Shared Heritage & Unique Developments: the Interaction Between Classical Japanese & Chinese Landscape Poetry

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People in different countries share many wonderful things despite the different structures of nation-states, cultural distinctions, religious differences, and ethnic origins. The connections between Chinese and Japanese poetry manifest how people in different countries can share a common heritage and how cultural communication can enrich civilization.

Classical Japanese poetry was influenced by early Chinese poetry in many aspects, including its metrical patterns, images, thematic concerns and cultural sentiments. During the Heian Period in Japan (794-1185), it was a social requirement to be able to understand, appreciate and recite Chinese poetry. In 893, Emperor Uda of Japan compiled the *Shinsen Manyoshu* (an anthology of Japanese poems). One unique feature of that work is that a kanshi, a poem of *shichigon zekku* (a Japanese term for a heptasyllabic quatrain each of seven Chinese characters) is placed after each Japanese poem (waka). In 913, a second anthology was completed and published. These poems were greatly influenced by Chinese poetry, especially those created in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) in China.

In the Edo Period (1603-1868), with the spread of education and the rise of Neo-Confucian ideology, Japan saw a boom in arts and literature which were greatly influenced by Chinese language and culture. Haiku, a genre developed in this period, shares similar aesthetic characteristics and cultural temperament with classical Chinese poetry. The famous haiku master Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) is generally acknowledged to have looked to Chinese poetry for inspiration, especially the poetry of Li Po (701-762) and Du Fu (712-770). The commonality between classical Chinese poetry and Japanese poetry (especially waka and haiku) is evident in thematic concerns and images, as well as tone and implications. In this article I will discuss Chinese and Japanese landscape poetry and explore their intricate interactions.

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Chinese Shan shui painting by Ju Ran, a painter in Five Dynasties and South Tang titled "The Poetic Scene in Xie Lingyun's Poems"

Landscape & Inner-landscape

Landscape is one of the most important motifs in both Western poetry and Eastern poetry. Unlike Western landscape poetry, which presents natural scenes in vivid and minute detail, giving an impression that they are unfolding right in front of the readers, landscape poetry in East Asia usually focuses on the "correlatives and counterparts" of the objects and the cultural associations of natural scenery. Also they describe the observer (the poets) as much as the observed. In a haiku written by Basho in 1691, the poet attempts to evoke a sense of aloofness amid the hurly-burly of our daily life:

Hiding in the water
the grebes of Lake Biwa
at year's end

While people are rushing about cleaning up and settling their financial accounts, the poet chooses to enjoy the grebes at the lake. The lines shed light on the poet's solitary and reclusive state of being and his desire to retreat from the world. The desire for relinquishment and renunciation is also seen in Chinese Zen poems written by Wang Wei (699-761) during the Tang Dynasty. In "The Gully of Twittering Birds", readers see another idle poet who is observing the flowers, the birds and the moon, although Wang Wei is more abstract and metaphysical. Unlike in Basho's poem, time in this poem is uncertain. The images of the fall (Osmanthus) and the spring (the spring mount) are juxtaposed to construct a realm that has no actual reference in the real world. The quietness and the emptiness are highlighted by the sound of the birds and the streams:

Osmanthus falls by the side of the idle poet.
The spring mount is empty in the quiet night.
The birds are much startled by the moonrise,
chirping now and then over spring streams.

It is evident that landscape poetry in Japan and China does not stop at verisimilitude or descriptions of the external world as it is. It represents natural scenes with subtle cultural and emotional connotations.

In both Chinese and Japanese poetry, autumn scenes are depicted to convey the melancholy of the poets as well as mortality and the impermanence of human life, because autumn ends the prosperity of summer and will usher in the chill of winter. The advent of autumn also heralds a beautiful season coming to an end. Take another of Basho's poems, "In Memory of Old Du":

Long sigh at late autumn:
who is lamenting the world?
The west wind is touching his beard.

Here Basho makes apparent allusion to Du Fu's "Climbing the High Terrace". In the poem Basho speaks as if he is in an imaginary conversation with this great ancient poet in China. The poem carries with it the sentiment that autumn evokes in Chinese poetry. The Chinese literary imagination about autumn can be traced back to as early as *The Book of Songs* created in the 11th century B.C. In "Minor Odes of the Kingdom: April" the anonymous poet attributes his fall from fortune and youth to the change of the seasons. Other such poems include "Nine Songs: Breeding Thoughts" by Qu Yuan (a poet during the Warring States period, who lived between 340-278 B.C.), "Nine Changes" by Song Yu (another poet during the Warring States whose exact years of birth and death are unclear), and "38 Thoughts (*Ganyu* Poems): No. Two" by Chen Ziang (a poet of the Tang Dynasty living between 659-700), as well as "Tune of Jade Flute" by Liu Yong (a poet of the Song Dynasty living between 987-1053) among others. In "38 Thoughts (*Ganyu* Poems): No. Two"(*Ganyu* literally means thoughts and reflections), the poet witnesses nature changing from its prime of vigor and utmost beauty to its death. He asks in the last sentence: how can those "wonderful wishes" fulfilled by everything be falling apart and withering? Here the wonderful wishes not only refer to personal happiness and achievements but also the blessings of his people and the country. Chinese landscape poetry, as we can see, sometimes gives voice to the poet's political ambitions and their social concerns.

Photo: YAFXSVDiocrhbg at Google Cultural Institute

Katsushika Hokusai's "Yoshitsune Falls", from the series "Famous Waterfalls in Various Provinces"

Images Make a Difference

Image is the predominant element in both Japanese and Chinese landscape poetry. Many common images are employed and they usually evoke the same emotions and similar cultural associations. For example, the image of the cicada usually stands for incorruptible personality, delicacy of texture, the transience of life, homesickness/love-sickness, beautiful music, or the impending winter (disaster) in both Chinese and Japanese poetry. Other images such as willow, pine tree, bridge, pavilion, goose, temple, snow, crow, moon, garden, and dew generate similar connotations in Chinese and Japanese poetry. The migration of geese has many ramifications about the departure and return of loved ones, as well as messages from afar, in Chinese landscape poetry. The "lone goose" signifies being bereft of both mate and flock. Li Qingzhao (1084-1155), a female poet of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), laments her separation from her lover under a full moon in the following lines:

Who sends love letters
when the wild geese return and the full moon climbs to the west mansion?

Photo: Zhou Mingan

"Du Fu Mourning the Autumn" painted by Zhou Mingan

Similarly, in Japanese poetry, geese, as the harbinger of a season, have an important place in the poetic imagination. In a poem named "Spring", one of a 50-poem sequence requested by cloistered Prince Shukaku in the early medieval age, the poet Fujiwara no Teika describes the spring scene:

Weary wild geese who came
through sky once chilled by frost
now head back north –
and on their departing wings
falls the soft rain of spring.

In the poem, we know the poet lives in the south and the departing of geese indicate the start of a new season. However, there are images that are distinctively Chinese or Japanese. For example, the image of plum blossom and orchid are frequent occurrences in Chinese poetry while the Japanese prefer cherry blossom and wisteria in their poems. Images in Japanese landscape poems like seagulls, cuckoos, scarecrows, clams and salted sea-bream are rarely seen in Chinese poetry. Also, the same image may not connote the same meaning in Chinese and Japanese poetry.

One example is the image of the chrysanthemum. In Chinese poetry, the chrysanthemum is associated with bleakness, the mourning of the deceased, hardship and strong will. Li Qingzhao's famous line "thinner than chrysanthemum" presents the reader with an image of a fragile women who is afflicted with love and sorrow. In "Partridges in the Sky" written by Huang Tingjian (1045-1105), one of the distinguished poets of the Song Dynasty, the poet indulges in drinking to warm himself on a chilly morning in early winter:

On yellow chrysanthemums dawns the morning chill.
Do not let your wine cup go dry while you lie still.

The chrysanthemum in Japanese culture enjoys a special position. It is a royal flower and the symbol of the nation. *Kaifūsō*, Japan's earliest collection of poetry in Chinese compiled in 751, has in it six chrysanthemum poems. Different from in Chinese poetry, the chrysanthemum for Japanese poets denotes chastity, blessings, peacefulness, and longevity. Here is another haiku by Basho:

Fragrance of chrysanthemums
and old Buddha's statues in Nara
purify and refine my soul.

In the poem, the chrysanthemum is thought of as highly as Buddha and it purifies and refines the human spirit. Actually it's common for Japanese poetry to treat chrysanthemums with serenity and Buddha-like compassion.

Japanese Landscapes vs Chinese Landscapes

The early Japanese landscape poems, especially kanshi, are not only filled with Chinese cultural and historical allusions (the legend of a cowherd and weaving maid, for example) and Chinese idioms (the four seas and prince grass) but also Chinese place names. It was a common practice for early Japanese poets to graft poetically pregnant Chinese names onto the Japanese landscape or to make analogies between them. In one poem (No. 31) in the 15th kanshi in *Kaifūsō*, Yoshino is just another Xuanpu, a paradise of immortals in the Kunlun Range. Yoshino River is also compared to the Luo River, where Cao Zhi met the Luo River Goddess and composed his rhapsody on the topic (No. 100). According to Wiebke Denecke ("The Power of Syntopism: Chinese Poetic Place Names on the Map of Early Japanese Poetry", *Asia Major*, Third Series, Vol. 26, No. 2 [2013], pp. 33-57) the Japanese prefecture Kayo is often taken to be the equivalent of "Heyang" in China, a place located to the northeast of Luoyang. Here is a poem in *Kaifūsō* titled "On an Excursion to

Yoshino Palace":

These mountains and these waters,
where we can be both wise and benevolent!
For ten thousand ages not a single stain,
where towards dawn I encounter the Mulberry-Branch Nymph.
Where windblown waves turn, entering our tunes
and fish and birds frolic together.
This spot is a true Fangzhang,
so who would even mention the visitor to Peach Blossom Spring?

The first two sentences make direct allusion to Confucius's saying in *Analects* – the wise rejoice in water and the benevolent rejoice in water – and the last sentence makes reference to Tao Yuanming's "Peach Blossom Spring", an essay describing a beautiful Utopian place. The comment made to compare "these mountains and these waters" of Kayo to the mythological and literary sanctuary in Chinese texts manifests a complex feeling of admiration and national pride. Actually it is a tradition of classical Chinese poetry to eulogize a natural scene by comparing it with legendary places.

Different from kanshi, Japanese vernacular poetry (waka and renga) usually operate clearly on a domestic map and sing of places imbued with local significance and lore. Places such as Abukumagawa, Utamakura and Mt. Takachiho have a big presence in landscape poems at the time, which indicates that a poetic geography that is uniquely Japanese was evolving until it became the mainstream in the years that followed. In Basho's poems, readers are invited to typical Japanese landmarks such as Futami, the Musashi Plain, and Mt. Fuji, which is perhaps the place which has been the most poetically inspirational in Japanese poetry. Basho captures the amazing moment when he encounters Mt. Fuji on his journey:

Mt. Fuji suddenly rises up,
so high that the sun rests on its forehead.

Also, despite the cultural and textual correlations, classical Japanese landscape poetry attempted and succeeded in constructing a particular Japanese context and distinctive Japanese identity. The poet Kobayashi Issa (1763-1828) liked geese so much that he wrote 448 haiku about them. In one of his verses, he writes:

From this day forth, geese,
you are Japanese.
Now enjoy your rest.

Photo: http://www.bashouan.com/psBashouNc02.htm

Basho

This consciousness of being Japanese is not uncommon at a time when the nation was seeking a distinctive culture and identity. In a haiku written by Tagami Kikusha (1753-1826), she described her sudden enlightenment with exhilaration:

Coming out of the temple gate
the song of the tea-pickers.
It is Japan!

As discussed above, Japanese and Chinese landscape poetry had an intimate interaction from the 7th and 8th centuries through to the 17th and 18th centuries. Although these early Japanese landscape poems imitated precedents created by Chinese poets in many aspects – in diction, theme, technique and poetic association – they are not blind copies, but selective borrowings and recreations. The vista seen through the lens of poetic landscapes in Japanese poetry represents aesthetic views, national identities and cultural sentiments that are uniquely Japanese. JS

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