

Nature as Refuge in Chinese Film and Literature

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Received: April 26, 2020

Accepted: June 17, 2020

Available online: June 23, 2020

doi:10.11114/ijsss.v8i4.4908

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/ijsss.v8i4.4908>

Abstract

In the period of 1920s and 1930s, traditional Chinese ideas and aesthetics, although embattled and in the process of being superseded by modern and Western aesthetics, did not totally disappear or die out in Chinese film and literature. For example, the image of nature continued to be constructed for its ability to relieve the misery of humanity. This is demonstrated in the films *A Poet at the Edge of the Sea* (1927) and *Sand Washed by Waves* (1936). However, because of social turmoil and turbulence of this period, the peaceful inner spirit as conveyed in the traditional culture seemed unattainable. There were more hints of social struggles in the “utopia”, as shown in the films *Little Toy* (1933) and *Return to Nature* (1936). The traditional ideas and aesthetics were also continued by some writers, such as Zhou Zuoren, Feng Wenbing, Yu Pingbo and Wang Tongzhao, who still had close spiritual connections with traditional culture. Sometimes the spirit of the “return to nature” was embedded with another mark of this period: the influence of Western culture, as shown by several of Guo Moruo’s poems.

Keywords: nature, refuge, Chinese film, literature

1. Introduction

In spite of the increasingly popular new ideas, in Chinese culture of the transitional period of 1920s and 1930s, the idea of “nature as refuge” was still kept alive by some traditionalists in their films or literary works, such as *A Poet at the Edge of the Sea* (1927) and *Sand Washed by Waves* (1936). Both films incorporated the traditional theme of a return to nature. In a continuation of the tradition, the sea is seen as the embodiment of nature, as the symbol of freedom, regeneration and of the ability to release oneself from the cares of the world. Both films demonstrated people’s spiritual suffering in an era of material prosperity, the corruption of human civilization, and attempts to regain the spiritual freedom which can only be achieved in nature.

However, in China during this period, it was war and revolution which dominated the national consciousness, and the focus of national thinking was on the need for societal struggle. In a moment of revolution these films re-asserted the traditional Chinese literati ideal of escaping from reality, and encouraged people to cut themselves off from the class struggle, and retreat to a distant sea coast. For this reason, they were criticized by the leftists as “a step backward”, “retrogressive” and “decadent” (Wang, 2003, p. 24). More frequently, the suggestions of “social struggles” were intertwined into the construction of “nature as refuge”. For example, *Little Toy* (1933) encouraged people to study the new technology and save the country with industry and new machines, and *Return to Nature* (1936) indicated that people had to come back to civilized society again and live a hypocritical life.

During this period, disillusioned by civil wars and revolutions, some intellectuals also expressed in their literary works the longing to retire from social life, which is demonstrated in the works of Zhou Zuoren, Feng Wenbing, Yu Pingbo, Wang Shiyong, Xu Zuzheng, Xu Weinan, Wang Tongzhao and Guo Muoruo. And similar as in films, their works all demonstrated a hint of influence of the time.

2. “Nature as Refuge” in Chinese Film

The films *A Poet at the Edge of the Sea* (*Haijiao Shiren*) (1927), directed by Hou Yao (1903-1942), and *Sand Washed by Waves* (*Langtaosha*) (1936), directed by Wu Yonggang (1907-1982), are typical representatives of nature’s power to heal and console (Note 1). *A Poet at the Edge of the Sea* centres on a poet’s suffering in the world of reality and his final escape to a seaside village (Note 2). In this “nature as refuge” type narrative, only the sea has the power to console the poet’s wounded heart and soul. The director Hou Yao himself acted as the lonely poet who saw the city as a machine

devaluing human nature. When the poet loses his eyesight and becomes frustrated by the city, he declares: “I will leave this degenerate civilization, return to the bosom of nature, regain inner freedom, and discard all worldly affairs! I’d rather live on the desolate island, than stay in the golden tomb of the city prison which devastates human nature!” The film successfully constructed a refuge world in which poet, seagull and wave were at one, and the sound of singing, water and wind resonated harmoniously.

Sand Washed by Waves is concerned with a struggle between a criminal and a policeman, and is similar in conception and in its view of nature. In this film, conflict and hatred among human beings exist only in civilized society, while in nature (represented by a desolate island) all conflicts disappear (Fig.1). Nature is shown as having the power to harmonize and even eliminate conflict between human beings. The shots of waves breaking on the shore give prominence to one aspect of the sea – the characteristics of serenity, placidity and tolerance. In this way the sea is represented not only as the background against which human activities are acted out, but also as a kind of “presence”, an important agent in human life, with its own independent identity. At the beginning of *Sand Washed by Waves*, there is a long shot moving from right to left. The object of this is to show a desolate coastline in which, with the exception of two human skeletons, nothing else remains. It stands as a metaphor for the power of nature, illustrating the ability of the waves of the sea to wash away all traces of human life, no matter how heroic or debased. The film shows that all worldly conflict will in the end be diminished by nature – demonstrated by the fact that ultimately only sand and bones remain. The film is an allegory suggesting that when seen in relation to the force of nature, human life and death are as insignificant as grains of sand, and that ultimately everything will be reduced to nothingness. This opening shot creates the same feeling of space and time as the traditional Chinese painting. At first glance the art of film seems far removed from traditional Chinese painting. Film is a western art, created in tune with the values of western culture, reproducing a certain “view” of reality in both space and time. The traditional Chinese arts have no such characteristics, and there is no tradition of perspective in ancient Chinese painting. However, despite these contradictions, the director of *Sand Washed by Waves* has succeeded in blending the aesthetic values of Chinese painting with the imported western technology of movie-making.

Both of these films make human power seem insignificant by indicating that on the desolate island, human existence and survival is in the hands of nature. Both films convey the message that by seeking refuge in nature it is easier for human beings to rid themselves of their worldly fetters. As distinct from the culture of the left in which water was constructed as a destructive force, here it is represented as a means of defusing conflict. In this myth the human beings rely on the power of nature to withstand political and social turmoil. Both films were criticized by the revolutionaries and leftists as being divorced from reality, and detached from the problems of human society (Gao, 2005, p. 204). The message that life and soul could only be awakened by the nourishment of omnipotent nature was a continuation of the traditional myth of mountain, with the sea replacing the mountain as the most frequently appearing image. During this modern period, as the centre of economic and cultural life moved from the inland to the southeastern part of China, especially the area around the Yangtze River and the East China Sea, representation of the sea became the new focus.

3. “Social Struggles” in “Nature as Refuge”

However, the harmony and tranquility in their description of “nature as refuge” is often destroyed by the presence of a hint of concern about social struggles. The director Sun Yu’s two films *Little Toy* (*Xiaowanyi*) (1933) and *Return to Nature* (*Dao Ziran Qu*) (1936) are examples of this (Note 3). Sun Yu enjoyed the title of “poet director” and was familiar with the tradition of Chinese poetry. Sun Yu enjoyed the title of “poet director” and was familiar with the tradition of Chinese poetry (Zhou, 2005, p. 67). His films were full of poetic sensitivity, romantic sentiments, and idealized dreams. For example, in *Little Toy*, the heroine Mrs. Ye and her family lived a peaceful life in Taoye Village near Tai Lake before the domestic wars and Japanese invasion. Here she made a living by making a variety of toys. In this film, the lakeside village is represented as a refuge. Sun Yu and the cameraman use a romantic, lyrical style to poeticize the village, making it full of beautiful scenery and laughter and joy, with honest and warm-hearted people living a simple and happy life. This recapitulates a traditional utopian theme, and was satirized by the leftists as “turning the impoverished village into a paradise” (Cheng Jihua, 1980, p. 269).

This form of romantic idealism can also be found in *Return to Nature*. Sun used a large part of the film to represent the splendid scenery on the desolate island and the idealized life in nature (Fig.2). The film’s narrative centres on the message that equality between upper and lower classes, and spiritual freedom, can only be achieved in the great world of nature. The social hierarchy which seems right and proper and unalterable in civilized society collapses on the desolate island. The most capable man, who used to be a servant in a warlord family, becomes the leader, while the masters of the family lose their superior status. In leftist films, social hierarchy was also criticized, but the hope of equality was still located in civilized human society. In *Return to Nature*, however, equality and freedom can only be achieved in nature (the desolate island) whose image is constructed to contrast with that of civilized human society. Only in nature can people get rid of their fetters and pretense, demonstrate their true feelings and personalities, and

become pure, simple, innocent and honest. When they finally come back to civilized society, they put on their masks, living again a hypocritical, unequal, restrained, and selfish life.

Both *Little Toy* and *Return to Nature* offer a vision of the unity of the human and natural worlds, revealing the Taoist outlook which attributes the utmost human happiness to a return to nature. However, there are significant new ideas in this traditional theme. In *Return to Nature*, although on the desolate island class equality is achieved, there is still domination and there were still rules, as shown by the leader Ma Long's purposeful controlling of the animals (calves and goats) and women. This is distinct from the ideal world in Tao Yuanming and Wang Wei's poetry in which men, women and animals live peacefully in harmony. The filmmakers explicitly suggest that although human beings are able to return to nature to live a simple and innocent life, they are no longer primitive or natural men. Instead, brought up in civilized society and branded with its traces, they are unable to regain the true equality, unity and harmony which is based on the diminution of human power.

In *Little Toy*, the new ideas are more explicit. Although Mrs. Ye lives a happy and peaceful life in the village, she is not detached from the worries and concerns of the outside world. "Our toys are hand-made," she reflects. "They are looked down upon by foreigners. If our toys are no better than those of foreigners, we can't survive, and can't match foreign toys like the airplanes and trains made by machines in the factory". In China, during this period, emphasis was placed on patriotic struggle and industrial progress, and the developments of new machines were given pre-eminence, as the means of building a strong nation. Mrs. Ye's daughter Zhuer is a young woman whose consciousness is steeped in these ideas. "Shanghai children," she reflects, "only play with foreign toys. Will they fight foreign aggressors when they grow up? I hope to open a factory and make toys with advanced machines to compete with foreigners." The aggression of the Japanese army, with its powerful weapons, made the Chinese realize the power of industrialization and the machines it could produce. The peaceful inner spirit as conveyed in the traditional culture seemed unattainable. In *Little Toy* Mrs. Ye finally left the peaceful village and called on people to fight against the invaders (instead of retreating or escaping to nature): "If we keep on retreating, one day we will have no place to retreat to. Escape is not a good way."

The new ideas embodied in *Little Toy* and *Return to Nature* suggest that in some constructions of "nature as refuge", there are suggestions of "social struggle" in this "refuge". The Taoist ideas of "quietness" and "inaction" upheld by the ancient literati were now seen as increasingly irrelevant to the needs of the present. The adherents of the tradition living in this period suffered more inner pain and doubt than those living in any former period. Firstly, the most significant transmitter of traditional scholar-bureaucrat culture, the "court", did not exist anymore. In the past, when "being in the court" was considered as synonymous with corruption, the praise of "returning to Nature" was often regarded as a means of demonstrating the spiritual cleanliness of the literati and their resistance to social philistinism. But now, in the absence of this contrast, "returning to nature" lost part of its significance and many intellectuals lost much of the psychological driving force of living a reclusive life. Secondly, with the turmoil of the war, the expansion of the railway, and the continuing process of urbanization and industrialization, painters, writers and filmmakers became increasingly distanced from the real nature. They lived in the city, where they were faced with the impact of industrialization on society, and its collision with traditional Chinese cultural values based on agricultural civilization. As Hang Jian argues, the adherents of the tradition in this period were living in an alien land in which both their spirit and their bodies were in exile (Hang, 2002). This alienation gradually reduced their confidence in both the practice and the representation of the life in nature. In ancient times when there was turmoil, many literati retreated to the mountains, something which was encouraged and praised by all. Now this kind of behaviour was devalued. Since the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911, traditional culture had been rejected or subjected to increasing criticism. The disillusion and collapse of traditional cultural values made it difficult for the literati to find their inner homeland. In the outside world, the literati could not easily get access to the pure nature; in their inmost hearts their loyalty to traditional values was faltering. As a result, in Chinese film of this period, even in representations of the traditional theme, the influence of these realities often made inclusion of the idea of "social struggler" unavoidable. Sometimes it was subliminal, as in *Return to Nature*, or at other times it was expressed explicitly, as in *Little Toy*.

4. "Nature as Refuge" in Chinese Literature

During the May Fourth movement, most intellectuals were preoccupied by "rebellious" and "progressive" ideas. Later, disappointed and disillusioned by civil wars and revolutions which did not produce their ideal of a completely changed society, the longing of a small number of intellectuals to retire from social life intensified. For example, in 1925, Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967), a well-known essayist and translator, wrote in his introduction to Feng Wenbing (1901-1967)'s short story collection *The Story of the Bamboo Forest (Zhulinde Gushi)*, "I always have the inclination to withdraw from society and live in seclusion" (Note 4) (Zhou, 1992, p. 268). Zhou again and again claimed that he liked Tao's attitude toward life and the tone of his writing. The writers of the 1920s could not live a detached and self-contained life in a utopia as Tao did. It was difficult for them to find the unsullied or peaceful pastoral environment which had been ideal places of refuge for an ancient hermit. The mentality of these intellectuals after the May Fourth movement had its

origins in the spiritual bewilderment brought about by the radical change in society and ideology. It was this bewilderment which prompted them to seek out a tranquil home and to look for an inner balance in nature. As the unsullied nature was almost impossible to reach, they had instead to put their hopes in the “refuge” of this world. For example, Yu Pingbo (1900-1990), a well-known essayist, poet, historian and critic, retreated to West Lake in summer, living in Lin Hejing’s residence on the Solitary Mountain (Note 5). Lin Hejing (967-1028) was a Song poet and hermit, well-known for considering “the plum tree to be his wife and the crane his son”. Yu Pingbo watched the beauty of the sun rising over Geling Mountain and listened to the rain and the thunderstorm. In this way his “inner coolness came out with the rain”; and his depression “was broken with the thunder” (Yu, 1989, pp. 33-34). Wang Shiyong (1902-1949) returned to East Lake. “Through appreciating the remote mountains and placid water, my mind was widened... I want to find a pure land in this dirty world” (Wang, 1947, pp. 61-64). Wang Senran (1895-1984) “wandered at leisure in the grassland and slept on the petals of flowers, cut off from all worldly worries” (Wang, 1999). Xu Zuzheng (1894-1978) indulged himself in the “clear quietness of the deep mountain and old temple” (Xu, 1999). Xu Weinan (1900-1952) felt intoxicated in the clear coldness of the blue mountain and green water far from human society (Xu, 1947, pp.18-21). They lingered on the mountains and water, amid trees and flowers, realizing the significance of individual human life though their communication with nature. By returning to nature, their sorrows and worries were allayed, their hearts were cheered and their minds were composed. As Wang Tongzhao (1897-1957) commented, “lush green grasses”, “a cup of fragrant tea”, “birds singing”, “shadows of flowers”, all these can make him “escape from the destructive bondage of social life, and obtain temporary tranquility and the chance to seek the old dreams” (Ni, 1999).

These writers considered the mountain and water to be a temporary refuge for their sorrowing spirit, just as the “seven sages” (including Ruan Ji and Ji Kang) roamed in the bamboo forest in the Wei-Jin period, or the forty literati (with Wang Xizhi as the representative) gathered together in “Orchid Pavilion” (*Lanting*). However, losing oneself in nature and remaining aloof from worldly affairs was not easy to achieve during this period. To the city dwellers, sometimes there were many impediments to living in mountains, or a pastoral existence. In order to get rid of society’s ties and spiritual constraints, some writers resorted to “fantasizing” about a return to nature, and their fantasies made it seem as if they were actually living in the world of nature. For example, although Zhou Zuoren lived in Beijing city, in many of his essays he wrote that he could still listen to the orioles singing in the spring countryside of the Jiangnan area; he could still taste the wild vegetables of his remote hometown; he could sit in a small boat drifting in the river. Through this fantasy he could “enjoy a little bit of natural beauty and harmony in this ugly world” (Ni, 1999).

This pursuit differentiated from the “zeitgeist” of this period. Frustrated by revolutions and civil wars, these writers chose to concentrate on their own happiness. They were able to free themselves from any sense of social responsibility or social “progress”, by resolving to “maintain their own integrity”, to be worldly-wise and “play safe.” Such passive elements muted the “modern” tenor of these works and weakened their ability to inspire rebellion. The idea of “refusing to be contaminated by evil influences” and “preserving one’s purity of mind” was based on keeping reality at a distance and detaching oneself from “progressive trends”. This demonstrated the spiritual intimacy of these writers with the ancient literati.

Sometimes the spirit of the “return to nature” was embedded with another mark of this period: the influence of Western culture, as shown by several of Guo Moruo’s poems. Guo Moruo’s ideas were a combination of the East and the West, the old and the new. Apart from those bold and new assertions, in several of his poems he expressed the old idea of “coming back to nature”, without the distinction between human beings and other things, without struggles or selfish desires, in order to achieve spiritual liberation. This is the ideal state depicted in his poem “Earth, My Mother!” (*Diqiu, Wode Muqin*) in which the workers, peasants, trees, the grass and angleworms all become equal and free:

Earth, My Mother!	地球，我的母亲！
I admire all the grass and trees, my sibling, your offspring,	我羡慕那一切的草木，我的同胞，你的儿孙，
They freely, independently, amiably, healthily	他们自由地，自主地，随分地，健康地，
Enjoy their endowed life.	享受着他们的赋生。
...
Earth, My Mother!	地球，我的母亲！
I do not want to fly in an aeroplane,	我不愿在空中飞行，
Neither ride in carts, on horseback, wear socks or put on shoes,	我也不愿坐车，乘马，着袜，穿鞋，
I only wish to go barefoot, ever closer to you. (Guo, 1953, pp. 86-93)	我只愿赤着我的双脚，永远和你相亲。

Here, Guo Moruo's ideals were beyond the scope of pantheism. As Sun Shaozhen argues, with this imagery he was actually representing Jean Jacques Rousseau's concept of "natural rights" (Sun, 2007, p. 51.). Rousseau (1712-1778) proposed that before civilized society there existed a natural state in which there was no government, no law, no authority. Natural man living in this natural estate was born with the rights of liberty, equality and the pursuit of happiness. Private ownership was the source of inequality, and the development of science and art caused the corruption of morality. In short, Rousseau advocated a return to nature. Guo's poem "Earth, My Mother!" presented Rousseau's idea of casting off the restrictions of feudal authority and doctrine. It represented the "natural man", who achieved the ideal of a return to nature. Guo described the process of writing "Earth, My Mother!" in his essay "My Experience of Writing Poetry". In this essay he emphasized that when once he was captured by his inspiration, he took off his clogs and lay down on the land, showing his intimacy with the earth by kissing and hugging it. In this way he felt that he experienced a rebirth, seeing another world and becoming another man. Here, Guo Moruo was not only intoxicated by Rousseau's thought, he also imitated Rousseau's behaviour (Note 6) (Guo, 1957-1963).

This Rousseau-influenced idea of a "return to nature" and intimacy with the earth is also conveyed in the poem "Notes on a Tour to West Lake" (*Xihu Jiyou*). Guo wrote this poem when he felt depressed in social life and went back to the countryside:

By the foot of the Leifeng Pagoda	雷峰塔下
There is an old man hoeing the fields,	一个锄地的老人
He has taken off his cotton-padded coat	脱去了上身的棉衣
And hung it on a branch of a young mulberry.	挂在一旁嫩桑的枝上。
He has stopped hoeing,	他息着锄头,
And raised his eyes to look at me.	举起头来看我。
Ah, his kind and amiable eyes,	哦, 他那慈和的目光,
His healthy yellow face,	他那健康的黄脸,
His graying beard,	他那斑白的须髯,
His veined and gold-coloured hands.	他那筋脉隆起的金手。
I want to kneel down in front of him,	我想去跪在他的面前,
And call him: "my father!"	叫他一声:"我的爹!"

And lick all the yellow mud off his feet (Guo, 1953, pp. 193-4). 把他脚上的黄泥舔个干净。(Note 7)

In this poem we can see a representation of human labour in nature and the poetic idealization of the "healthy" life of the peasants. Through the depiction of the ploughman, Guo expressed his longing to leave the civilized world and return to live a more "primitive" life in close communication with nature. He detested the corruption and degeneration of social life, and considered the natural world to be a pure land. He saw peasant life as a form of redemption, which provided consolation and revelation to his painful spirit.

5. Conclusion

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Chinese cultural traditions were maintained by some intellectuals who were preoccupied with traditional ideas. Disillusioned by civil wars and revolutions, disappointed by urbanization, industrialization and modern life, and obsessed with a nostalgia for the traditional way of life, they continued to construct the myth of "nature as a refuge" or "returning to nature" in which the natural force (e.g. "water force") was praised for its ability to relieve human misery, as shown in some films of the 1920s (e.g. *A Poet at the Edge of the Sea*) and non-leftist films of the 1930s (e.g. *Sand Washed by Waves*), and some literary works (e.g. Zhou Zuoren's prose). However, during this period, many intellectuals lived in a cultural environment preoccupied with the idea of social struggles, social progress based on science and technology, and the influence of Western culture, therefore they had no real way to escape from the society, although they were tired of the turmoil which was pervading society. This is demonstrated in the films *Little Toy* and *Return to Nature*, and Guo Muoruo's poems.

Acknowledgements

This paper is supported by "Cooperation and Innovation Center in Henan Province for International Dissimilation of Chinese Language".



Figure 1. *Sand Washed by Waves* (*Langtaosha* 浪淘沙) (1936). In a desolate island all conflicts between the criminal and the policeman disappear.



Figure 2. *Return to nature* (*Dao Ziran Qu* 到自然去) (1936). The aristocratic family spend their holiday in a desolate island

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Notes

Note 1. *Haijiao Shiren*: 海角诗人; Hou Yao: 侯曜; *Langtaosha*: 浪淘沙; Wu Yonggang: 吴永刚.

Note 2. The main plot is as follows: a poet, tired of the corrupted city life, wants to escape to a desolate island. He rejects the approaches of a wealthy city girl and falls in love with a fishergirl – the continuation of the "fisherman" tradition. Both of them experience hardship and suffering in society. Finally, the poet and the fishergirl are rescued and live happily in a seaside village.

Note 3. *Xiaowanyi*: 小玩意; *Dao Ziran Qu*: 到自然去.

Note 4. Zhou Zuoren: 周作人; Feng Wenbing: 冯文炳.

Note 5. Yu Pingbo: 俞平伯; Lin Hejing: 林和靖.

Note 6. In 1749 when Rousseau was conceiving the article *Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts* on the question "Has the Progress of the arts and sciences contributed more to the corruption or to the purification of morals", he also lay down on the earth and experienced a feeling of rebirth.

Note 7. Translated by Kirk A. Denton. See Denton, *The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature: Hu Feng and Lu Ting*, 1998, pp. 62-3. See also Chen Xiaoming, *From the May Fourth Movement to Communist Revolution: Guo Moruo and the Chinese Path to Communism*, 2007, p. 76.

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