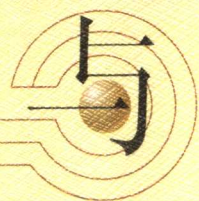


# TRADITION AND CREATION

# 传统



# 独创

## ESSAYS IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

——  
古今中外文学论集

「美」曾理／著

[USA] Zeng Li

贵州人民出版社

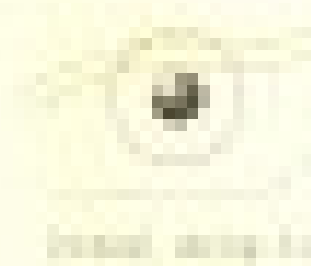
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古今中外文学论衡

（第三卷）





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## Beyond the "Wang River": An Exploration of the Chan Spirit in the Nature Poetry of Wang Wei<sup>[1]</sup>

### 提 要

在中国浩瀚的诗歌创作和诗学里,自唐以来“援禅入诗”或“以禅说诗”常常是一种风尚。作诗、论诗似乎跟参禅一样,都讲究一个“悟”:悟禅境,悟诗境。本文试图通过对王维的一些自然诗的分析,具体探究一下诗与禅的关系。在对王维著名的《辋川集》里的自然诗进行了分析讨论后,我们了解到,与其他不少唐代士大夫诗人一样,王维诗歌创作的想象力在很大程度上受到禅宗的启迪。正是在禅宗思想的影响下,王维才在其诗作中展示出一种平淡含蓄、自然清幽的审美情趣。由此观之,他自然诗中的恬静的意象、“无我”的境界以及山水直观化的奇妙力量,又无一不在有效地传达着禅意。

*Vast and broad, the wide cold current;  
 Gray and black, the dark autumn rain.  
 You ask about Zhongnan Mountain:  
 My heart knows beyond white clouds.*

This poem, entitled “Answering Pei Di” (Da Pei Di), is one of the famous nature poems written by Wang Wei (701 – 761). Its seemingly simple form and its aloof and tranquil tone reveal the poet’s cosmological experience through which the poet and the universe are interfused as one. To a large extent, this kind of experience is often expressed not only in Wang Wei’s nature poems but also in many other famous poets’ works. The well known Tang poem “Snow – Bound River” (Jiangxue) by Liu Zongyuan (773 – 819), for example, conveys the same experience:

*A hundred mountains and no birds,  
 A thousand paths without a footprint;  
 A little boat, a bamboo cloak,  
 An old man fishing in the cold river – snow.* <sup>[2]</sup>

Often enough, this cosmological experience expressed in Chinese poetry is referred to as “Chan jing”, or “Chan qu”, meaning the Chan realm or the Chan spirit.

As a matter of fact, in the vast literature of Chinese poetry and poetics, there is continual reference to Chan, a peculiarly Chinese version of Buddhism. Historically, many Chinese scholar poets emphasized “Chan meanings” in good poems; and many critics repeatedly related Chan to poetry. Yan Yu, the famous twelfth – century poetry critic, for instance, says: “Generally speaking, the Way of Chan lies in subtle enlightenment, the way of poetry also lies in enlightenment.” <sup>[3]</sup> Today, such phrases as “Chan shi” or “shi Chan”, meaning Chan poetry, can still be seen in critical articles about classical Chinese poetry.

Indeed, Chan, which arose in the Tang Dynasty and advocates emptiness and achievement of inner self – realization in its larger outlines, had a far – reaching impact on Chinese poetry over many centuries. But the crucial question is, how does Chan influence Chinese poetry? Or, what possible relationship can there be between Chan and Chinese poetry? It seems impossible to answer this question in words, for Chan is itself inexpressible. In other words, what Chan emphasizes is a felt rather than a known reality of things. Nevertheless, since it is a general agreement that Chan is pervasively woven into Chinese poetry, it is worthwhile to try to examine Chan tendencies in Chinese poetry. Therefore, a task taken up in the present paper is to explore the Chan spirit in Wang Wei's nature poetry through an analysis of a handful of representative poems in his "*Wang River Collection*" (*Wangchuan ji*). I chose Wang Wei's nature poems rather than his Buddhist poems for this study following the general views that there are always subtle Chan or Buddhist overtones in almost all his nature poems and that most of his Buddhist poems are written allegorically rather than explicitly. Moreover, the quiet imagery, the detached impersonality, and the power of visualization of landscapes in most of Wang Wei's nature poems are, I believe, a particularly effective means of communicating the Chan spirit. The focus of the analysis in this study will be on the images in those nature poems since "the image is the constant in all poetry, and every poem is itself an image". [4]

Obviously, this essay's scope does not permit detailed recapitulation of Chan; but the following brief synopsis will highlight the fundamental features of Chan that pertain to Chinese poetry, including that of Wang Wei. [5] Chan is to a large extent a very practical teaching. The aim of Chan is first of all Enlightenment. The Chan Enlightenment, or wu in Chinese, means "to awaken to the fact", or, loosely, "to understand". According to Bodhidharma, man originally has his own ready – made Buddha – nature. Therefore, the basic teaching of Chan is enlightenment of the heart and beholding Buddhahood within oneself. In other words, man is enlightened to his true self. With this enlightenment to his true nature, man is emancipated from his small self or personal ego and eventually



reaches the freedom talked about in Chan. As shown in the Chan tradition, Chan Enlightenment is a spiritual, mysterious, and intuitive experience that is free from all distinctions. Thus, meditation for Chan becomes a kind of intuitive method of realizing one's own Buddha-nature.

The emphasis of Chan upon the experience itself of being enlightened entails a rejection of any stereotyped ascetic practice and rituals. In addition, the Chan doctrine holds that the Buddha-nature is present not only in man but also in all sentient beings. Hui Neng says: "If men in later generations wish to seek the Buddha, they have only to know that the Buddha mind is within sentient beings; then they will be able to know the Buddha. Because the Buddha mind is possessed by sentient beings, apart from sentient beings there is no Buddha mind."<sup>[6]</sup> Therefore, entering into the monastic community is not a condition for the Chan Buddhist to achieve the realization of Buddhahood. Man's Buddha-nature can be apprehended in the midst of his daily activities. Since Chan asks one to see his own Buddha-nature directly and intuitively, it puts stress on practice rather than knowledge. According to the Chan doctrine, logic is a hindrance to the achievement of wu. To the Chan Buddhist, the truth of reality does not lie in the logical and metaphysical language and when the nature of the mind is realized it is not possible to express it verbally. Therefore, from the very beginning, Bodhidharma declares that his doctrine is directly pointing to one's own soul and is not hampered by the canonical teachings.

With the foregoing Chan notions in mind, we shall see how Chan elements are woven into Wang Wei's nature poetry and his poetic vision. Wang Wei is unusual in terms of being equally famous as a poet and an artist. As an artist, he stood out in landscape painting and created a new way of using the ink called *po mo* in treating landscapes. As a poet, he distinguished himself in nature poetry and because of his high achievements in this area he is usually ranked with other two great Tang poets, Li Bai (701-762) and Du Fu (712-770).

It is a common viewpoint shared by scholars of Chinese poetry that the three poets represent respectively in poetry the three main intellectual trends:

Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. In his *Chinese Lyricism*, for instance, Burton Watson summarizes: "... we have noted the Taoist - inspired fantasy that is characteristic of much of Li Po's poetry, and the Confucian idealism and social consciousness so important in that of Tu Fu. A third element that played a major part in the intellectual and spiritual life of the Tang is represented in the poetry of Wang Wei, whose 400 extant works have been described as so many affirmations of the Buddhist faith."<sup>[7]</sup> Indeed, this kind of comment associating Buddhist or Chan tendencies to Wang Wei's poems seems justified when we view the poet's works and his life as a whole.

On the one hand, Wang Wei, usually called the "poetic Buddhist" (Shifo), is said to be the first well known scholar in China who was converted to Chan. From his biography, the indications of his involvement with Chan are certainly clear: his study with the Chan master Dao Guang (681 - 760); his conversion of part of his Lantian Estate into a monastery; and his daily activities in relation to Chan during the late years of his life. On the other hand, his interests in Chan are reflected in many of his works such as poems written to Buddhist monks, poems describing monks' lives, and poems that bear references to the Chan doctrine or Chan practices.

Speaking of Wang Wei's Chan interests, however, we should note that there exists a basic tension in his life between government service and reclusion. The poet's ambivalence towards court service and retreat to nature is widely discussed by Wang Wei scholars and critics. Chen Yixin, in his treatment of Wang Wei's social and political attitudes, writes: "We may say that from the twenty - first year of Kaiyuan (733) when he returned to Changan to the second year of Shangyuan (761) when he died, he was never a formal recluse who hung up his official cap. He was always an official. He was both an official and a recluse simultaneously."<sup>[8]</sup> Again, Pauline Yu points out: "Wang Wei never interrupted his career to cut himself off completely from official duties. Certainly, all the places suggested as possible retreats were quite close to the post he occupied at the time, and rather than living as a total hermit, he seems to have found ways to

divide his time between the court and the country. ”<sup>[9]</sup> When attempting to explain the poet's ambivalence, scholars and critics either emphasize the social and financial reasons for Wang Wei to hold office, or feel uncertain. <sup>[10]</sup> As a matter of fact, in my view, Wang Wei, living in the two styles simultaneously, simply followed those old traditions of reclusion, such as the court reclusion (*chaoyin*) and city reclusion (*shiyin*). As an official who certainly participated in practices of both Taoism and Buddhism, Wang Wei belongs to the group of scholars who followed the so - called middle retirement (*zhongyin*) tradition. <sup>[11]</sup>

Historically, critics of poetry shared a view that the most significant thing in Wang Wei's poetry is that his nature poems communicate profound Chan spirit. The following famous poem, “*Bird Call Valley*” (Niaoming jian), for instance, was highly appreciated and taken as a Chan poem by Hu Yinglin (1551 - 1602), the Ming Dynasty critic: <sup>[12]</sup>

*Man at leisure, cassia flowers fall.*

*The night still, spring mountain empty.*

*The moon emerges, startling mountain birds:*

*At times they call within the spring valley.*

Generally speaking, Chan tendencies in Wang Wei's nature poems lie very deep below the surface. From the Chan view, however, it is this kind of poetic quality that marks Wang Wei's nature poems as the highest type. The most characteristic of this type is probably the poems in the “*Wang River Collection*”.

Twenty quatrains altogether, the “*Wang River Collection*” is a poetic response to the twenty scenic spots of the poet's Wang River Estate. As indicated in the preface to the collection, Wang Wei wrote these quatrains while accompanying his friend Pei Di (b. 716) in the estate. It is said that before these poems were written Wang Wei drew the famous “*Wang River Scroll*” (Wangchuan tu) to describe the twenty beautiful places. Unfortunately, only late imitations of that scroll are left to us.

With tangible and precise natural images in them, almost all of the twenty poems in this collection are pictorial, carrying visual qualities. Thus, when reading them, we would naturally imagine the beauties of the natural topography of that place. Immediately, they remind us of those Chinese landscape paintings produced by Song and Yuan masters. As both a poet and an artist, Wang Wei discloses in front of us a set of tranquil and detached pictures which are unified by such simple and recurring natural images as empty mountains, vast waters, and white clouds. To see clearly the appeal of nature to the poet's poetic sensibility which will eventually lead us to the Chan realm, let us start with images in these poems of this collection since Wang Wei's use of natural images provides us with a key to the stillness and remoteness in his poetry in general. As Pauline Yu says: "Of the three major high Tang poets, Wang Wei is perhaps most closely associated with the imagistic methods . . . a style that attempts to efface the overt and commenting presence of the poetic subject to yield the initiative objects. This stance derives in large measure from the author's Taoist – Buddhist inclinations to de – emphasize the human ego and suggest instead a union with and submergence in the natural world." [13]

As some scholars have pointed out, the physical isolation of the poet is a central image in Wang Wei's nature poems in general. [14] By seeking to live away from man, the poet often encloses himself in mountains or forests. A very good example of this is the poem "Bamboo Lodge" (Zhu Liguan), the seventeenth of the collection:

*Alone I sit amid the dark bamboo,  
Play the zither and whistle loud again.  
In the deep wood men do not know  
The bright moon comes to shine on me. [ #17 ]*

Obviously, the poet selects this kind of solitude. Sitting in the enclosure of the bamboo wood and playing music, he enjoys his self – world which has a

harmonious relationship with nature. Further, since the object of “men do not know” is implicit, we have an impression that not only the poet is isolated, but also his existence in the bamboo wood or even the existence of the wood itself is not known by others. Thus, the significance of the poet’s presence there is only realized by the poet himself. This can be seen elsewhere in the collection. For example:

*Secretly enter the Shang Mountain road;  
Woodcutters cannot be known. [ #4 ]*

To a large extent, the image of physical isolation is a poetic portrait of the Chan Buddhist. Since Chan advocates detachment from the material world and concentration on one’s own mind, the Chan Buddhist often withdraws from the noise of society so that he can have a calm and tranquil mind and have it work spontaneously and naturally. The impression of this poem as a Chan portrait is reinforced by the fact that Wang Wei himself is a Chan believer. It seems that by enclosing himself inside the bamboo forest, or, by depicting such an isolated image in the poem, the poet feels the essential oneness of man with nature as manifesting Buddhahood. This kind of realization of spiritual truth is also expressed through the poet’s playing zither and whistling. Furthermore, the natural image of the bright moon in the last line serves, in the Chan view, “as a symbol for a sudden, instantaneous enlightenment occurring after a period of solitary contemplation in the darkness”. [15]

An image that is closely associated with the image of isolation in Wang Wei’s nature poems is the image of “mountains”. This image can help us grasp the sense of space that comes out very strongly in Wang Wei’s nature poems:

*On continuous mountains autumn colors return. [ #2 ]  
Empty mountain, no man is seen. [ #5 ]  
Autumn mountains embrace the lingering light. [ #6 ]*



*In the mountains, if guests are to stay. [ #7 ]*

*Mountain green rolls into white clouds. [ #1 ]*

*In the mountains produce red calices. [ #18 ]*

Being a spatial image, "mountains" is presented in these poems as a constant and coherent world which we enter and walk deeply into while reading these poems. With very simple and natural elements of the compositions of these poems, the poet discloses in front of us repetition of far and near, above and below mountain shapes.

When reading these poems, we realize that continuous mountains and empty valleys are something between abstraction and realism in the poet's art, and we feel that these poems present a landscape created more by his creative impulse than by nature itself. Here mountains are not presented as terrible majesty nor is there any exhilaration of mountain – climbing, as noticed by Luk Yuntong.<sup>[16]</sup> Rather, in Wang Wei's art, the image of mountains conveys only a detached tone of calmness and tranquillity.

The poet's isolation and the quiet mountains are, to a large extent, two key images which form an important part of Wang Wei's pattern of solitude in his nature poems. And with these images in mind, we can find access to other types of images in his "*Wang River Collection*" that illustrate Chan meanings. Read the second poem, "Huazi Hill" (Huazi gang):

*Flying birds leave endlessly.*

*On continuous mountains autumn colors return.*

*Up and down Huazi Hill:*

*Melancholy——what limits to these feelings? [ #12 ]*

In the poet's art continuous mountains are seen holding the autumnal colors and birds flying off without end. These images, containing a notion of both space and time suggest a sense of undefined infiniteness. Overwhelmed by such

boundlessness of space and time while wandering up and down the hill, the poet utters his feeling of melancholy. The melancholy, however, is not the feeling of forlornness, not the depressive sense of solitary isolation, but a sort of appreciation of the greatness of the absolute. Thus, the coherence of this poem is achieved in the way that the exclamation of the last line corresponds to the qualities of the scene in the first couplet.

To some extent, Wang Wei's nature poems may be characterized by his use of many sound images. This gives a delightful touch to his solitude:

*Empty mountain, no man is seen.  
Only heard are echoes of men's talk.  
Reflected light enters the deep wood  
And shines again on blue - green moss. [ #5 ]*

This is the fifth poem, "Deer Enclosure" (Luchai), which is perhaps the most famous of the whole collection. Opening with the image of "empty mountain," which the poet is so fond of and so frequently uses in his poems, the poem denotes a denial of sight; while through the sound images in the second line, it indicates that the poet learns about others' existence in an intervening distance.

There is a paradox in the opening image "empty mountain" between the empty, hollow, nonmaterial connotations of the character *kong* and the heavy, solid massive connotations of the character *shan*. This image then suggests the unpopulated state of the mountain and at the same time the philosophical concept of being and nonbeing—a paradoxical Chan notion of the illusory quality and the ultimate reality of the external world. With only men's voices being heard, the poet conveys his deep feeling: that is, of a nature in which man holds an integral but not assertive place. Further, the hidden human beings in the poem indicate that the poet's solitude is achieved on the edges of other people's activities. This, however, suggests the appropriated "void" of the mind in the sense of Chan.

Although the apparent paradoxical images of sight and sound in the first couplet can be simply explained by the possibility that the poet could hear people's talk in an intervening distance without seeing them, they still suggest the spontaneousness in the Chan technique of *Gongan*.

In Chan, spontaneousness refers to a mysterious illumination. The dialogues between the Chan master and his disciple in the *Gongan* are often naturally and spontaneously spoken, full of underlying meanings and wisdom that abandon habits of intellectual pursuit. As a method to illuminate people, *Gongan* is to "blot out by sheer force of the will all the discursive traces of intellection whereby students of Zen prepare their consciousness to be the proper ground for intuitive knowledge to burst out".<sup>[17]</sup> The seemingly carefree, unassuming conversation in the *Gongan* is resulted from the Chan emphasis on man's inner nature. Aesthetically, Wang Wei must have absorbed in his art this spontaneous way of expression in *Gongan*.

By observing the final rays of sunlight shining on the small moss through the lower branches of the deep wood, the poet's focus in the second couplet of this poem, moves from the massive mountain onto a small object. Rather than looking up and far away, the poet is now looking down and close to himself. To the poet, as to the Chan Buddhist, truth can be seen in even the most seemingly trivial aspect of nature—the tiny mossy glade. With the "reflected light" shining again "on" the tiny moss, the poem ends with a total stillness and timelessness. It seems that the entire poem renders a frozen moment when the poet's nature is mingled with the external world.

Wang Wei is very much interested in describing a scene in sunset in his nature poems. This can be seen in the image of "reflected light" in the above poem "Deer Enclosure." Elsewhere in his nature poems we frequently encounter such lines as:

*In solitude I close my brushwood gate,  
In the vast expanse, facing lowering light.*

*Far away the distant mountain dusks;  
Alone toward white clouds I return.*

Another good example of this is the sixth of the collection, which is entitled “Magnolia Park” (Mulan chai):

*Autumn mountains embrace the lingering light.  
Flying birds follow companions ahead.  
Brilliant blue – green at times distinct and clear;  
Evening mists without a place to be. [ #6 ]*

Being set during the twilight hours between brightness and darkness, the whole scene in this poem, with images like “autumn mountains”, “flying birds”, and “brilliant blue – green”, conveys a mysterious quietude and boundlessness. Ogawa Tamaki has paid attention to the image of “sunset” in Wang Wei’s poems and associated it with Wang Wei’s Chan inclination.<sup>[18]</sup> Indeed, only when we recognize this kind of Chan spirit manifested in Wang Wei’s poems, can we comprehend the underlying meaning of them. In the last line of the above poem, however, some Wang Wei scholars found an unresolved restless atmosphere. Pauline Yu, for instance, observes that “the evening mists are curiously described as ‘without a place to be.’ ...” “In any case,” she finally points out, “the image is typical because of its vague reference and negative phrasing.”<sup>[19]</sup> Again, about the evening mists Marsha Wagner has this to say: “The vague, negative emphasis of the last three words undercuts the sense of tranquillity at dark, and explodes the deceptive stability and concreteness of the first two lines. The poet leaves us with our attention on the unsettled, hovering mist.”<sup>[20]</sup> In my opinion, when associated with the poet’s Chan inclination, the “evening mists,” like the “empty mountain” which indicates the issue of being and nonbeing, lingers on everywhere and so no where. It does not at all break the quietude nor does it suggest an unsolved restlessness. Rather, this image reinforces the mysterious