

Natural Writing Transcending Reality: A Cross-Cultural Comparative Study of The Eight Notes of Yongzhou and The Dharma Bums

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Abstract. From the perspective of cross-cultural hermeneutics, natural images and their spiritual connotations in different cultural contexts exhibit profound connections and variations. The Eight Notes of Yongzhou by Liu Zongyuan of the Tang Dynasty and The Dharma Bums by American writer Jack Kerouac, though rooted in distinctly different cultural contexts, both take nature as a medium to achieve spiritual transcendence of social reality. The landscapes in Liu Zongyuan's writing embody the frustrations and idealistic aspirations of literati, while Kerouac, influenced by the American reception of Han Shan's poems, regards the wilderness as a spiritual sanctuary to escape modern civilization. Despite differences in cultural backgrounds and expressive styles, both writers convey implicit criticisms of mainstream culture through natural writing and seek personal spiritual liberation in nature. This study highlights the creative transformation of literature in the process of cross-cultural communication, reflecting the universal value of natural writing as a transcendent form of expression.

Keywords: Natural Writing, Cross-cultural Comparison, Liu Zongyuan, Jack Kerouac

1. Introduction

Natural writing, as a literary expression, transcends cultures and time, reflecting humanity's enduring quest for spiritual freedom. Two notable examples are The Eight Notes of Yongzhou by Liu Zongyuan from the Tang Dynasty and The Dharma Bums by Jack Kerouac. While emerging from vastly different contexts, both works achieve spiritual transcendence through their engagement with the natural world. Current research mostly focuses on individual textual interpretation, lacks cross-cultural dialogue on the underlying logic of natural writing, and fails to fully reveal the mechanisms of creative transformation in literary communication.

This paper adopts close reading and cross-cultural comparative methods to focus on the creative contexts, mountain imagery, spiritual cores, and stylistic innovations of the two works, exploring the resonance and variation of natural writing in different cultures. The study examines how natural writing resonates and varies across cultures, thereby deepening understanding of Eastern and Western literary commonalities and offering new insight for cross-cultural research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Interpretive theory of variation: theory of comparative literature

Cross-cultural hermeneutics, as a key methodology in comparative literature, focuses on the creative transformation of literary phenomena in the process of dissemination and reception across different cultural systems. Breaking away from the linear model of traditional influence studies, this theory emphasizes the inevitable filtering, misreading, and reconstruction in cultural exchanges.

As a Chinese paradigm of comparative literature, cross-cultural hermeneutics constitutes both a “temporal” and a “spatial” interpretation [1]. In the spatial dimension, when literary texts cross cultural boundaries, they interact with the cultural traditions of the receiving party, forming a new field of meaning production [2].

Cross-cultural hermeneutics opposes the Eurocentric tendency to mechanically apply Western theories to Eastern texts, advocating a global perspective to examine fundamental theoretical issues shared by Eastern and Western cultures [3]. This theory focuses on the mechanism of creative transformation in cultural communication. The Americanization of Han Shan’s poems is a typical case where the source culture is given new life in a heterogeneous context. Gary Snyder’s translations transformed linguistic symbols, linking Han Shan to the American counterculture movement.

2.2. The influence of Han Shan’s poems on American nature writers

The reception of Han Shan’s poems in the United States is a classic example of variation theory in cross-cultural literature. This process is not one of a simple cultural transplantation but a complex mechanism. It involves translation, filtering, and reconstruction, which ultimately integrates into the local American cultural context.

Gary Snyder integrated the image of the Tang Dynasty poet-monk with the American Western wilderness spirit, providing the Beat Generation with spiritual resources to rebel against mainstream values. It can be argued that Japhy Ryder, who returned to the desolate mountains of America, experienced a journey similar to that of Han Shan, who retreated to Tiantai Mountain in China: “I have traveled ten thousand miles; today I return to Cold Mountain”. These similar physical and spiritual journeys led Japhy Ryder to be ultimately frozen in Smith’s hallucination as the classic variant image of “the Beat hero icon, the American Han Shan” [4].

Snyder’s translation strategy was distinctly localized: he deliberately emphasized the connection between Han Shan and the natural wilderness, transforming the imagery of mountain seclusion in the original poems into an American spirit of wilderness adventure [5]. This approach aligned with Han Shan’s image with the emerging environmental awareness and counterculture movement at the time, offering a lifestyle alternative to modern civilization for post-war American youth.

3. Creative contexts and motivations

3.1. The historical context of The Eight Notes of Yongzhou

Liu Zongyuan wrote The Eight Notes of Yongzhou during a period of drastic political upheaval in the mid-Tang Dynasty. After the failure of the Yongzhen Reform, Liu Zongyuan, as a core participant, was exiled to the remote region of Yongzhou. This political setback became an important motivation for his literary turn towards natural writing. During his ten years away from

the political center, the landscapes of Yongzhou not only served as his geographical place of exile but also transformed into a spiritual space of sustenance.

Yongzhou's terrain, as Liu described, was both isolated and exceptional, bordered by Jin, You, Wu, Chu and Yue. Among the hundreds of prefectures renowned for their landscapes, Yongzhou is the finest [1]. This emphasis on the characteristics of the landscape implicitly reflects a reevaluation of the value of real politics.

Inheriting the literary tradition of the Six Dynasties, Liu integrated the Confucian tradition with the Daoist thought of harmony between man and nature. He endowed landscapes such as Gumu Tan (Copper Cauldron Pool) and Xiao Shi Tan (Little Stone Pool) with the spiritual projections of scholar-officials. The chilling desolation conveyed in his writing is not only an objective description of the natural environment but also a true reflection of his psychological state after political frustration. This way of writing, which deeply binds personal emotions to natural images, breaks through the narrative function of traditional travel notes, constructing an aesthetic space with a strong sense of subjectivity.

Liu's natural writing was not a passive withdrawal from society. Through his delicate depiction of the landscapes of Yongzhou, he both criticized the social reality of unrecognized talents and maintained the social concern of a scholar-official. In his seemingly objective descriptions of scenery, he implied expectations for an ideal political order. This critical expression mediated by nature aligns with the allegorical tradition in mainstream literature of the time, but is more personalized.

3.2. The historical context of *The Dharma Bums*

As a representative writer of Beat Generation literature, Kerouac acutely captured the spiritual predicament individuals faced amid industrialization and urbanization. Through the ethos of the "backpack revolution", the novel advocates resisting the utilitarian tendencies of mainstream society by returning to nature and embracing Eastern Zen thought. The character Japhy Ryder, modeled on poet Gary Snyder, synthesizes Snyder, Ryder, and Han Shan into one, shaping the classic image of an American Han Shan [4]. This cultural grafting not only reflects the creative transformation of cross-cultural communication but also embodies the writer's active pursuit of an indigenous spiritual path for his society.

Following the success of *On the Road*, Kerouac grew disillusioned with the commercialized literary world and turned inward to seek a purer spiritual expression. Introduced to Zen and Han Shan's poetry through Snyder, he drew on Eastern views of nature to critique modern civilization. In *The Dharma Bums*, Ray Smith's journey across the California mountains is not merely a physical movement but a spiritual practice of longing for a harmonious natural ecology, pursuing a balanced social ecology, and desiring to reconstruct a healthy spiritual ecology [6]. By comparing mountain-climbing meditation to Zen practice, Kerouac endowed natural experiences with metaphysical significance, a stylistic approach that forms a cross-temporal resonance with Liu Zongyuan's aesthetic realm of "the mind concentrating and the body dissolving".

Post-war America's social contradictions also motivated the creation of *The Dharma Bums*. Under the dual shadows of the Cold War nuclear threat and McCarthyism, Kerouac's wilderness wanderings represent a form of rebellion against a repressive social order. Dharma bums described in the novel sought to break the single value standard of material success through a simple life and dialogue with nature. This rebellion was not a complete negation of modern civilization but an attempt to retrieve an alienated authenticity of human nature through a return to the natural world. By describing the contemplation and communication between Ray and Jaffey in the mountains,

Kerouac expressed a strong desire for the unity of individual humans and nature, an ecological awareness that is even more forward-looking in the context of the escalating global ecological crisis today [6].

Unlike Liu's static contemplation of landscapes, Kerouac's natural writing is characterized by a distinct activism. Natural experiences in *The Dharma Bums* are always combined with physical practices; activities including hiking, camping, labor, and other specific activities become media for spiritual awakening. This dynamic style stems not only from the adventurous spirit of American frontier culture but also integrates the Zen philosophy that enlightenment permeates every action, walking, standing, sitting, or lying down.

4. Comparative analysis of *The Eight Notes of Yongzhou* and *The Dharma Bums*

4.1. Cross-cultural interpretation of the core image of "Mountains"

4.1.1. Western Mountain and Little Stone City Mountain in *The Eight Notes of Yongzhou*

In *The Eight Notes of Yongzhou*, Liu Zongyuan's writing about Western Mountain and Little Stone City Mountain is not merely natural description, but reconstructs them in a spiritual order beyond reality. Western Mountain, exudes a sense of sublimity of "revering the lofty mountain". However, its essence is not a rendering of geographical height but a symbol of the spiritual height of scholar-officials. His experience of "the mind concentrating, the body dissolving, and merging seamlessly with all creations" when ascending Western Mountain is essentially achieving integration with the natural order through physical practice, thereby temporarily breaking free from the shackles of real politics. This writing style reflects the aesthetic tradition of the Tang Dynasty literati that when one observes things through one's own subjectivity, all things are tinged with one's own colors, and landscapes become a medium for expressing emotions about personal fate.

The description of Little Stone City Mountain further demonstrates Liu's ingenuity. The exotic scene of trees and bamboos growing implicitly metaphorizes the ideal personality of talents who maintain their true nature despite adversity. The juxtaposition of the "strangeness" of the rocks and the "beauty" of the trees is not only admiration for natural creation but also an implicit criticism of the neglect of talents in real society. Shao Ningning points out that the shrinking of the landscape images in *The Eight Notes of Yongzhou* and the implied psychology of confining and possessing them indicate subtle changes in the connotation of 'wandering' in Chinese culture since Zhuangzi [7]. Through his focus on micro-landscapes, Liu Zongyuan shifted from grand political concerns to the experience of individual existence. As an interweaving of artificial traces and natural forms, Little Stone City Mountain's reflection that "it resembles a structure built by a wise man" is essentially a philosophical meditation on the relationship between human effort and natural craftsmanship, implicitly reflecting on the artificial political order.

4.1.2. Mount Tamalpais and Desolation Peak in *The Dharma Bums*

In *The Dharma Bums*, Mount Tamalpais and Desolation Peak are not only as geographical backgrounds for the story but also core images through which Kerouac constructs a space for spiritual transcendence. Unlike the static landscapes in Liu Zongyuan's writing, Kerouac transforms the process of mountain climbing into a dynamic spiritual practice. The experience of climbing described in the book as "keeping moving forward with no distractions" essentially integrates the Zen philosophy of "the mind abides nowhere" into physical practice, making the natural wilderness

a dojo for resisting the alienation of modern civilization. This writing style breaks through the objective description of scenery in traditional nature literature, endowing mountains with the symbolic significance of a spiritual dimension.

The imagery of Desolation Peak reveals more profoundly the internal contradictions in Kerouac's natural writing. The "desolate" nature of the peak not only refers to the geographical isolation but also metaphorizes the universal state of spiritual loneliness of modern people in a materialistic society. However, Kerouac does not linger on the portrayal of loneliness; instead, through Ray Smith's enlightenment in solitude, he shows how nature becomes a medium for reconstructing self-identity. In *The Dharma Bums*, Ray Smith's journey of seeking Buddhism and truth actually reflects Kerouac's spiritual pursuit of discovering the value of life through the experience of inner life [8].

To fully and in-depth interpret works born of the integration of writers and places, one needs to dialogue with the works themselves but also with nature through the works [9]. On the one hand, Kerouac absorbs the seclusion tradition in Han Shan's poems, depicting Desolation Peak as a pure land away from urban hustle and bustle; on the other hand, he injects the pioneering spirit of America's Westward Expansion, endowing mountain climbing with the adventurous color of conquering the wilderness. This cultural hybridity has created a unique image of the "American Han Shan", Japhy Ryder is both as transcendental as the Tang Dynasty poet-monk and possesses the activism of an American countercultural hero. When Ray Smith witnesses the scene of "all things being empty" at the top of Desolation Peak, Eastern Zen enlightenment converges with Western existentialism, and the natural landscape becomes a catalyst for philosophical thinking.

4.2. Nature as a medium of spiritual redemption

Although Liu Zongyuan and Kerouac lived in drastically different times and spaces, they both regarded nature as an important medium for transcending real predicaments and achieving spiritual redemption. In *The Eight Notes of Yongzhou*, the landscapes are not only geographical existences but also a reliance for Liu Zongyuan in reconstructing his inner order during his political exile. The Little Stone Pool is drawn as chilling the spirit and piercing the bones, quiet and profound, which is both a portrayal of the natural realm and an externalization of his lonely state of mind.

Writers of nature, often unable to bear the demands of modern society on time and the soul, retreat to the wilderness to seek "spiritual peace completely free from the noisy material world". They flee the so-called "civilization", which is often harmful or chaotic, to places with fewer people in pursuit of a higher level of life [10]. Correspondingly, in *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac constructs a spiritual sanctuary against modern material civilization through descriptions of wilderness spaces such as Mount Tamalpais and Desolation Peak. The protagonists, Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder, hike and meditate in the mountains, engaging in physical practices that ultimately lead to their integration with nature, seeking freedom from social discipline. Through Japhy, Kerouac expresses his identification with Zen thought, "I believe I am an old-time monk wandering the world in modern clothes... to turn the wheel of truth, namely the Dharma wheel, and accumulate merit for myself" [11]. Nature is not only a physical wilderness but also a dojo leading to spiritual enlightenment.

4.3. Implicit resistance to mainstream culture

Liu Zongyuan's natural writing is rooted in the scholar-official tradition of "when poor, one cultivates virtue alone", and his criticism is implicit in the aesthetic construction of the natural order; in contrast, Kerouac's resistance carries the color of modern individualism, directly challenging social norms through physical practice and spiritual exploration. In *Record of the Small Mound*

West of Gumu Tan, Liu Zongyuan described the small mound less than an acre in size to metaphorize his own situation, transforming political oppression into an aesthetic contemplation of micro-landscapes; Kerouac, on the other hand, allows the protagonist to experience the enlightenment of all things being empty at the top of Desolation Peak, negating secular standards of success through existential awakening. Despite their different approaches, both achieved indirect criticism of mainstream culture through natural writing.

5. Stylistic innovation: transcending the conventions of traditional travel notes

Both Liu Zongyuan and Kerouac achieved profound innovations in the traditional travel note genre through their natural writing, transcending its mere recording of scenery to become a literary form that carries spiritual exploration and philosophical thinking.

Although Liu Zongyuan's *The Eight Notes of Yongzhou* bears the name "record", the author integrates reflections on personal fate into natural descriptions, making every pool, mound, stream, and rock a projection of his state of mind. The description of "chilling the spirit and piercing the bones, quiet and profound" in *Record of Little Stone Pool* is no longer merely a depiction of scenery but an externalization of the author's state of mind; in *Record of the Small Mound West of Gumu Tan*, he uses the neglect of the small mound to metaphorize his own lack of recognition, turning natural imagery into a metaphorical vehicle for social criticism. This writing strategy that transforms travel notes from a documentary genre to a symbolic one breaks through the stylized tradition of landscape notes since the Six Dynasties, endowing the genre with deeper philosophical connotations.

Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* further breaks the narrative framework of travel literature. Although the work takes wilderness wandering as its main thread, it integrates novel narration, Zen quotations, poetic fragments, and philosophical monologues, forming a hybrid style. Unlike traditional travel literature that emphasizes exotic customs or adventure experiences, Kerouac elevates daily activities such as mountain climbing and camping into rituals of spiritual practice. As described in the book, the experience of climbing Mount Tamalpais is defined by the quality of keeping moving forward with no distractions. Fundamentally, this experience interprets the Zen philosophical proposition of "the mind abides nowhere" through embodied physical practice. This stylistic experiment blurs the boundary between fiction and non-fiction, creating a literary form more suitable for expressing the spiritual pursuit of the Beat Generation.

The stylistic innovations of both writers reflect a transcendence of the objectivity criterion of traditional travel notes. Liu reconstructs the natural order through constructing realms, making the landscapes of Yongzhou a symbolic system of his political ideals and life philosophy; Kerouac captures the stream of consciousness through spontaneous writing, interweaving natural landscapes with Zen experiences into a surreal spiritual picture. It is worth noting that this innovation does not completely deviate from the essence of travel notes but expands their functions, Liu Zongyuan's "records" still maintain the concise classical aesthetics, and Kerouac's "wandering" does not depart from specific geographical spaces, but both inject subjective spirit, transforming natural writing from a geographical record to a history of mentalities.

6. Conclusion

Based on the perspective of cross-cultural variation theory, this study reveals that although the natural writing in Liu Zongyuan's *The Eight Notes of Yongzhou* and Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* are rooted in distinctly different cultural contexts, they share the core logic of "achieving spiritual

transcendence through nature”. Through the construction of landscape imagery, implicit cultural criticism, and stylistic innovation, both works demonstrate the cross-cultural resonance and creative variation of natural writing.

The study also has limitations. It only focuses on the comparison of the “mountain” imagery and core spirits, without an in-depth analysis of other natural images in the two works and their history of dissemination and reception. Future research can expand to a panoramic comparison of natural images, explore the cross-cultural mutual infiltration of the two works, combined with specific communication cases, or introduce multiple theoretical perspectives, such as ecocriticism and existentialism, to further excavate the cross-temporal and cross-spatial value and contemporary enlightenment of natural writing.

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