Ethics and Aesthetics of Nature:
Comparing Liu Chi’s “The Wind-in-the-Pines Pavilion” and
John Muir’s “A Wind-Storm in the Forests”

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Concern with the environment has pushed ecology to the forefront of literary and historical studies. Like post-colonial theories, eco-criticism locates literature in the larger context of social and geographical forces and has enriched our understanding of the role of culture in human thinking. More importantly, eco-criticism has stimulated a more genuine interest in non-Western traditions based on an ethical perspective. This paper looks at differences between Chinese and Western perceptions of nature at both the ethical and the aesthetic level by comparing two travel essays, one by Chinese scholar-official Liu Ji, the other by American nature writer John Muir. The paper begins with the similarities between the two works in genre and subject matter, it then examines the differences between them in literary techniques used, in ideals of nature travel, and in ethical-religious outlook. The paper highlights some of the basic differences between nature writing traditions in China and the West, but it also tries to show that ideas of environmental ethics in recent West coincide with those found in Chinese traditions.

Introduction

Human appreciation of nature has a long history and the recent surge of interest in the environment has brought attention to the importance of environmental ethics which in turn has stimulated interest in eco-criticism. Ideas and actions of the past are now reevaluated in light of new standards of environmental behavior. Western ideas about nature have been under academic scrutiny, and this has resulted in a lot of insights on the subject. It is generally accepted now that dominant Western ideas about nature were anthropocentric and they have contributed to the exploitation of nature in modern Western culture. In the meantime, traditions of Asian countries are also examined in light of the need for environmental sustainability. Like cultural criticism, the new interest in the environment has significantly broadened the scope of literary studies. It is now accepted that literature must be read against its original cultural context and against the realities of human-nature relationship, for aesthetics is closely related to ethics.

This paper applies this line of thinking to the traditions of nature writing in China and the West through a study of two travel essays, namely Liu Ji’s “The Wind-in-the-Pines Pavilion” and John Muir’s “A Wind-Storm in the Forests”. Liu Ji (1311-1375) lived in the Ming and Yuan Dynasties. He was a master of Confucian classics, a great literary stylist, and a successful scholar-official, holding important positions under the governments of the Yuan and the Ming Dynasties. The essay chosen here is often included in selections of travel writings of traditional China and is a good example of the genre.

John Muir (1838-1914) was leader of the preservation movement in the U.S. during the Progressive Era. He was the founder of the Sierra Club and of several national parks including Yosemite. Muir was also a master of prose writing and published numerous nature writings in popular magazines which were later republished as books. Muir lived in the industrial era and witnessed the rapid destruction of wilderness in America. He stood midway between the Transcendentalism of Emerson and the environmental ethics of Aldo Leopold. He was
an avid promoter of the “wilderness cult”, a popular romantic movement that emerged in America in the second half of the 19th century, and preserving nature was his main concern (Nash 1982).

“The Wind-in-the-Pines Pavilion” was written while Liu Ji was serving the Yuan. It is made up of two parts, both describing his experience during a visit to the Wind-in-the-Pines-Pavilion in Mount Guiji, Zhejiang in August 1355. He stayed in the mountain for about 13 days. Obviously this was not his first visit, the spot had become his favorite retreat. The first part was written as a letter to the Abbot of the temple at the end of the visit. It gives a general discussion of winds and pine trees and focuses on sounds made by the trees, concluding with a discussion of the meaning of such natural phenomena. The second part was written two weeks afterwards and recalls the gestures of pines and concludes with a brief conversation with the Abbot of the temple.

Muir’s “A Wind-Storm in the Forests” begins with a general discussion and description of the power of mountain winds and their effects on forests. The main body of the essay consists of a narrative describing his experience during a storm in the Sierra mountains. He headed into the forest as the storm started in the morning, wandering from place to place, then he climbed up to the top of a tree, remaining there for hours until the end of the storm. He gives vivid descriptions of the gestures, sounds, light and colors, and smells of the forests which are mixed with comments.

These two essays are chosen because of their similarity in genre, subject, and writing methods. The similarities provide an ideal beginning point from which the more subtle and profound differences between the two traditions to which the authors belonged can be studied. I will begin with the similarities and then proceed to study the differences.

**Genre and Subject**

The two essays chosen are both nature writings in the form of travel narrative. As such they share some basic features such as realistic landscape descriptions, comments, and narrative structure based on travel, though the last element is not very pronounced in Liu’s essay.

There are striking similarities in the subject matter, striking not only because both discuss winds and pine trees, but also because some of the generalizations drawn are almost identical. On the aesthetics of wind Liu, for example, wrote: “Wind has no form. Wind cannot create sound on its own, it sounds only in connection with things...its sound depends on the thing: loud or soft, clear or vague, delightful or frightening—all are produced depending on the form of the thing”. Muir wrote: “Winds are advertisements of what they touch”, “Each was expressing itself in its own way,—singing its own song, and making its own peculiar gestures,—manifesting a richness of variety to be found in no other forest I have yet seen.” Moreover, Liu wrote that “Among plants and trees, those with large leaves have a muffled sound; those with dry leaves have a sorrowful sound; those with frail leaves have a weak and unmelodic sound. For this reason, nothing is better suited to wind than the pine.” Muir also concludes: “Pines are the best interpreters of winds.” Silver Pines “200 feet in height waved like supple goldenrods chanting and bowing low as if in worship, while the whole mass of their long, tremulous foliage was kindled into one continuous blaze of white sun-fire.”

Thirdly, both writers sought escape from the dominant society and stress the purifying power of nature. Liu writes: “Listening to it can relieve anxiety and
humiliation, wash away confusion and impurity, expand the spirit and lighten the heart.” Similarly, Muir, who spent his whole life encouraging people to go to the wilderness, embraced nature as the home of beauty and truth: “The sounds of winds in the woods...exert influence over every mind” and “on such occasions Nature has always something rare to show us, and the danger to life and limb is hardly greater than one would experience crouching deprecatingly beneath a roof.” “We hear much nowadays concerning the universal struggle for existence, but no struggle in the common meaning of the word was manifest here; no recognition of danger by any tree; no deprecation; but rather an invincible gladness as remote from exultation as from fear.”

Aesthetics and Ideals of Travel

Both writers attribute the purifying power of nature partly to its aesthetic beauty which is conveyed using both description and rhetoric devices such as simile. Liu vividly captures the beauty of pine trees, including sounds and sight. About the shape of the pine tree and its movement in wind: “has a stiff trunk and curled branches, its leaves are thin, and its twigs are long. It is gnarled yet noble, unconstrained and overspreading, entangled and intricate. So when wind passes through it, it is neither obstructed nor agitated. Wind flows through smoothly with a natural sound.” “They resembled a feathery canopy above the mountain’s head. Just when the sun reached its height, a wind rustled the branches, and they became like dragons and feng-birds soaring in dance, their “feathers” moist and coiling around, intertwining as they moved about. Shadows fell among the roof tiles; gold and green wove themselves into a brocade.” The sound was “like an underground spring—“sa-sa”—as it emerges to flow quickly over rocky shoals. When the wind is slightly stronger, it sounds like ancient court music. And when a great wind arrives, it is like stirring up waves, or like pounding drums with faint traces of a rhythm.” Or “the sound was like a hsun ocarina or a ch’ih flute; like passing rain; and like water striking against a cliff; or like armed cavalry charging, swords and spears grinding and clashing. Then, suddenly, it became like insects chirping insistently —‘ch’ieh-ch’ieh’— now loud, now faint; seemingly distant and yet close by. No description could fully capture it.”

An acute observer of nature, Muir gives detailed descriptions of sights, sounds and smells of forests in the storm. About gestures of trees in the wind: Sugar Pine’s “long, horizontal arms swing round compliantly in the blast, like tresses of green, fluent algae in a brook”, “Young Sugar Pines, light and feathery as squirrel-tails, were bowing almost to the ground; while the grand old patriarchs, whose massive boles had been tried in a hundred storms, waved solemnly above them, their long, arching branches streaming fluently on the gale, and every needle thrilling and ringing and shedding off keen lances of light like a diamond.” About colors: “notwithstanding this was the winter season, the colors were remarkably beautiful. The shafts of the pine and libocedrus were brown and purple, and most of the foliage was well tinged with yellow; the laurel groves, with the pale undersides of their leaves turned upward, made masses of gray; and then there was many a dash of chocolate color from clumps of manzanita, and jet of vivid crimson from the bark of the madroños, while the ground on the hillsides, appearing here and there through openings between the groves, displayed masses of pale purple and brown.” About smells: “For this wind came first from the sea, rubbing against its fresh, briny waves, then distilled through the redwoods, threading rich ferny gulches, and spreading itself in broad undulating
currents over many a flower-enamedle ridge of the coast mountains, then across the
golden plains, up the purple foot-hills, and into these piny woods with the varied
incense gathered by the way.”

Beyond the similarities we find some interesting differences. First, the lengths of
the two essays are very different, reflecting differences in the genre between the two
literary traditions. Like most Chinese travel essays, Liu’s piece is short, with only a
little over 700 characters (933 words in translation). This is partly because travel
essays were often for private use or correspondence. Also, in Chinese literati culture,
travel essay was not recognized as a formal genre (Hargett 1986); though it combined
history and landscape poetry, the influence of poetry was much greater and the ideal
of yi jing was dominant. (Dai 2004) Muir’s essay, on the other hand, contains 3,316
words, the right length for publication in popular magazines. This is according to
the origin of Western travel writing as a form of popular literature. Moreover, travel
writing in the West reached its peak in the 18th and 19th centuries and was strongly
influenced by scientific exploration and description was greatly valued (Stafford
1984). As a scientist, Muir was familiar with botany and glacial geomorphology. He
was able to back up his impression and interpretation with scientific facts. The
scientific emphasis is paralleled by also attention to sensual impressions in which
Muir’s essay is extremely rich.

There are also differences in characterization. Liu directly describes how he felt
about natural phenomena while Muir projects his feelings into nature and uses
personification more widely. Muir is especially fond of using adjectives. Thus he
finds nature “beautiful”, “exciting”, “exuberant”, “glorious”, “fragrant”, “delicious”,
“redolent”, and the forests themselves were seen as “happy”, “excited”, “thrilled”,
“glad”.

Ethical Religious Outlook

Besides aesthetic beauty, religion occupies prominent places in both works as the
most important source of idea contributing to the interpretation of nature.
Literature is a reflection of the larger cultural-religious outlook in which it exists. Liu
and Muir are no exceptions. Led by poetry, mountain-and-water literature in China
went through a significant change in the interim period between the Han and the Tang
Dynasties. Faith in Confucianism had been undermined in this time of political and
social turmoil and Taoism and Buddhism flourished and greatly broadened the
outlook of Chinese culture. The coexistence of Confucianism and Buddhism and
Taoism constituted one of the most salient themes in Chinese high culture.
Scholar-officials pursued the political career espoused by Confucianism but
frustration in politics often drove them to Buddhism or Taoism. Since geographically
the latter two were associated with mountains, there emerged in this period a new
awareness of and attitude toward mountains. Freedom of the mind, escape from
worldly worries and suffering, and spiritual practice were new ideals associated with
mountains which were dotted with temples. The result was the flourishing of nature
literature both in form and content. The Confucian method of bide or moral
comparison was replaced by new ways which gave more room to individual
expression. Nature poetry reached maturity during the East Jin period and became a
widely accepted theme. As part of the same trend and influenced by nature poetry,
travel writing in the form of short essay became an established genre in the Tang
dynasty and flourished later. (Mei and Yu 2004, Hargett 1986) Liu belonged to this
tradition. This essay was written when Liu had lost his official position because
because his advice on a political matter had offended his superiors. (He 2008) His appreciation of Buddhism is inseparable from his need to get away from political life: “I escaped from my duties and with the leisure time wandered free and easy here and there without any worldly concerns to perplex the mind. I can feel happy here and pass the entire day this way.” This is most clearly seen in the words of the Abbot toward the end of the essay: “Our Buddha considers the neutralization of the Six Defilements as the basis for enlightening the mind. Whatever enters the eyes and ears is empty and false.” When asked why he had named the pavilion after natural phenomena, the abbot laughed and said: “It just happened by chance.”

Muir wrote within the tradition of physico-theology of the Christian West, beholding “the glorious perfection” and feeling “faith in Nature’s forestry”. He uses words like worship, blessing, devout frequently, “The winds blessing the forests, the forests the winds, with ineffable beauty and harmony as the sure result.” Thus forests were like “a devout audience”, and the setting sun seemed to say, “My peace I give unto you” while the listening forests appear “immortal”. Beauty, sublimity, grandeur came from this divine presence. More specifically, Muir was mainly under the influence of Transcendentalism. In his essay Nature Ralph Emerson wrote that words are signs of natural facts and that “it is not words only that are emblematic; it is things which are emblematic. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture.” (Emerson 1980, 1019). To Emerson nature embodied a larger spiritual existence which he compares to God. Although nature is somewhat inferior to the spirit, they are unified through a somewhat arbitrary and unequal arrangement. If Emerson was trying to steer American high culture away from the rapidly expanding commercialism of his time, he managed to stay above the turmoil of the real world and remain holistic. Muir did not have such luxury. His concerns were more mundane and they were about escaping from industrial civilization and preserving the vanishing nature. His strength was action, not metaphysics.

Moreover, the meaning of the concept of nature differs widely in the two essays. In Chinese traditions of Buddhism and Taoism, nature was not conceptualized in a reductive way and nature and humans were not opposed. The characters for nature, ziran, means self at ease. Escape in nature has more to do with the state of mind than with the material fact. The boundary between humanity and nature is not sharply drawn. The presence of humans in nature was not a problem. Liu stayed in the temple on the mountain and interacted with the monks there, and he enjoyed the place “because though situated amid a mountain forest, it is still not far removed from people.”

If the unity in Emerson’s philosophy favored idealism, by the time of Thoreau and Muir, the separation between nature and humans was already too obvious. Muir opposed human civilization and his wilderness tolerates no human presence. As the founder of the national park system, Muir had contributed a great deal to the making of the myth of pristine wilderness. (Spence 1999) Nature is perfect, there is nothing but harmony, and this nature must be kept away from the human world. His praise of nature is seldom qualified. Muir loved the Sierras because of their wilderness condition. While in the mountains, he usually avoided human companionship. “Instead of camping out, as I usually do, I then chanced to be stopping at the house of a friend.”
Conclusion

Both writers yearned for freedom, but the means of achieving it and the meaning of it differed considerably. Western travel writing was influenced by the ideal of exploration and by preoccupation with the journey, while in Chinese travel writing the journey itself is not that important. In fact scenery itself was never the goal, the goal was experience or *yijing*. Muir’s nature was characterized by two forces, one scientific and the other religious. In the details Muir benefited from modern science, an advantage Liu did not enjoy. But details of special knowledge have the danger of alienating the experiential and preventing one from understanding the meaning of nature. Muir overcame this problem by subsuming science under theology, by using all the details of description to fit the physico-theological belief in the purpose of Creation. There is great tension here. It is an irony that the objective science only serves a highly subjective view.

We feel less of this ambivalence in Liu’s piece. Liu’s views of nature reflect the multi-dimensional, holistic, and ethical perspectives often found in Chinese religions. As the ending of Liu Chi’s essay shows, suggested through the words of the Abbot, the external world is recognized, but it is not the most important, for the purity of mind matters more. Since there is no dogma, all is open and there is no distraction. But Liu was a more challenged traveler because the meaning of nature is to be appreciated through ethical and religious practice, it is not a not concept or theory that can be handed out. It is not necessary to go to famous mountains to find freedom or turn to government to protect wilderness. The center of action is the individual. All are related. Nature is everywhere if you know how to find it. If this view seems vastly different from that of Muir, by the time of Aldo Leopold, with his concepts of land ethic and ecological conscience, it was no longer totally strange in the West.

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