
A Deconstructive Reading of Taoist Influenced Chinese and American Poetry

Hong Zeng

Southwest Jiaotong University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Zeng, Hong. "A Deconstructive Reading of Taoist Influenced Chinese and American Poetry." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 21.6 (2019): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3472>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 0 times as of 02/09/20.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and CultureISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 21 Issue 6 (September 2019) Article 8
Hong Zeng,
"A Deconstructive Reading of Taoist Influenced Chinese and American Poetry"
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss6/8>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 21.6 (2019)**
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss6/>>

Abstract: In her article "A Deconstructive Reading of Taoist Influenced Chinese and American Poetry" Hong Zeng attempts to deconstruct the logos status of "Nature" in Chinese natural philosophy and explore the tragic potentiality of such philosophy and poetry under its influence. It also analyzes its aesthetic strategies used to overcome historical tragedy, and how such tragic potentiality in classical Chinese philosophy and poetry break out into the imagery of death and fragmentation in modern Chinese and American poetry under its influence, including poetry by such poets as Hai Zi, Gu Cheng, Robert Bly and Wallace Stevens, and how it sometimes leads even to the tragic lives of the poets, such as the suicide of Gu Cheng and Hai Zi. In such exploration, the paper defines the rarely explored affinity between Chinese natural philosophy and western tragic theories and western aestheticism, and discloses the tragic propensity beneath the deep-rooted myth of the serene, holistic vision of Chinese natural philosophy and poetry under its influence.

Hong ZENG

A Deconstructive Reading of Taoist Influenced Chinese and American Poetry

Before his death, the contemporary Chinese Meng Long Shi poet Gu Cheng mailed a manuscript to his friend in Beijing---Xiao Nan (pen name) from Auckland, New Zealand. He wrote to her, "this is a synopsis of Chinese natural philosophy written by me. After reading it, you will know where I become demented." (*Burial* 212) Not coincidentally, perhaps, another famous contemporary young poet Hai Zi, before his suicide under the train wheels, had also written, "I died from Taoist violence" (qtd. in Xi). Hai Zi's dying words became his poet friend Xi Chuan's unresolved contemplation. How can the apparently serene and holistic vision of Chinese natural philosophy be implied as having such tragic propensity and aesthetic violence? This paper attempts to deconstruct the status of logos attributed to "Nature" in Chinese natural philosophy and explore the tragic potentiality of such philosophy and poetry under its influence. It will also analyze its aesthetic strategies used to overcome historical tragedy, and examine how such tragic potentiality in classical Chinese philosophy and poetry break out into the imagery of death and fragmentation in modern Chinese and American poets under its influence, and how it sometimes leads even to the tragic lives of the poets.

The etymology of 自然 *ziran* (Nature) is far from being the natural environment in the western sense. It is rather an attitude. "自" is self---not the individual self, but the self-suchness of the universal world, the universal self at one with all things in the universe. "然" is a void word, conveying an attitude of acquiescence and compliance. Therefore 自然 conveys an attitude of complying to the flow of Nature without the obstruction of human intelligence. However, investigating the corpus of Taoist writing, and classical Chinese poetics and western sinologist study, we can find important differences beneath their family semblance. The major differences are: Is the Nature described by Chinese natural philosophy about the real Nature, or is it an aesthetic fabrication for overcoming human historical tragedy? Is human language a product of Nature or does it signify man's inevitable exile from Nature? Is poetic emotion a natural element in confluence with the seasonal switch and cosmic movement, or is it disrupting element that needs to be annihilated in order to become one with Nature?

Lao Tzu advocates keeping the primordial core of silence, solitude, non-action, and emptiness, which he recognizes as the attributes of Tao: "There was something formless and perfect before the universe is born. It is serene. Empty solitary. Unchanging. Infinite. Eternally present. It is the mother of universe. For lack of a better name. I call it the Tao" (Lao Tzu, chapter 25). Language is provisional and secondary, and silence is privileged: "The Tao that can be named is not eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not true name" (Lao Tzu, chapter 1). Later exponents of Taoism often emphasize the non-metaphysical nature of Tao, as Guo Xiang expresses it, "Tao is seeing." However, Lao Tzu's ascetic attitude toward the sensory world bespeaks the contrary: "Colors blind the eye. Sounds deafen the ear./ Flavors numb the taste. Thoughts weaken the mind. Desires wither the heart" (Lao Tzu, chapter 12). Tao, being eternally present, also sets itself above the physical world of flux.

The privileging of silence, solitude and emptiness in achieving harmony with a primordial origin in Tao Te Ching underscores a religious impassivity and imperturbability, to the extent of obviating human emotion itself, that makes its philosophy seemingly devoid of the tragic conflicts in the Western philosophical tradition. This religious impassivity is perpetuated as well as transformed in Chuang Tzu's work into more exuberant form, manifested in the abundance of ethereal figures soaring above benefits and harm, floating beyond life and death. A grandiose relentlessness and indifference to ordinary human emotions coexists strangely with a rapturous self-loss:

Nan Kuo Tzu Ch'i leaned on a table. He looked to heaven and breathed gently, seeming to be in a trance, and unconscious of his body. Yen Ch'eng Tzu Yu, who was in attendance on him, said, "What is this? Can the body become thus like dry wood and the mind like dead ashes? The man leaning on the table is not he who was here before." "Yen," said Tzu Ch'i, "your question is very good. just now, I lost myself, do you understand? You may have heard of the music of man but not the music of earth; you may have heard of the music of earth, but not the music of Nature." (Chuang Tzu, Chapter 15)

The music of man is the sound of musical instruments such as pipes and flutes. The music of earth is the voice of wind making various sounds by blowing through valleys, weeds, streams and caves. What is the music of Nature? It becomes a much less tangible entity as the argument accumulates. It is the invisible and transcendent impact of creative spirit itself, the impact of Tao on the manifold universe, molding each thing as what they are. In this passage, the music of Nature, if not set against the music

of man and the music of earth, at least exists in a hierarchy above them. This hints at the metaphysical nature of "Nature" in Chuang Tzu, a hint reinforced by the necessity of physical as well as mental self-annihilation in achieving the cosmic union--by "turning body into dry wood, and mind into dead ashes."

Liu Xie and Zhong Rong, the prominent ancient Chinese literary critics strongly influenced by Taoist aesthetics, consciously or unconsciously ameliorate this potential conflict between man and Nature, physical universe and metaphysical entity in Lao-Chuang philosophy by naturalizing human language and emotion as the emanation of Tao. According to Liu Xie, "文", translated alternatively as pattern and language, is both the physical contour of Nature and the aesthetic pattern of language and poetic form. Poetry is as primary and original as the physical Nature itself. Man is "the flower of the elements and the mind of Heaven and Earth":

Great is the fulfilled power of aesthetic pattern, for it appeared along with the generation of Heaven and Earth. . . . Man, endowed with the spark of a spiritual nature, is added to these to form the great Triad. Man is the flower of the elements and the mind of Heaven and Earth. With mind, language appears, and in language, aesthetic pattern become manifest. This is the inherent character of natural process. (Liu, qtd. in Owen 18)

Liu Xie also explained parallelism in terms of nature's bilateral symmetry. The parallel couplet is considered not as a poetic device, a mere craft for superfluous embellishment preserved by a conservative poetic tradition. It was considered as the formal linguistic manifestation of the structure of the natural world.

Unlike Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu, which advocate the annihilation of human mind in order to attain to the cosmic mind, Liu Xie exalts human mind as the culmination of cosmic mind, human language as the flower of natural elements. He gives a natural rhythm to human emotion by revealing its poetic sympathy with the switch of seasons:

Springs and Autumns follow on in succession, with the brooding gloom of dark Yin and the easeful brightness of Yang. And as the bright countenances of physical things are impelled in their cycles, so the affective capability of mind too is shaken. (qtd. Owen 21-22)

Zhong Rong's *Shi Pin* elevates the poet's role by placing him in the cosmic triad of "man-heaven-earth." Man, human emotion, and self-expression are given a free rein because they are in natural confluence with cosmic movement:

The breadth animates beings and things; these in their turn inspire man. Pushed by the impulses and feelings which dwell within him, man expresses himself through dance and song. His song is a light which illuminates the Three Spirits (Man-Earth-Heaven) as well as ten thousand creatures. (qtd. in Cheng xi)

It is not hard to see the disparity between the advocacy of self-annihilation, non-human centered perception and derogation of language in Lao-Chuang philosophy and the exaltation of human language, emotion and intellect in Zhong Rong and Liu Xie's poetics. Later critics fall into either of these two strands. Lu Ji's *Wenfu* perpetuates Lao Tzu's privileging of void and silence, and seems to offer a link between the uncreated primordial origin and the emanated world of color and sound: "Trying void to demand for Being; knocking upon Profound Silence for sound." (Lu, qtd. Yip 75) Yan Yu's *Chang Lang Shi Hua*, however, echoes the non-physical nature of Tao implicit in Lao-Chuang as against Liu Xie and Zhong Rong's poetics. Through images such as "sound which vibrates in the air, color which shimmers like a mirage, the moon reflecting in the water, the face looking out of mirror," he implies the illusory nature of poetic imagery in its reference to the physical world. There is clearly a transcendent ring to his "ineffable spirit." According to him, great poets give little to observation or analysis:

Among the great poets of T'ang, the highest place is always given to the ineffable spirit. Like the antelope horns which blend with tree branches in the forest, their verses devote very little preoccupation to observation or analysis. They possess a radiant transparency that can never be discerned. Sound which vibrates in the air, color which shimmers like a mirage, the moon reflecting in the water, the face looking out of mirror, such is the appearance of their poetry. (qtd. in Cheng xiv)

Wang Guowei inherits the Taoist belief in the non-human centered perception in his definition of objective poets, who "view things as things view themselves, so that there is no distinction between self and object." (Wang 2) Although influenced by Schopenhauer, his concepts of "the beautiful" and "the sublime" have not any trace of the tragic confrontation embedded in this pessimistic Western

philosopher. While in Schopenhauer, the demolition of individual will-to-live in the face of a greater, alien power achieves a tragic magnitude because of the implicit sacrifice, the self-loss in Wang Guowei's poetics, as apparent in Chinese natural philosophy, is smoothed over with the surface of peaceful fusion.

Tao Yuanming has been a model of Taoist simplicity, unintentionality and ease. Only recently critics begin to probe his "Peach-blossom Spring" in the deconstructive context, dwelling on the core of absence in the seeking of a Taoist paradise. (Liao 21-29) Wang Wei's scrupulous suppression of human emotion in his painterly depiction of physical Nature seems to continue the objective, non-human strand of Taoism. Han Shan (Cold Mountain) represents the culmination of the Taoist imperturbability that allows man to find his natural element even in the annihilating season of winter.

Among the Western sinologists, Ernest Fenollosa is one of the earliest who discovered for the West the aesthetic value of Chinese characters. His book "Chinese written characters as medium for poetry" is edited by Ezra Pound and lauded by him as having discovered not only a language, but a new aesthetics: "We have here not a bare philosophical discussion, but a study of the fundamentals of all aesthetics." (Pound 3) In this book, Fenollosa revives the myth of the poetic correspondence of traditional Chinese characters with real-life process. The ideogrammic method, juxtaposition of disparate plane of existence without apparent link, is implied both in the formation of Chinese characters and the syntax of classical Chinese poetry. It has been a great inspiration for the father of modern American poetry to achieve compactness and precision in his advocacy of the Imagist movement. An emphasis on objectivity is the inevitable by-product of eliminating the discursive discourse in English romantic poetry. Such an influence may be traced in William Carlos Williams' poetics, "not idea about things, but things themselves," and perhaps find its far-reaching echo in Robert Bly's advocacy of "Object Poetry." The removal of the anthropocentric perception brings about a concern for the non-human Nature. Bly talks about the second fold consciousness in Nature, which are embedded in man's deeper self. His delineation of the history of European literature is defined by the varied attitude toward Nature in different ages. Gary Snyder, a great pupil of Zen Buddhism, in his mystic poems builds the synthetic body of man and animal.

Among contemporary Western literary critics, the American-Chinese scholar Wai-lim Yip is a notable one in highlighting the non-human, non-metaphysical strand of Chinese natural philosophy. In his authoritative reading of Pound's translation of classical Chinese poetry, Pound's *Cathay*, and his important work on the comparative aesthetics of China and the West, *The Diffusion of Distance*, Wai-lim Yip hammers down the point that classical Chinese language and poetry has much less intellectual director than its English counterpart because of its asyntactic and paratactic structure: The success of Chinese poets in authenticating the fluctuation of concrete events in phenomenon, their ability to preserve the multiple relationships in a kind of penumbra of indeterminatedness, depends to a great extent in the spareness of syntax. (Yip 38)

Francois Cheng, in his semiotic study of classical Chinese poetry, *Chinese Poetic Writing*, also remarks at the very beginning, that freedom of language units makes Chinese a mobile language embodying the original multiple temporal-spatial relationship in Nature. Classical Chinese, according to him, is "a semiotic system founded on an intimate relationship with the real, so that there is no rupture between signs and the world, and none between man and the universe." (Cheng 79)

The French postmodernist Roland Barthes countenances the non-emotive, non-cognitive strand of Chinese natural philosophy, while dramatically overthrows the value of "nature" and unity of signification in his semiotic study of Japanese culture, *The Empire of Signs*. He reveals the non-emotive, non-cognitive, anti-nature aspects and broken signification in Noh drama, a form influenced by Zen Buddhism. "Japanese theatre exposes its own artifice and thus empties itself of meaning and emotivity." (Barthes 61) The Japanese theatrical face, white-powdered and leaving only strictly elongated eyes and mouth make the face "dismisses any signified, i.e. expressivity. This writing writes nothing; nor does it lend itself any emotion, to any meaning, but it actually copies no character." For a man performing a woman, "woman is an idea, not a nature." (Barthes 89-91)

William Bevis' study of Wallace Stevens, *Mind of Winter: Psychology of Meditative Experience*, is the first book, perhaps the only one up to the present, that uncovers the link between Stevens' poems and Zen Buddhism in the strain of the emotionless, thoughtless perception of reality. (Bevis) Contemporary Chinese aestheticians, such as Li Zehou and Liu Xiaobo, no matter in an affirmative or negative assessment of traditional Chinese philosophy, believe that harmony rather than conflict characterizes it. While Li Zehou lauds traditional Chinese philosophy for its optimistic outlook and harmony, (Li 3) Liu Xiaobo laments its lack of conflicts that produced the great tragic arts of Greek drama, and the profound crisis of modern Western philosophy. (Liu 25)

Because views on the Taoist vision predominantly emphasize its non-human, unemotive, non-cognitive and self-annihilating aspects, as well as the harmony between man and Nature, and homology

between language and cosmic movement, the inner divergences within the whole canon of Taoist aesthetics are rarely probed by the critics. The divergences, as I have revealed, include the ambivalence about the physical or metaphysical, natural or artificial nature of Tao, the human or non-human perception and emotive expression. In my view, these divergences underscore the inner contradictions intrinsic in Taoist philosophy, which potentially may give rise to tension and conflicts that are germs for tragedy, a mode traditionally denied to the vision of Chinese natural philosophy.

My deconstruction unfolds in three aspects---the deconstruction of time, subject and language, and discloses the hidden conflicts and tragic propensity dormant beneath the serene, holistic vision of Taoism. The emptiness and stillness of Lao Tzu, the floating at ease of Chuang Tzu, were all originated in Spring and Autumn Period and the Period of Warring States, with 16 small countries fighting for supremacy which led to a disastrous destruction of life. Their peaceful and floating-at-ease philosophy camouflages the attempt of evading war-beset history and mythicizing time: Lao Tzu originated a cosmic origin, whose generative, holistic power supplanted the fragmentation and destruction of the war; Chuang Tzu's shamanistic imagination created a mythopoetic self "born at the same time as the heaven and the earth" (Chuang Zi 25), in order to overcome the tragic, fractured self diminished by the destruction of the war.

The Confucius man is a man growing in time, "at fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning, at thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the decree of Heaven. At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the revelation of truth. At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing the norm." (Confucius 11) Taoist man is not a man in time, rather, it is in time-spatialized. The first chapter of Chuang Tzu's "Floating at Ease" depicts the great roc soaring up 90 thousand miles into the sky, breaking away from the earthly, human, historical time, and flying into the mythic time with "eight thousand years as a spring, eight thousand years as an autumn". (Chuang Tzu 23) Because of the Taoists' evasion of historical time, the weakness of its mythicized time is embodied in the conflict between historical and mythicized time in its influenced literature, which leads to the conflict between historical and mythicized self. In the classical Chinese poetry, because the incomplete grammar of classical Chinese poetic language allows it to take on a non-lineal, multi-directional flow, such language can, like a two-sided embroidery, accommodate both historical and mythic time, and the double consciousness of historical and mythic self---without being rent apart. However, such conflicts are the germs for tragedy, and in modern Chinese and American poetry they break out into the imagery of death, fragmentation and tragedy, and lead even to the tragic lives of the poets.

A comparison of Western Aestheticism and Chinese natural philosophy helps to illuminate the fictitious nature of its aesthetics. The Western Aestheticism in the 19th and 20th century (with representative figures such as Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Wilde) seems to be distant from Chinese natural philosophy: Western Aestheticism is anti-natural, and values fiction and mask; In Chinese natural philosophy, Nature is the highest ideal. Western Aestheticism does not believe in origin, to them, writing is fractured, layered text imitating literary convention, away from the original author; Chinese natural philosophy believes in a pre-linguistic, pre-human origin, Tao is the origin of all. Western Aestheticism is aristocratic, Chinese natural philosophy advocates making everything equal. In Western Aestheticism, the concept of self resides in that existence precedes essence. The essence of self is the product of the self's lifelong artistic self-fabrication, but Chinese natural philosophy believes in Tao and the cosmic self as individual self's essence. However, a careful examination will reveal striking similarities of both: both are defensive mechanism poised on a sense of disaster. Just as Lao-Chuang philosophy was produced in the war-beset time, Western Aestheticism emerged in the fin-de-siecle melancholy, and grew under the shadow of two world wars. Both aestheticism are aesthetics for overcoming historical tragedy and thus poised on a sense of disaster. They deconstruct the conventional self, and build a new self with art. Such self is protean as well as coalesce into mythic status. The protean self in Chinese natural philosophy stems from "transformation into Nature". The mobile self in Western Aestheticism derives from various masks it takes on in its artistic self-fabrication. Both aestheticism provide a channel for the threatened, dwarfed, fractured self to escape historical disaster, and fabricate a new, mythicized self in a mythicized time.

Both aestheticism employ similar aesthetic strategies: such as two dimensionality, the cartooning and exaggeration of thoughts (particularly so with Chuang Tzu). Both regard truth as relative, so as to enlarge spiritual freedom. As contrary to the claim of Taoist origin, Chuang Tzu's "Floating at Ease" has a thwarted origin. The myth of the K'un bird was repeated three times at the very beginning. Its narrative modes move from myth to legend, to historical record: the gradation of the fictitious nature of the story mocks at the narrative modes' intensified verisimilitude, and makes it a self-deconstructive text. The thwarted start underscores the fictitious nature of origin. Chuang Tzu's self-deconstructive strategies, in time (using the parody of historical record to narrate the most extravagantly fictitious

myth) , subjectivity (cosmic, expanded self and historically-limited self subject to fate---命), and language (the collapsing of signification, separation of signifier and signified; floating signifiers), camouflage its inner conflicts and tragic tension beneath its floating at ease.

The syntax and lexicon of classical Chinese poetry, like a double-sided embroidery, are able to accommodate both the omniscient/non-human centered perspective (mythic time and cosmic self) and limited/human, historical perspective (limited time, historical self), and allow the tragic conflicts between the two kinds of consciousness and two kinds of temporality to be accommodated in the same language, beneath a serene, holistic surface. For example, the verbs in classical Chinese poetry do not have tense and denomination, very often verbs are totally gone, leaving only the juxtaposition of nouns; verbs are replaced by static words such as nouns and adjectives. These traits of verbs, on the one hand, create a non-anthropomorphic, omniscient, timeless perspective (because verbs convey movement and time, adjectives and nouns convey static state of existence), a Taoist perspective from the sky. On the other hand, these traits create a subjective impressionism, even momentary illusion, and an artificial sense of cinematic transfixation. For example, the use of adjectives as verbs in Meng Hao-ran's verse creates such double consciousness, "野旷天低树/江清月近人" ("Vast plain, sky lowers among the trees./The limpid stream, the moon moves close." "Sky [low] tree," "moon [close] man" turn an optical delusion of a limited perceiver into a static, eternal state, reinforced by the artificial suspension of time created by the repetitive structure of the parallel couplet. Objectively, sky remains at the same height, nor is the moon closer to man. These are optical delusions created by the broad plain and the clear river, perhaps also by the poet's loneliness. The intimacy between man and Nature is a hopeful delusion of the poet, conveyed through linguistic aberration and the artifice of the parallel structure. The elimination of verbs throughout the poem lifts the transient feeling of an individual into an eternal state of human sorrow for its rootlessness in the universe. From this poem, we can see that the syntactic flexibility in classical Chinese with its juxtaposition of nouns without verb are double-edged: it hints at both an omniscient, objective perspective contemplating the general situation of human existence, and a highly subjective impression evoked in the individual.

Also, the omission of personal pronoun as subject conveys at once an oneness with the boundless universe, and a sense of self as diminished and drowned in Nature. Often they form a discordance. For example, in Meng Haoran's "春晓" (The Spring Morning), the eternal life cycle of Nature in harmony with man (denoted by the omission of personal pronoun and man's submerging into Nature) is undercut by the awareness of individual life's inability to repeat itself (as Nature does) once it is lost. The omission of preposition, on the one hand, obscures time and space, and combined with the omission of personal subject, conflates the consciousness of man and Nature, on the other hand, insubstantializes things into illusion. For example, the omission of preposition and personal pronoun in Wang Wei's verse "空山不见人/但闻人语响" (Empty mountain, no one to be seen/ but hear, the human voices.) Another classical Chinese poetic device, parallel couplet, with its repetitive structure can suggest at once the time-stilling suspension---a grandiose identification with the expansive Nature, and can be a human rhetoric device against change, therefore simultaneously embodies the infinite and the finite---the double temporal dimension of myth and history, and the double consciousness of cosmic and historical subject.

To sum up the double nature of the syntactic void of classical Chinese poetry: On the lexical and syntactic level, the omniscient consciousness is created by the syntactic flexibility of classical Chinese poetry in various forms:

1. Verbs: Verbs have no tense. Elimination of verbs and juxtaposition of nouns create the sense of timelessness. The multiple perspectives in the syntactic void evoke a non-human, omniscient perception.

Intransitive verbs are used as transitive verbs, so as to create a reciprocity of subject and object. Linear progression of the poem is disrupted by a circulation resembling timelessness.

2. Preposition and particles: Omission of prepositions which lead time and place phrases tends to obscure time and location, and lends an atmosphere of universality to specific description. The lack of particles (such as "the," "a" as well as singular and plural form of nouns) achieves the same effect of universality by its indefinite reference.

3. personal pronouns: The omission of personal pronoun submerges personal subject in the manifold sentience of Nature.

4. parallel couplet: In its repetitive structure, temporal progression is momentarily checked, so as to create an artificial order and artificial suspension of time. Moreover, the multiple perspective emerging in the syntactic void slows down perception and creates a sense of timelessness.

The juxtaposition of nouns without apparent link allows images to form a metonymic chain, a subtext of their own. These apparently scattered images reflect on each other. Like the endless reflections in a hall of mirrors, they create a spatial expansion beneath the temporal progression of the poem.

However, the same linguistic characteristics may also create a highly subjective, and limited consciousness:

1. verbs: The juxtaposition of nouns without verbs may increase the psychological collision rather than eliminate it. Sometimes the seemingly erratic connection between nouns may suggest a momentary optical delusion colored by certain psychological state.

While the substitution of verbs by nouns and other static words effect stabilization, the nouns contaminated by verbal undertone may also suggest substance is that coming into being; stable, isolated substance is illusion, for substance is only the cross-section of actions. The substitution of verbs by adjectives effects a startling, instantaneous, often illusive impression conveyed through the surprise of its linguistic novelty, as much as it effects a cinematic transfixation.

The reciprocity of subject and object effected by the use of an intransitive verb as transitive verb may create an ambivalence about the process of interiorization and exteriorization, so that the poem might be highly subjective.

2. omission of preposition: The obscuring of time and location effected by the omission of prepositions, rather than universalize the particular scene, may insubstantialize it into illusion: things are suspended in a nowhere's realm, between presence and absence, physicality and emblem. For example, "[In the] Empty mountain, none to be seen/ But hear, the echo of voices." The lack of particles and definitive modifiers in classical Chinese syntax (in poetry) make the subjects described much less solid and substantial than what might be built by English syntax.

3. Omission of personal pronouns: The self-effacement resulting from this omission may suggest man's diminished presence in Nature.

4. Couplet: It can be a human artifice and rhetoric against the flux of time. The imagery in couplet is often the flux of time, contrary to its time-suspended, repetitive structure. Such as "无边落木萧萧下/ 不尽长江滚滚流" (The boundless forest sheds its leaves shower by shower/The endless river rolls its waves hour after hour).

In summary, instead of hinting at a uniform subject, which is at once absent and omni- present, classical Chinese poetry is often a plural text where linguistic characteristics are double-edged: toward building an omniscient, objective consciousness as well as hinting at a limited, highly subjective perception. The syntactic void may evoke a rounded view of physical nature as well as insubstantialize them into illusion. The submerging of personal subject in Nature may evoke an identification of man's untrammled spirit with Nature's boundless grandeur, as well as scale down his existence. The parallel couplet may accord with the opposite forces that bring Nature into endless flux, as well as create a human artifice against temporal progression.

It must be emphasized: it is not that they work one way or another at different times. The double-edged linguistic effect is the two sides of the same embroidery. American New Poetry influenced by the imagery juxtaposition of classical Chinese poetry and by the principle of associative compound Chinese characters, in its abrupt, unexplained imagery juxtaposition, also embodies the implicit conflicts between history and myth. Take Ezra Pound's "Metro" as an example, "the apparition of these faces in the crowd/ petals on a wet, black bough." The bright flower petals against the dark subway, suggests the myth of Persephone kidnapped by the underground king Pluto---here is the modern technology of subway---and conveys the surrealist juxtaposition and conflicts between Nature and modernity, myth and history. The poetic imagery at once conveys the static, decorative effect of Japanese print, and a momentary optical illusion, inheriting classical Chinese poetry's contradictory combination of physical clarity and subjective impressionism.

In the contemporary American poet Wallace Steven's poems, the conflict between omniscient/non-anthropomorphic perspective and historical/limited human perspective was intensified, underscoring with greater strength aesthetic violence and the price of omniscience. In his seasonal poems, the dilapidated beauty of winter scene is deeply influenced by Chinese natural philosophy, painting and poetics. Often, to arrive at the oblivion and omniscience of "the mind of winter" requires individual's symbolic Zagreus, numbness and death. In his winter poem, "No Possum, No bread, No Taters", Steven thus described the winter scene, "The field is frozen. /The leaves are dry./Bad is final in this light./In this bleak air the broken stalks/Have arms without hands. /They have trunks/Without legs or, for that, without heads./They have heads in which a captive cry/Is merely the moving of a tongue." (Stevens 290) Such image of fragmentation leads to the miraculous image of snow flakes, "Snow sparkles like eyesight falling to earth,/Like seeing fallen brightly away." "Eye" has the same sound as "I", implying

the extinction of the human, individual, limited self, and what replaces it is the "rusty" raven, "bright is the malice in its eyes", a dehumanized, omniscient perspective. In "The Snow Man", he wrote, "one must have a mind of winter/ To regard the frost and the boughs/ Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;/ And have been cold a long time/ To behold the junipers shagged with ice,/ The spruces rough in the distant glitter/ Of the January sun; / and not to think/ Of any misery in the sound of the wind,/In the sound of a few leaves,/ Which is the sound of the land/ Full of the same wind/ That is blowing in the same bare place/For the listener, who listens in the snow,/ And, nothing himself, beholds/ Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." (Stevens 9) In order to arrive at Snow Man's non-human, omniscient perspective, one has to make the painstaking effort of disregarding one's human misery and of emptying oneself. In the poem, the delayed verb and long-winding sentence records such effort and price. In his "Poetry is a Destructive Force," Stevens compares the price for acquiring the non-human, or transcending-human poetic force to the voracious beast in the poet that kills the poet's human self: "He is like a man/ In the body of a violent beast./Its muscles are his own . . .// The lion sleeps in the sun./ Its nose is on its paws./ It can kill a man" (Stevens 65).

Robert Bly is another contemporary poet heavily influenced by classical Chinese philosophy and poetry. He inherited Taoist philosophy's still, empty receptivity, and imagery pattern that transforms the solid world into Taoist fluid energy. In his poems, the abstraction and simplification of human consciousness merges with the brooding sentence in Nature and forms a perceiving subjectivity of "third body". However, Bly's poems, like classical Chinese poetry, under its serene and holistic surface, are often split into the double consciousness of omniscience and limitation. For example, in "The Two Sounds of the Ocean", the superficial, austere, death-implying consciousness of limited self covers the rich, omniscient, cosmic chorus that transcends humanity. Often, the encounter of limited self and cosmic self in Bly's poems takes the form of collision between daytime and night consciousness, and such collision adopts the form of death and violence---death, chaos, violence is the path of returning to the primordial ocean of life. For example, in his "When the Dumb Shall Speak", Bly wrote, "Fires in the sea,/The ships smoldering like bodies,/ Images of wasted life,/ Life lost, imagination ruined,/The house fallen,/ The gold sticks broken,/ Then shall the talkative be silent,/ And the dumb shall speak" (Bly 115).

As can be seen, among the modern American poets heavily influenced by Chinese natural philosophy, the conflicts between the omniscient, cosmic self and historically limited self, between mythic time and historical time break out into tragic imagery of death, Zagreus and destruction. Such symbolic destruction and death is a necessary path for acquiring a poetic vision transcending humanity. In the following I will examine two Chinese poets, Hai Zi and Gu Cheng, and explore how their poems reflect such tragic conflicts in their attempt to arrive at Taoist cosmic oneness, how such tragic conflicts lead to the tragedy of their lives.

In Hai Zi's poems, Hölderlin's twilight of god---the descending from the divine oneness to the throe of individuation and fragmentation---suggests strongly the penalty of Zagreus suffered by Dionysus, as expounded in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. The primal unity represented by Dionysus under the influence of wine, akin to Taoist primal unity with Nature, has its price the penalty of being torn from limb to limb: the principle of individuation represented by Apollo has to be torn down, in order to merge into the primal unity of pain and throe---the Dionysian ground being of existence. Dionysus is the son of Zeus and the Goddess of earth, he was once torn by the jealous Hera. His father Zeus sewed him together, and to his body, so that Dionysus was re-born. Hai Zi paid homage to both Hölderlin and Nietzsche in his poetry, and was under their deep influence.

To a certain extent, the imagery and poetics of fragmentation echoes the cultural ruptures in the 80s: the intellectuals' self-split between tradition and reality, East and West with the thaw after the Cultural Revolution and the in-flood of western thoughts. Besides, Hai Zi, as "a son of peasants", as he called himself, witnessed the quick disappearance of the countryside where he grew up: the flooding of peasants-migratory laborers into the city, the rapid heating of economic reform and consumerism. Hai Zi's Taoist lyrical ambience--his elegy for the countryside and Nature makes him an anachronism and a modern exile.

The throe of individuation as falling from a divine unity and from Taoist unity with Nature is reflected in the form of his poetry: folk songs, legends, myths, the fragments of countryside scenes are transmitted intermittently in the urban scene of degeneration and violence. It forms the polyphony of vagrancy, nostalgia and lost love. The imagery of Zagreus frequently appears in Hai Zi's poetry celebrating his unity with Nature. In "Spring, Ten Haizi", Hai Zi wrote, "Spring. ten Haizi rage and roar under their breath...The pain of being cleaved pervades the great earth." (Hai Zi 146) In "Dawn", Hai Zi wrote about the morning landscape, "they are my limbs split open again/dripping rain, snow and tears in February." (Hai Zi 146) In "July is not far," Hai Zi wrote, "bones hang all over my body/like

twigs on the blue water". (Hai Zi 47) The whole word is a wound, longing for a lost Nature, hometown and divine unity.

Death through Zagreus is the typical penalty for artistic figures in Western myths---such as that of Orpheus, Icarus and Dionysus. In order to become one with primal Nature, individuality has to be torn down and become the manifestations of many. Since Hai Zi has been writing on the verge of death, his poetic persona has already merged into the world. Very often he spoke not as an individual, not even as a human being, but in the voice of the universe itself. In his "Earth. Melancholy. Death", (Hai Zi 75) the speaker is the Old Earth that dies and regenerates through blood and mire, and in "Sonnets, Moon at Night," the poet is "a well the ancestors dig towards the descendants,/ All originate from my deep, mysterious, and dark water." (Hai Zi 17) From Hai Zi's poems, we can clearly see that Zagreus, death and aesthetic violence is a path to Taoist unity. The radical conflicts and tragic propensity dormant beneath the holistic, serene surface of Taoist Nature, can be confirmed in the penalty of Zagreus Dionysus experiences in his primal unity as espoused by Nietzsche's tragic philosophy. Such philosophy of Nietzsche was heavily impacted by Eastern philosophy, such as Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, and by Buddhism through the influence of Schopenhauer. Therefore, Hai Zi's dying words, "I die from Taoist violence" is not hard to understand. His poetics plays out the tragic propensity of Chinese natural philosophy, and as one living out his poetics, his suicide under the wheels acted out the modern, explosive outcome of such tragic propensity.

The contemporary Meng Long Shi poet Gu Cheng migrated to New Zealand in 1989. On the beautiful island of Auckland, Gu Cheng, who believed in Chinese natural philosophy, seemed to have found his dreamed Taoist paradise. However, in 1993, Gu Cheng's youthful life tragically ended in suicide and homicide. Gu Cheng's exile from Taoist paradise, in his poems, is embodied in the split voice torn between mythic and historical time, mythopoetic self and historical self. In his poetry collections shortly before his death, such as *The Eulogy World* and *Quicksilver*, the poet speakers are more often than not self-split: a posthumous, omniscient self watching distantly his still-living, limited self.

During the Cultural Revolution, Gu Cheng followed his father to the countryside in Shandong province, there the primal unity of Nature in his childish eyes coincided with the Taoist primal unity and left a deep impression on him, which was recorded in his "Fantasia of Life": "without purpose/float under the sky/Let the cascade of sunlight/wash black my skin", "the sun is my boatman/It pulls me/with the rope of intense light/step by step". (Gu, *Collected Poems of Five Poets* 319) "The sun baked the earth/like a piece of bread/ I walked/with bare feet/my footprints/were pressed into the earth like a seal/thus my life/was merged into the universe." (Gu, *Collected Poems of Five Poets* 319) The urban life Gu Cheng later returned to had always been his burden, being a violation of that primordial Nature, so that he had to walk around the world, to the distant island of New Zealand, in order to recapture that Nature unpolluted by human intelligence. And yet, since the returning path to childhood is impossible, death becomes the only path.

In his speech, "I was waiting for the voice of death," Gu Cheng wrote, "about three years ago, I felt as a person I had already died, and became a ghost (later his group poems "Ghost Entering the City" expressed the same self-consciousness), every time I dreamed, I dreamed that I had returned to Beijing, not knowing where to go. But I am not anxious anyway, since I had already died. It was as if I were looking out from a place, only looking, that is all." (Gu, *Burial Bed* 229) In his poem "Accident," "Burial Bed", "Ark", one can always see a posthumous, omniscient self watching a limited, living self, just as the Buddhist man sailed across the ocean of Samsara looking back at his self still trapped in this world. Such split poetic voice reminds us of the split between Heaven and human, mythic and historical time in Taoist philosophy. For example, in his poem "ark", he wrote:

You have boarded a vast ship which will founder
It will sink in the swell of the sea's breathing
Now you still look at the flag
The open stretch of wine-dark grasslands
Seabirds wail over the watery graves
You still play on the guardrail
Thrilled by the sound of the dark stairs
The ship is empty, every one of the doors will be opened
Till the cool flames rise from the crew's cabins. (Gu, *Selected Poems* 113)

Calling oneself as "you" has already designated self-split. In this poem, one kind of the subjectivity is the childlike, sharply delimited self---"you", who was completely unaware of the imminent shipwreck, the other is a posthumous, omitted, retrospective self pervading in the air, flowing at large, looking dispassionately at the "you". "I", prophetically sees the ship-sinking and death as a path towards

freedom and flame. "All the windows will be opened/ until from the sailors' cabins float up cool flames." Gu Cheng's poems profoundly reveals the necessary aesthetic violence for realizing the perspective of "watching from the sky" in Chinese natural philosophy. In "New Street," he wrote, "Killing is a lotus/ having killed/ hold in the hand/ the hand cannot be changed." (Gu, *Burial Bed* 56) This poem conveys a dual attitude towards violence: on the one hand, "killing", synonym for the Taoist violence, is religious purification. The unchangeable hand holding lotus reminds one of the Buddha holding lotus and Christ's nailed hands. On the other hand, the unchangeable hand also conveys an inextricable sense of guilt. In his "Seasons. Preserve Twilight and Dawn", the Taoist transparent world of oneness is reflected through a dying eye. "For many years/ I have been living in the valley of your breath..." (Gu, *Collected Poems* 390) The seamless superimposition of human, sensuous love and the-world-as-lover seems to recapture Gu Cheng's early "Fantasia of Life," but the early morning song has already been enveloped in the twilight shadow of valediction and death.

Gu Cheng's poems and life path expose the inner conflicts and tragic propensity of Chinese natural philosophy. Not only because returning to Nature is hard to realize in the modern society where civilization has become man's second nature, but also because, "Nature," from the very beginning, is an aesthetic fabrication. The real Nature Gu Cheng discovered in New Zealand jungle is completely different from the harmonious, nourishing Nature in Taoist philosophy, as he wrote in *Tomb Bed*,

before I believed in Nature, and also believed in my own nature. I assumed that as soon as I return to Nature, I would get rid of all the tormenting thoughts. The natural beauty of my life will reveal itself of its own accord. It would be like what I wrote in one poem, 'the wind sways the leaves,/ the grass is growing seeds,/ we stand without talking,/this itself is beauty.' But all these are imagination. In the real Nature, I saw even more terrible destruction. Nature is not beautiful, everywhere are mice, lice. It is not like the Nature we saw in our travel. Without electricity, water and modern civilization, you have to fight with Nature all day long. Everywhere in Nature are gaping mouths. But that is not even the main point, the main point is that in Nature, I found my own nature does not belong to the sky, nor to me. It is blind, crawling and ruling over me like ants and octopus. It can not stop. (Gu, *Burial Bed* 136)

Gu Cheng cannot escape modern civilization (antithetical to Nature) by running to that primitive island, because what he wanted to escape from is inside his own nature, the nature that was not acknowledged by Chinese natural philosophy. It is the same with his beautifying of "girl's nature", regarding it as the transformation of Tao itself--- flower goddesses reincarnated into the girls in the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The transfiguration is at odds with the worldly women in the real world. "All these flowers/ should not have earth/Let the earth miss them," (Gu, *Burial Bed* 185), such idealization of nature inevitably leads to the chasm with real life, resulting in his harm and murder of his woman in real life.

Taoist ideal Nature is an aesthetic fabrication, and like Western aestheticism, has its own price: it serene, holistic vision often requires individual's symbolic Zagreus and death, therefore not so far from Western tragic theories built upon the sacrifice of the one side of the antinomy. In Schopenhauer's Buddhist-influenced aesthetics, in the conflicts between the-world-as-will and the-world-as-idea, what is sacrificed is the-world-as-will, in order to achieve the beauty or the sublimity of the-world-as-idea. In Nietzsche's philosophy, what is sacrificed is the Apollonian illusion, in order to achieve the primal ground being of existence with its mixed blaze of pain and intoxication. In Walter Benjamin's *Trauspiel*, what is sacrificed is the humanity of the ruler, in order to attain to the iron will of the monarch; in his theory on ancient tragedies, individual heroes are sacrificed to achieve universal redemption. In Chinese natural philosophy, in its aesthetic fabrication and mythicization of time to overcome historical tragedy, what is sacrificed is history and historical self. Wang Guowei, Hai Zi, Gu Cheng are all poets whose lives are typically riveted on aestheticism and who became therefore anachronism exiled from history. The Eulogy World Gu Cheng sang of is a liminal world, poised on abyss, because that ideal world is reflected through a dying eye.

"Dark night gave me dark eyes/with them I seek light" (Gu, *Gu Cheng's* 117), this early poem by Gu Cheng, unconsciously prophesized the ontological darkness---implied in his poetics of death and life of tragedy and crime---looming on the path of his inexorable, thwarted search for the ideal state defined by Chinese natural philosophy.

As can be seen, "Nature" in Chinese natural philosophy is an aesthetic fabrication to overcome historical tragedy. Its aesthetic strategy of mythicizing time and poetizing self has planted the seeds of tragic conflicts between mythicized and historical time; between the cosmic self "watching from the sky" and the historically limited self. While the two-sided embroidery of classical Chinese poetic language can still accommodate the double temporal consciousness and subjectivity, such conflicts break out into

imagery of death, Zagreus, and tragedy in modern Chinese and American poets under its influence, sometimes even lead to the tragic lives of the poets.

Therefore, at its greatest depth, the vision of Chinese natural philosophy and its influenced literature and arts is not so far from that of Western tragic theories and Western aestheticism. It is like the same ocean, at sunset, you dive in the West through the flaming, boiling sea surface, you would find yourself in the East, in the dim, seamless green depth of the ocean, but the same waving motion spreads to the bottom of the sea, even though the greater the depth, the harder for you to detect that motion. Western poetry is adept at depicting the conflicts within human nature, but beneath the conflicts in Greek tragedy, is the Eastern, Dionysian primal unity and Apollonian salvation with its bright illusion. Chinese poetry is adept at describing Nature, but isn't its Nature also dormant human nature, and perfected aesthetic illusion? Isn't it deep-hidden conflict and reconciliation between the fictitious perspective from the sky and evanescent human life?

Works Cited:

- Barthes, Roland. *The Empire of Signs*. Translated by Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, 1982.
- Bevis, William. *Mind of Winter: Wallace Stevens, Meditation and Literature*. U of Pittsburgh P, 1988.
- Confucius. *The Analects*. Translated by Raymond Dawson. Oxford UP, 2008.
- Cheng, François. *Chinese Poetic Writing*. Translated by Donald A. Rigg and J. P. Seaton, Indiana UP, 1977.
- Chuang Tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. Translated by Burton Watson, Columbia UP, 1968.
- Fenollosa, Ernest. *The Chinese Written Characters as a Medium for Poetry*. Edited by Ezra Pound, City Lights Books, 1936.
- Gu, Cheng. *Selected Poems*. Edited by Sean Golden and Chu Chiyu, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1990.
- . *Mu Chuang* (Burial bed). Zuoja Chubanshe, 1994.
- . *Wu Ren Shi Ji* (Collected poems of five poets). Zuoja Chuabanshe, 1986.
- . *Gu Cheng de Shi* (Gu Cheng's poems). Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1998
- Hai Zi. *An English Translation of Contemporary Chinese Poet Hai Zi*. Translated and introduced by Hong Zeng, Edwin Mellen Press, 2005.
- Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching*. Translated by Stephen Mitchell, Harper Collins Publisher, 1988.
- Li, Zehou. *Li Zehou Shi Nian Wen Ji* (Ten Years' Collection by Li Zehou). Vol. 3, Anhui wenyi chubanshe, 1994.
- Liao, Binhui. "Longing, Exile and Absence---the Aesthetic Structure of 'Peach-blossom Spring.'" *Jie Gou Pi Pin Lun Ji* (A Collection of deconstructive criticism), Dongda Tushu Gongsi, 1974.
- Liu, Xiaobo. *Xuan Ze de Pi Pan: Yu Li Zehou Dui Hua* (Criticism on choice: dialogue with Li Zehou). Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1988.
- Liu, Xie. *Wen Xin Diao Long* (The literary mind and carved dragon). Zhejiang Guji Chubanshe, 2010.
- Lu, Ji. *Wenfu*. Henan Meishu Chuabanshe, 2016.
- Owen, Stephen. *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics*. The U of Wisconsin P, 1985.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. Vintage Books, 1992.
- Wang, Guowei. *Ren Jian Ci Hua* (On Ci poetry). Qunyan Chubanshe, 1995.
- Xi Chuan. "Hao You Xi Chuang Tan Hai Zi Zi Sha de Qi Ge Ke Neng" (His friend Xi Chuang talks about the seven possible causes of Hai Zi's suicide). *Cul.qq.com*, 27 March 2014, <http://cul.qq.com/a/20140327/007087.htm>
- Yip, Wai-lim. *Diffusion of Distance*. U of California P, 1933.
- Zhong Rong. *Shi Pin* (Appreciation of poetry). Zhongzhou Guji Chubanshe, 2010.

Author's profile: Hong Zeng teaches Comparative Literature at Southwest Jiaotong University in China. Before that, she had taught at Carleton College and Hamline University for 13 years in America. Zeng's single-authored book publications include *Semiotics of Exile in Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and *Semiotics of Exile in Contemporary Chinese Film* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). Email: <2942763458@qq.com>