaojun and Bei Qiao, 《Centered on Above the Peaks: Selected Poems by Ten Poets Writing about Nature》, Beijing: China Books Press, 2021 p. 298.

and pursuit of poetry that poetry is nature, and create an environment with feelings, so that the poems present a simple and pure, free and clear sound like birdsong, like the original color notes of nature, awakening the original touching of the world's heart.