

Gary Snyder and China

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Abstract—Gary Snyder had a close relationship with Chinese culture. From the Chinese poet Hanshan to Chinese ancient poems, from Chinese Zen to Chinese Confucianism, he experienced a kind of cultural influence which was totally different from the western one. Under this kind of influence, he has changed to live an oriental lifestyle and created his works with Chinese traits. The contents, the writing skills and the thoughts of his works embody the traits in a whole way. Meanwhile, as one of the representatives of the Beat Generation, his works with Chinese features have made a difference on the development of the literature of the Generation.

Index Terms—Gary Snyder, Han Shan, Zen, Confucianism, Chinese ancient poems

I. INTRODUCTION

Gary Snyder, an outstanding representative of the Beat Generation, was born on May 8, 1930 in San Francisco, California, and is well known not only for his advocacy of environmental protection and ecological concerns, but for his translation and imitation of classical Chinese poetry and a great interest in the philosophies of the East, especially of the ancient China showed in his works. Under the influence of Ezra Pound and Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder became fond of Chinese poetry and the philosophy of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu and received a “whole-round influence of Chinese culture”(Ou Gong, 1994, p.33). He read the *Tao Te Ching*, translated the poems of Han Shan, a hermit poet living in the T'ang Dynasty, and assimilated a lot of Chinese cultural elements in his own poetry. Once he said: “I tried writing poems of tough, simple, short words, with the complexity far beneath the surface texture. In part the line was influenced by the five- and seven-character line Chinese poems I'd been reading, which work like sharp blows on the mind.” (Donald, 1960, p.420-421)

II. SNYDER AND HAN-SHAN, A CHINESE MONK AND POET

Han-shan, or Han-shanzi, was a monk in T'ang Dynasty, famous for his Zen poems and his madness as well as for being translated and introduced to the West by Snyder. From the introduction in the preface of *Riprap & Cold Mountain Poems* written by Snyder, we can get a clear impression of Han-shan:

Kanzan, or Han-shan, “Cold Mountain” takes his name from where he lived. He is a mountain madman in an old Chinese line of ragged hermits. When he talks about Cold Mountain he means himself, his home, his state of mind. He lived in the T'ang dynasty—traditionally A.D.627-650, although Hu Shih dates him 700-780. This makes him roughly contemporary with Tu Fu, Li Po, Wang Wei, and Po Chu-i. His poems, of which three hundred survive, are written in T'ang colloquial: rough and fresh. The ideas are Taoist, Buddhist, Zen. He and his sidekick Shih-te (Jittoku in Japanese) became great favorites with Zen painters of later days—the scroll, the broom, the wild hair and laughter. (Snyder, 1982, p.33)

In 1950s and 1970s, Han-shan became the idol of the Beats and Hippies. They imitated Han-shan's long hair, bare foot, ragged clothes and madness. And they also read Snyder's version of poems, did research on the Zen principles embodied in Han-shan's poems and applied them in reality to show their opposition to the modern hypocritical civilization.

Then, what made Snyder interested in Han-shan's poetry and enabled it so popular in America?

In 1952, Snyder lived in San Francisco studying Chinese and Japanese in the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of California at Berkeley. While at Reed, he had already begun practicing sitting meditation, zazen (Can Chan), and in Berkeley “became acquainted with the warm, relaxed, familial, and devotional Buddhism of traditional Asia in the atmosphere of the Berkeley Buddhist Church.”(Murphy, 2000, p.7) He also felt a strong affinity for China, in part as a result of an experience he had as a child, which he has retold in several different interviews. He recounts going into the Seattle Art Museum and seeing a room full of Chinese landscape paintings. At that moment he felt a deep shock of recognition because they looked to him exactly like the Cascades, with which he was already familiar. He felt that “the Chinese had an eye for the world that I saw as real.” (Snyder, 1980, p.94) Visiting China in the early 1950s, however, was not an option.

Later with Shin-hsiang Chen, he ultimately translated twenty-four of the Cold Mountain Poems of Han-shan. These vivid translations are an excellent adaptation of Han-shan's poetry to Western sensibility and taste, and they remain great favorites of readers oriented toward mountains and the out-of-doors.

Although he looked like a mad monk, Han-shan actually is a master of Zen Buddhism. He lived in the Kuo-ch'ing Temple of Cold Mountain in Tian Tai, now a part of Zhejiang Province. His friends were birds, clouds and creeks besides Shih-te (Shi De), another mad monk in the mundane eyes. The four lines from “I Settled at Cold Mountain

Long Ago” describe his life as such:

Thin grass does for a mattress,
The blue sky makes a good quilt.
Happy with a stone overhead
Let heaven and earth go about their changes. (Snyder, 1982, p.43)

Han-shan’s 365 poems are full of the thoughts of Taoism and Zen. And many of his poems and behaviors are considered as the famous Koans in the Zen history. For example:

My home was at Cold Mountain from the start,
Rambling among the hills, far from trouble.
Gone, and a million things leave no trace
Loosed, and it flows through the galaxies. (Snyder, 1982, p.59)

In order to be “far from trouble”, Han-shan often lived in mountainous areas. The earthlings are worried about the so-called trouble everyday, but what is trouble actually? Nothing! No matter what they are, trouble, power or money, they all will “go”, and “leave no trace.” These words just present the thoughts of Zen Buddhism and Taoism: Nothing is permanent; “a million things” are from nothing and ended in nothing, either.

When Snyder and other Beats and Hippies faced the busy and indifferent society, the cold war and the “hot” war, they were confused, lost, and had no sense of belonging and safety. At that time, the introduction and transmission of Taoism and Buddhism met their mental desire. They found the way to release their emotions and restore their value in life and the world in *Tao Te Ching* and Han-shan’s poems. They even found themselves in Han-shan’s life style, just as Snyder puts it in the preface of *Riprap*: “They (Han-shan and Shih-te) became Immortals and you sometimes run onto them today in the skidrows, orchards, hobo jungles, and logging camps of America.” (Snyder, 1982, p.33)

III. SNYDER AND CHINESE ANCIENT POEMS

Snyder fell in love with Chinese landscape paintings at the first sight. Since then, he had learnt the Chinese language, read translations of classical Chinese poems. He knew quite well about Wang Wei, Li Po, Tu Fu, Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, especially his idol—Han Shan. So it is inevitable that he would use a lot of Chinese materials in his poems. Just as Patrick D. Murphy puts it in *A Place for Wayfaring—The Poetry and Prose of Gary Snyder*: There are four areas that comprise the heart of Snyder’s resources for his poetry. The first consists of the cultures of inhibitory or indigenous peoples, particularly the Native American tribes of the Pacific West. The second area consists of the Asian cultures of China, Japan, and, to a lesser extent, India. The third area consists of ecology, a concern of Snyder’s throughout his life. The fourth area of resources is a matter of poetics rather than thematics (Murphy, 2000, p.15-18). It is obvious that Chinese culture plays a very important role in Snyder’s poems. According to Ou Gong’s data, there are 51 times that Snyder quoted the Chinese culture elements in his poems (Ou Gong, 1994, p.33). We can make a rough list in the following.

First, in the poems collection *Left Out in the Rain—New Poems 1947-1985*:

- 1) And built a poem to dead Li Po (“A Sinecure for P. Whalen”)
- 2) Wang Wei built his own Deer Park, / Chao-chou left no gate ajar (“Song for a Cougar Hide”)
- 3) Walt Whitman, Hitomaro, Han Shan, / Here / In Berkeley December Twentieth- / Century rain, ... (“The Rainy Season”)
- 4) We had ten Zen monks / Down for lunch—/ “tenjin” the head monk said: / in China it was just a bun (“t’ien-hsin”) / means “that the heart” / it means a real feed / in Japan today. / “they still have buns in China / called “t’ien-hsin”—/ Dimsum, in Cantonese. (“Tenjin”)
- 5) Riding the edge makes one crude. / The Chinese poets / I have no heart to read. (“The Ride”)
- 6) Lao-tzu says / To forget what you knew is best. (“High Quality Information”)
- 7) The title “After T’ao Ch’ien”
- 8) The title “After the Chinese”
- 9) In China first, the Diamond Sutra pressed / With type of clay, all Sentient Being Blessed. (“A Work for Burke”)

Second, in his *Turtle Island*:

- 10) Mushroom-vision healer, / single flat drum, / from long before China. / Women with drums who fly over Tibet. (“The Way West, Underground”)

Third, in the poems anthology *The Back Country*:

- 11) Our portion of fire / at this end of the milky way / (the Tun-huang fragments say, Eternal Light) / Two million years from M 31 / the galaxy in Andromeda—/ My eyes sting with these relics. / Fingers mark time. (“The Manichaeans”)

Of course, it is not feasible to list all the quotations of Chinese culture elements in Gary Snyder’s poems here due to the limit of the space. There are still many left. But even from the limited quotations listed above, we also can see how great it is the influence of the culture in this ancient oriental land on Snyder’s works.

Patrick D. Murphy reveals in his book *A Place for Wayfaring—The Poetry and Prose of Gary Snyder* that during college and the early years in San Francisco, Snyder’s favorite poet was Ezra Pound according to Kerouac and other friends. Certainly, Pound’s concerns for the exact word and for the simple, straightforward statement have become a

part of Snyder's poetic principle. Pound's attention to the well-made line and the clean image is clearly evident in Snyder's work.

The syntax of written Chinese is quite different from English, as the former relies on characters rather than on an alphabet building individual words. It is generally thought that English sentences are combined by grammar while Chinese ones by meanings. As a special literature form, classical Chinese poetry has its unique features unlike other Chinese literature forms, namely the concision of language. Limited by its form, poetry should be as concise as possible. Poetic images are often described in blocks and concise phrases without verbs, prepositions or articles. And classical Chinese, even the language of much of the Asian poetry Snyder initially studied, does not employ any tenses. In Snyder's poems the frequent absence of articles, *a* and *the*, stands out along with the frequent absence or lengthy delay of the appearance of any pronouns. Also, he emphasizes the action or event rather than the person causing or witnessing such an event. The poems anthology *Riprap & Cold Mountain Poems* are replete with such Asian poetic influences.

In the poem "Riprap", there are four lines embodying such Chinese features.

ants and pebbles

In the thin loam, each rock a word

a creek-washed stone

Granite: ingrained

with torment of fire and weight (Snyder, 1982, p.30)

In these sentences, none is complete, just some noun-phrases such as "ants and pebbles" and "a creek-washed stone", even the letter "a" in "ants" at the beginning of the sentence is not in capital; there is also no predicate verbs, for example, "each rock a word" or "Granite: ingrained / with torment of fire and weight".

A lot of such examples can also be found in *Left Out in the Rain—New Poems 1947-1985*. For instance, the first stanza in "Bakers Cabin on Boone's Ferry Road" has the same features.

Frogs all night

three white ducks

chanting down the pond

the yowling of the Siamese in heat

the hot iron thud on spitting shirts

Dampish firewood squeaks and burns.

four kittens and a baby squall

in boxes by the kitchen stove. (Snyder, 1986, p.35)

In the poem Snyder always uses present participles to replace the normal English syntax, for example, chanting, yowling, spitting etc. The following two poems have the similar Chinese-style lines as well:

Lines on a Carp

old fat fish of everlasting life

in rank brown pools discarded by the river

soft round-mouth nudging mud

among the reeds, beside the railroad track (Snyder, 1986, p.11)

Ezra Pound is the father of Imagism. The imagists such as him and Amy Lowell are all fond of classical Chinese poetry. The reason that the Imagists found value in Chinese poetry is that Chinese poetry is, by virtue of the ideographic and pictographic nature of the Chinese language, essentially imagistic poetry. The Chinese language is concrete and direct and metaphorical. The history of Chinese writing conditioned Chinese literature to its conciseness and precision. To make fewer words do more work was the cherished aim of literary training in ancient China. Since images need fewer connectives and convey more, it is only natural that they are built into the very texture of classic Chinese poetry. They either juxtapose with, or superimpose or melt into each other, and often form clusters of fused ideas impregnated with power and energy.

So it is no wonder that both champions of Imagism, Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, are infatuated with Chinese poems. Ezra Pound defines an image as that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time, and later he extends this definition when he states that an image is "a vortex or cluster of fused ideas" "endowed with energy." An Imagistic presentation is hard, clear, unblurred, done by means of the chosen "exact word." An Imagist poem enables the reader to see the physical thing rather than put him through an abstract process. Lucid logical exposition is no good poetry. The best poetic effect is visual and concrete. Thus an Imagist's image represents a moment of revealed truth, truth revealed by a physical object presented and seen as such. An Imagist poem, therefore, often contains a single dominant image, or a quick succession of related images. Its effect is meant to be instantaneous.

Snyder is significantly influenced by classical Chinese poetry, by Ezra Pound, and by William Carlos Williams' dictum "No ideas but in things." So in Snyder's work, the selection of images is also the basic organizing device. "Pine Tree Tops" is a typical example:

in the blue night

frost haze, the sky glows

with the moon

pine tree tops

bend snow-blue, fade
 into sky, frost, starlight.
 the creak of boots.
 rabbit tracks, deer tracks,
 what do we know. (Snyder, 1974, p.33)

In this nine-line short poem, there are a series of ten images: “night”, “frost”, “sky”, “moon”, “pine tree”, “snow”, “starlight”, “boot”, “rabbit tracks” and “deer tracks”. These beautiful, quiet and concrete objects suggest a deep, remote and serene atmosphere, making readers feel fresh, calm and enjoyable. This kind of poetic mood is well embodied in Wang Wei’s poems. Here is Wang Wei’s “Autumn Twilight in the mountains (《山居秋暝》)” translated by Kenneth Rexroth whose translation of classical Chinese poems influenced Snyder a lot:

In the empty mountains after the new rain
 The evening is cool. Soon it will be Autumn.
 The bright moon shines between the pines.
 The crystal stream flows over the pebbles.
 Girls coming home from washing in the river
 Rustle through the bamboo grove.
 Lotus leaves dance behind the fisherman’s boat.
 The perfumes of Spring have vanished
 But my guests will long remember them. (Rexroth, 1970, p.55)

There are more than ten images in this short poem: “empty mountain”, “new rain”, “bright moon”, “pines”, “crystal stream”, “pebbles”, “bamboo grove”, “girls”, “lotus leaves”, “fisherman’s boat”, “perfumes of Spring”, etc. From these two poems we can easily find the influence of Wang Wei’s poetry on Snyder’s writing style.

Snyder also mentioned Wang Wei in his poem “Song for a Cougar Hide” from *Left Out in the Rain*: “Wang Wei built his own Deer Park”. We can sense Snyder’s admiration for Wang Wei. So Snyder also went to the rural part of California to “built his own Deer Park.”

It is easy to find more examples of image juxtaposition in Snyder’s work, such as in “Sustained Yield”:

This summer-dry winter-wet
 California
manzanita, valley oak, redwood,
sugar pine, our folk
sun, air, water,
our toil,
Topsoil, leafmold, sifted dirt,
hole-in-the-ground (Snyder, 1986, p.134)

Snyder’s relaxed and placid mood in a sweet spring of Coyote valley is dearly shown by the underlined images, which look random but are actually selected carefully.

IV. SNYDER AND CHINESE ZEN

Zen is the Chinese Buddhism. It is the combination of Indian Buddhism and Chinese traditional culture (mainly the Taoism and Confucianism). In the ancient India, Zen was a way of meditation, of cultivating one’s morality, not just belonging to Buddhism. It originates from India, and then spreads to Japan, and later to China. But it is completely formed in China with the efforts and innovation of Hui Neng, the founder and the Zen master of the Chinese Zen. Zen became popular in the T’ang and Sung Dynasty while the T’ang and Sung poetry flourished. Just as Snyder puts it in *The Real Work*, the great Chinese poets were contemporaries of all the great Chinese masters even though they might not have known each other very much because China had a huge population even then. It was a real cultural climax; poetry and Zen were both at their most creative in China simultaneously. (Snyder, 1980, p.19) In the T’ang Dynasty, the famous poets such as Wang Wei, Po Chu-I (Bai Juyi) and Han-shan were fond of Zen Buddhism. Wang Wei, the most outstanding poet of the Mountain and Water poetic school, lived in a half-hermit life. He had great zeal for discussing Zen with the master monks, and compared himself to Wei Mo Jie, the master of Zen. He was a vegetarian and lived in a house only furnished with a rope bed and the mortar for triturating herbs. He also wrote a eulogy for Master Hui Neng. So in his poems, the approaches and principles of Zen can be easily found. And just due to this, his poetry is characterized by its artistic sense of peace and beauty. Han-shan’s Zen poems are especially canonized by Snyder. Han-shan’s poems are more colloquial and simpler than Wang Wei’s and show the truth and principles of Zen more directly as well. His poems and Snyder’s translation of them will be discussed in detail in the following part.

It is reasonable to say that although Snyder went to Japan studying Zen and Buddhism, he is mainly influenced by the Chinese Zen, by the Zen embodied in poems by Han Shan, Wang Wei and other great ancient Chinese poets. Snyder’s own words give sound grounds:

I read Ezra Pound’s and Arthur Waley’s translations of Chinese poetry, a translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, and some texts of Confucius. Within a year or so I went through the *Upanishads*, *Vedas*, *Bhagavead-Gita*, and most of the classics of Chinese and Indian Buddhist literature. The convergence that I found really exciting was the Mahayana Buddhist

wisdom-oriented line as it developed in China and assimilated the older Taoist tradition. It was that very precise cultural meeting that also coincided with the highest period of Chinese poetry—the early and middle T'ang Dynasty Zen masters and the poets who were their contemporaries and in many cases friends—that was fascinating. Then I learned that this tradition is still alive and well in Japan. That convinced me that I should go and study in Japan. (Snyder, 1980, p.19)

At that time, it was not convenient for Snyder to come to China to study Chinese poems and Zen or Zen Buddhism. If it was, Snyder surely would come.

Then what's the relationship between Snyder's poetry and Taoism? Snyder knew *Tao Te Ching* as well as Rexroth, and some of his poems were influenced by their thoughts. For example, all of the following poems have the trace of Taoism: "Without" (*Turtle Island*), "High Quality information" (*Left Out in the Rain*), "The Way Is Not Way" (*Regarding Waves*), "No Matter, Never Mind" (*Turtle Island*), "The Great Mother" (*Turtle Island*), "For Nothing" (*Turtle Island*), etc. Take "No Matter, Never Mind" as an example, in which he obviously assimilated the thoughts of *Tao Te Ching*:

The Father is the Void
The Wife Waves
Their child is Matter.
Matter makes it with his mother
And their child is Life,
a daughter.
The Daughter is the Great Mother
Who, with her father / brother Matter
as her lover,
Gives birth to the Mind. (Snyder, 1974, p.11)

Tao is the core and the base of *Tao Te Ching*'s thoughts. According to Lao Tzu, *Tao* is the origin of the universe, of every being:

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生万物。

(*Tao* gave birth to the One; the One gave birth successively to two things, three things, up to ten thousand) (Arthur, 1998, p.90-91)

But actually *Tao* is "Void", "Not-being", so Lao Tzu said in Chapter 40:

天下万物生于有，有生于无。

(For though all creatures under heaven are the products of Being, Being itself is the product of Not-being.) (Arthur, 1998, p.86-87)

So "the Father" in the poem "No Matter, Never Mind" is the "Void", the "*Tao*". From him, all things are generated. Snyder tried to show, in this short poem his understanding of the essence of *Tao Te Ching*, the origin of the universe and the birth of all beings in the world.

V. SNYDER AND CHINESE CONFUCIANISM

In order to avoid the earthly trouble, Han-shan lived as a hermit in the mountainous area. "Let heaven and earth go about their changes" (Snyder, 1982, p.43). Snyder likes this kind of life style and philosophy and he even imitated Han-shan to live in the Sierra Nevada Mountain. He made his living as a lumberman and spent most his time in writing poems and traveling around mountains and forests, just like a hermit. But in addition to being influenced by the hermit spirit of Han-shan and the thought of "doing-nothing" of Lao Tzu, Snyder has also learnt a lot from Confucianism, which instructs people to care about the society and the world. He took part in the anti-war campaign with Allen Ginsberg, and became an eco-activist caring the pain and hardship of our earth as well as being a hermit. He devoted himself to the work of protection of environment and wrote a lot of poems to express his painful feeling for the destroyed nature and advocated people to stop ruining our world. Snyder wrote in "Energy is Eternal Delight": "A young woman at Sir George Williams University in Montreal asked me, 'What do you fear most?' I found myself answering 'that the diversity and richness of the gene pool will be destroyed—'" (Snyder, 1974, p.103)

"Four Changes", a prose written in the summer of 1969 by Snyder, shows his concern about population, pollution, consumption and transformation. In the prose he analyzes the serious conditions of the modern society in four aspects and offers feasible solutions to them. Also, he cares about the environment conditions in China:

Pere David's Deer, the Elaphure,
Lived in the tule marshes of the Yellow River
Two thousand years ago—and lost its home to rice—
The forests of Lo-yang were logged and all the silt &
Sand flowed down, and gone, by 1200 AD—
Wild Geese hatched out in Siberia
head south over basins of the Yang, the Huang,
what we call "China"
On flyways they have used a million years.

Ah China, where are the tigers, the wild boars,
the monkeys,
like the snows of yesteryear
Gone in a mist, a flash, and the dry hard ground

is parking space for fifty thousand trucks. (“Mother Earth: Her Whales”, Snyder, 1974, p.47)

The destruction made by the machine and the modern civilization created by humans—“most precious of all things” (Snyder, 1974, p.47), would bring the revenge to them. One day, “May ants, may abalone, otters, wolves and elk / Rise! And pull away their giving from the robot nations.” And “The Robots argue how to parcel out our Mother Earth”. (Snyder, 1974, p.47)

As an ecological poet, Snyder also pays attention to the deterioration of Chinese cultural and environmental heritage in “To the Chinese Comrades”:

What did they leave us.

“K’ung fu-tze, some buildings, remain.”

—tons of soil gone.

Mountains turn desert

Stone croppt flood, strippt hills,

The useless wandering river mouths,

Salt swamps

Silt on the floor of the sea. (Snyder, 1968, p.112)

However, Snyder is still fond of China and Chinese culture. When he was asked the question by Chowka “What about their (Chinese people) disaffiliation with their spiritual lineage”, he answered:

That doesn’t trouble me too much. I believe the Chinese had been pretty well disaffiliated from that already for some time. But, in a sense, the primary values already had sunk in so deeply that they didn’t have to articulate them much anymore. Also, as a student of Chinese history, I perceive a little about the cycles that it moves in. If the rest of the world holds together, I would bet that a century and a half from now China again will be deeply back into meditation, as part of the pendulum swing of things. In a way, People’s China is a manifestation of wonderful qualities of cooperation and selfless endeavor toward a common goal that were there all along. ...The contemporary Chinese look back on Taoism as a heritage in their past that as socialists they can respond to. Buddhism is a foreign religion—it came from India! But the Taoist component in Chinese culture will surely return again to the surface. (Snyder, 1980, p.127-28)

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