

## COMMENT ON “SYMBIOTIC NURTURE BETWEEN LITERATURE, CULTURE AND NATURE IN GARY SNYDER’S META-PICTO-POETRY OF LANDSCAPE”

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The research perspectives on American poet Gary Snyder’s work have witnessed an increasing diversification of angles in recent years, mainly due to the following reasons. Snyder’s global perspective and unique individual psychological experiences shaped his exceptional poetry. Additionally, people in modern society are facing complex and ever-changing relationships between humans and nature as well as between human and ecological civilization. Especially, the crisis of post-industrialization, the rise of consumerism and materialism, the lack of belief and the desolation of the soul not only impact the external environment, but also pose a crisis for the human soul. Snyder’s poetry profoundly reflects these issues. Moreover, scholars value the oriental cultural elements present in Snyder’s works, considering them increasingly significant in the era of globalization. Consequently, both his creative works and critical analyses have garnered significant attention from the academic community, particularly in China. There is also a continuous update and

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refinement of related theories. The focus of this article (under review) is to explore Snyder's poetry from a cultural perspective.

A crucial and indispensable element in Snyder's poems is Zen thought, which is also one of the key contents of this article. The World's Parliament of Religions was held in 1893. After that, the renowned Japanese Zen master Suzuki Daisetsu, also known as Suzuki Daizhuo, traveled to the United States to teach Zen Buddhism. This event sparked a strong interest in Eastern Zen within Western society, leading to a "Zen craze" trend in the United States around the 1950s. Mahayana Buddhism, which includes Zen Buddhism, is open to all who embrace its path. Its ultimate purpose is to work toward the salvation of the world and to foster altruism. This particular cultural characteristic deeply resonated with Gary Snyder. As a result of this profound connection, Snyder made a resolute decision to give up, continuing his studies at Indiana University, and embarked on a transformative journey to Japan in 1956 to immerse himself in the practice of Zen Buddhism for more than a decade.

Zen thought exerted a profound and lifelong influence on Snyder, with classic works like *Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra*, *Six Patriarch Altar Sutra*, *Diamond Sutra* and *Avatamsaka Sutra*, playing a crucial role in shaping his ecological awareness. Zen imagery and allusions, such as "Buddha Beads", "Sentient Beings", "Lotus Throne" and "Elysium" are prevalent throughout his poetry, further illustrating the profound influence of Zen thought on his creative methods, concepts and ecological content. Part of his ecological consciousness also finds theoretical grounding in Zen thought.

Zen thought values personal experience and perception of the world, which aligns perfectly with Snyder's love for wilderness and his ideal of being with nature. His poetry reflects his profound experiences in nature and the intimate connection he shares with it. For example, *River in the Valley* describes his observations and descriptions of the surrounding natural environment while walking along the causeway with his son; *Real Work* (from *Turtle Island*) records his experience of rowing with friends among the small islands in San Francisco Bay. Snyder's state of feeling nature with heart, and blending into it, is reflected in the seemingly plain narration and description of the scenery. Only real experience can help writers understand things clearly and effectively and write more appropriate works.

Snyder's poems abound with rich Zen imagery, which contributes to their aesthetic significance in line with Zen aesthetics. As is widely understood, imagery (*yixiang* in Chinese) involves the organic fusion of "meaning" (*yi* in Chinese) and "object" (*xiang* in Chinese) in a literary work. The poet's subjective emotions are projected onto external objects, imbuing them with a significance that transcends mere objectivity, relying on imagery to evoke emotions beyond the physical representation. In Snyder's poems, the landscapes described are not fictional, yet they are not purely objective either. Instead, they are based on the poet's real experiences as a historical figure. His use of discourse is rooted in his perceptions, encompassing his sensibilities, intuitions, and even delusions and blind spots. While the place and landscapes may exist in reality, Snyder's distinct way of seeing and listening infuses the text with his unique perspective during the process of reconstruction. Snyder's poetry creates a perceptual world through the lens of Zen discourse, illustrating this world from flowing streams to majestic mountains, from serene rivers to tranquil Zen temples.

Snyder believes that poetry is a means of spreading Buddhist teachings, as he agrees with poet Bai Juyi's view that Chinese poetry is "another way to spread Buddhism." Snyder also hopes that his works can do that. His poems actively disseminate Buddhist concepts, and his desire to convey the logical concepts of Zen comprehensively is exceptionally strong. To achieve this, he employs special poetic language and expression techniques. The Zen tradition of "not establishing words" encourages him to delve into the realm of imagination. In this pursuit, Snyder's poetry can be considered a representative of "forgotten words," that is, he is good at portraying logical Zen concepts comprehensively.

Bi (2023) focuses on the use of the *ku* structure in Snyder's poems. *Ku* is a term derived from the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese character *ju* and is associated with concise phrases, aphorisms, or Zen-like poems used in Zen Buddhism or Buddhist scriptures. To facilitate the practice of Zen or poetry for beginners, Toyo Eicho, a monk of the Miaoxin Temple School of the Linji Sect, in Japan, compiled over 4,000 Zen verses, Buddhist scriptures, ancient poems and other teachings into a portable booklet, from more than 200 Chinese Zen teachings, scriptures, lantern records, koan, classics and ancient poems. This booklet was later compiled, transcribed and published by many eminent monks., and served as a vocabulary reference book known as the *Sentence Collection of Zen Temples*. The length of a *ku* can vary, ranging

from a single character to more than 20 characters. Examples of *ku* include phrases like “Go for tea”, “Grind a brick to make a mirror” and “Cloud in the sky, water in vast”. Despite their brevity, each *ku* carries a profound meaning that can help individuals tap into their wisdom and lead them toward enlightenment.

Inspired by the *Sentence Collection of Zen Temples*, Snyder gives his similar English definition of *ku*, describing it as a “short and concise phrase” and “a keyword group in some sense”, functioning as the skeleton of a poem to show the whole structure. In the long poem *Endless Mountains and Rivers*, Snyder employs a technique to create a feeling of endlessness and non-intermittent writing. He does this by structuring each stanza around a *ku*,” which forms a relatively independent “bone structure” for the poem. Additionally, the overall structure of the poem centers around a larger *ku*, which is the phrase “walking on walking” found in both the opening and closing lines of *Endless Mountains and Rivers*. By using this approach, Snyder connects all the individual *ku* in the poem like knots, creating a network-like *ku* structure mechanism. Poems themed “cultural travel” evoke the sensation of Chinese landscape paintings, where various landscapes and scenes seamlessly blend, giving readers a feeling of an integrated experience of time and space with an endless extension.

Indeed, the *ku* structure used by Gary Snyder can be seen as a natural product of the creative process and aligns with the “visionary poetics” category that Snyder defined. In public interviews, Snyder expressed his belief that the *avant-garde* poets of the American counterculture in the 1950s inherited and developed the poetic skills of visual imagination from British former Romantic poet William Blake. Additionally, they were inspired by the “epiphanies” of Japanese Zen master Suzuki Daizhuo’s Zen Buddhism and the influence of Ezra Pound’s definition of “imagery.” Despite its brevity, a *ku* does reflect the openness and complexity of Pound’s definition of “image”.

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