

From the “Pastoral Poetry” to “Migrant-workers Poetry”

--- The Eco-Dilemma of the Agricultural Civilization in Mainland China

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I would like to share with you the status of current agro-ecological civilization in mainland China. To be honest, the situation is not very good. I would like to begin with some of the past and contemporary poems on themes of countryside and farmers, from the viewpoint of literary critique.

On the one hand type of the main Chinese poetry on these themes includes the “pastoral poems”, created 1600 years ago by poet Tao Yuanming; on the other the “migrant-workers poems” by contemporary Chinese young farmers working in cities. A comparative study of these poems with a rural theme in these two different eras might shed light on the spirit of Chinese agricultural civilization, as well as its corresponding fate under the impact of the wave of modernization. I hope that by doing so I may contribute some insight for the understating of human condition in a globalized world.

Tao Yuanming (AD 365-427) was an ancient Chinese poet who lived 1600 years ago and is known as “the founder of the pastoral genre” in China. His outstanding contribution to the history of Chinese literature lies in the depiction of pastoral scenes and expressing the expression of local feelings. “Five thousand years of Chinese civilization” is actually “five thousand years of agricultural civilization”. Tao’s pastoral poems reflect almost perfectly the spirit of China’s agricultural civilization, so he is looked upon as the greatest poet of the ancient China.

His greatness is manifested in two aspects: the love of his homeland and nature, the two aspects being closely linked.

Tao Yuanming was originally a county government official who due to intolerable bureaucratic constraints, resigned his position and determined to return to his homeland. While engaged in farming, he continued to write poetry. He preferred the hard life of the poor, and would not give up his love for nature or the pursuit of spiritual freedom until the end of his life.

After he retreated to the countryside and returned to nature he had this in his poems to express his feelings of joy, “While young, I was not used to worldly cares, and hills became my natural compeers. But by mistakes I fell in mundane snares, and thus entangled was for thirty years. A caged bird would long for wonted wood, and fish in tanks for native pools would yearn. Go back to till my southern fields I would, to live a rustic life why not return? ... After long years of abject servitude, again in nature I find homely pleasure.”(Tao Yuanming, *Return to nature, I*)¹ In this poem, having escaped the affairs of officialdom, he compared himself to birds having broken the confinement and flown back to mountains and also to fish having struggled out of a

¹A translation of an unknown source, available,
<http://www.zftrans.com/favorite/emplate/2005-11/26/2005112616631.html>.

pool and returned to rivers, thus, the free feeling. When returning to his farm and nature, no doubt he returned to his own nature.

Tao's ideal agricultural society is largely found in his *Peach Blossom Spring, plus a Poem*, which depicts rural scenery featuring flat and spacious land, neatly arranged cottages, shady mulberry trees and bamboo groves, thriving crops, leisurely life and simple morals. His ideal rural life is well illustrated in the picture where "The garden grows more familiar, and interesting with the daily walks. What if no one knocks at the always closed door!"; "Holding the pot and cup, I give myself a drink, happy to see in the courtyard the hanging bough"; There the trees, happy of heart, grow marvelously green, and spring water gushes forth with a gurgling sound; There the clouds idle away from their mountain recesses without any intent or purpose, and birds, when tired of their wandering flights, will think of home"², man and nature live in harmony with each other. Hence, physical body and mind acquire simultaneously the maximum freedom.

(In 1920s, when studying in France, a Chinese young man named Liang Zonggong translated some of Tao's poems into French, which was highly appreciated by French literary masters Romain Rolland and Paul Valéry. With the support of the two masters, the French translation of "Tao Qian's Poems" (Tao Qian, another name of Tao Yuanming) was published by Lemarget, Paris in 1930, with a preface by Paul Valéry, who stated that Tao's style was natural, simple and pure, as were the Roman Virgil and the French La Fontaine.)

Why did the rural life appeal to the poet so much that he resigned and returned to his homeland? My explanation is that the rural life is not only closer to nature, more poetic, but also enables one to have access to a more intimate neighborhood, which is an organic integration of natural ecology, spiritual ecology and social ecology, thus, richer in ecological meaning. Since the Greek meaning of the prefix "eco-" in the English word "ecology" is "residence" and "home", Tao's "pastoral poems" can be said to be "eco-poems." To its original meaning, ecology can be said to be a kind of learning on "home" and "countryside".

With industrialization and urbanization spreading rampantly all over the world, , as far as China is concerned, a country of with a long agricultural history, is concerned, cities seem to have a more powerful attraction. Currently in China an "urbanization movement" launched by the government is moving forward by leaps and bounds. According to official documents, China's urbanization rate has increased from 17.92% in 1978 to 43.9% in 2006. It is supposed to reach 72.9% in 2050, close to the level of European and American countries. It is said that in mainland China, 655 cities are opening to the world, and 183 cities are intended as international metropolis.

Cities are expanding and growing consistently, but what is the actual situation of rural areas and farmers? In the living conditions of "migrant workers" (i.e., farmers seeking jobs in cities) one may find a good perspective for this. Since "migrant workers" have it both ways living in cities and rural areas, they have a say for all the current conflicts and tanglements between the urban and rural areas in China. Fortunately, from this vulnerable group of low culture level and little voice, there emerged a number of amateur poets, poets of migrant workers themselves, or "migrant-worker poets", whose poetry is called "migrant-workers poetry."

From the point of view of the subject matter, like the traditional "pastoral poetry", the connotation of "migrant-workers poetry" is also about the local homeland, but it diverts to the opposite: the tone of migrant-workers poetry is no longer the Tao style of "returning", but "going out". That is, it is no longer

²Lin Yutang's translation, available,

<http://www.putclub.com/html/ability/translation/translation/training/2010/0515/14761.html>.

returning home, but leaving home; nor do they harbor expectations for the home, but a despair for the home; no longer it is a pastoral ode, but a pastoral elegy; it is not a return to nature, but a helpless departure from it.

Ordinarily, both migrant workers' "running away" and Tao's "returning" are in pursuit of an ideal life. However, while after "returning to his homeland", Tao could still enjoy the pleasure as found in the lines "After long years of abject servitude, again in nature I find homely pleasure," while when migrant workers entered cities full of hope, they instead fell into a more harsher prison. Zheng Xiaoqiong, a girl from Sichuan, an outstanding representative of migrant-workers poets, has nearly a decade of working experience in the economically developed Dongguan City, Guangdong Province. She wrote in a poem that when she entered a hardware factory, she had to tie herself to the assembly line in the workshop and attach herself tightly to the high-speed working machine; she was even deprived of her name, and simply called "245", her number on her work card. Her life under the constraints of the contract is like this, in the space of a minute remove from the machine platform more than one kilogram of iron, place it rightly and punch it. Repeat the action 12 hours a day, punching 13,000 holes! This is probably a hundred times more than any previous work in the fields. However, what does the city give to them? Migrant-worker poets write that the city gives them nothing but "work clothes", "work site", "work number" and "a night overtime," and in addition, "instability", "wrinkles" and "grey hair". "You didn't give me anything I want and you didn't return me anything I give you. "(*The Strange Land, What did You Give to Me?* By Tang Yihong)

Actually, apart from the wrinkles and grey hair, there is even something even more tragic, that is, work-related injuries. Work-related injuries of migrant workers can hardly be considered as accidents. According to statistics, because of obsolete equipment, poor environment, lack of necessary technical training and fatigue caused by overtime working, each year there are more than 30,000 cases of finger accidents among the migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta, cutting or rolling off more than 40,000 fingers. To cite their own lines, thousands of migrant workers are just like "a crop moved to cities cut down indifferently by the edge of the machine age" and like "an unacclimatized bird knocked black and blue by sharp branches of reinforced cement".

Could there be anything more tragic than these finger cutting off accidents? Yes, it is "jumping out of a building," the way a migrant worker commits suicide. According to recent reports, from January 23, 2010 to November 5, 2010, in Foxconn, a well-known Taiwanese company operating in Chinese mainland, there has occurred one after another 14 cases of this kind of tragedy, causing the social concern of the society and as well as that of the world. In mainland China, Foxconn could be said to be in the rank of the best companies.

Nevertheless, young men and women are still flooding from their villages to cities!

Here, we must ask the question: just for a "belt", that is, not wanting to tie a belt (a part of an ancient Chinese official's garment) neatly to meet his superior, Tao resigned resolutely and returned home to farming; now faced with 40,000 rolled off fingers and successive suicide jump events, why do these young men and women from rural areas still "refuse to return home"? It is even more puzzling that despite the successive suicide incidents, the number of applicants every day to Foxconn is not on the decline, but instead it reaches as many as twenty thousand per day.

This could not be explained simply by as personal choice, nor could we require expect people to follow Tao's example to be poor but leisurely. A deeper reason should be seen that the general structure of the society and the times has have fundamentally changed.

In the social life of Tao's age, there was only one pole, that is, agricultural civilization, but now the new pole of "industrial civilization" has been added. Moreover, this new one is demolishing the established pole of

agricultural civilization by using ruthless and forceful means. Consequently, in this process of urbanization existing local farms are dismantled into pieces. This is not a symbolic expression. In mainland China, in order to complete indicators of urbanization as soon as possible, villages and homes where generations of farmers live, are being removed in large areas, resulting in common tragic events, caused by the so-called “forceful demolition”, and “bloody demolition”. (Refer to reports on “the Case of Yihuang Bloody Demolition”)

As for the original local farms, the fortunate ones began to be assimilated by the industrial society and turned into processing centers of agricultural products. Others are left worse than before, when industrialization and urbanization have exhausted their inherent vigor and vitality, turning villages only into weak shells where only white-haired old people and little children live.

Traditional local culture has been disintegrated, traditional farmers have degenerated and traditional rural landscape has disappeared. Based on their research, some agricultural experts conclude that the contemporary countryside could hardly provide farmers with an effective system of life that is meaningful, and after leaving their home to work in cities, migrant workers have actually become “homeless”, which is the basic reason why migrant workers refuse to go back home. (He Xuefeng)

Everything in the rural areas of the past, if not disappearing rapidly, is completely changed. With their own personal feelings on this pathetic situation, migrant-workers poets make a vivid and moving description, like “Camphors are in sleeping,” “Green hills are trembling,” “The sun is dusty,” “Rivers are greasy,” “The wind resonates with iron plates,” “Birds in the trees look depressed,” and “Even silence is infected with diseases”. Young people have to bid farewell to their homeland where their forefathers have lived for generations, and set out for the hard journey to work in a strange city.

Goodbye, corn, fruit trees, streams, locust trees and banyan
Goodbye cicadas, grass and childhood of Chinese milkvetch
...
When the last rice fell to the bulldozers
There would disappear the thousand-year-old village
Where the moon would never penetrate the door of wood, iron and aluminum
ZhengXiaoqiong Poems, P. 145

The excavator of industrialization “reaches out its giant steel teeth” and mercilessly cuts off the root of civilization having grown for thousands of years in their homeland, or to put it in their own line, “from the depths of the earth cut off the umbilical cord that connects my ancestors and I”.

...
This is the twenty-first century
This is a gray machine and felled litchi woods
They fell down, garden turning into rubble, the ruins of the earth
Vast land is being burnt by industrial flame and constructed as well, ah
Buildings, factories, concrete, from the earth to me
From the arm of the machine to mine, corn leaves and rice seedlings
My muscles, bones and skins have become part of the machines
Zheng Xiaoqiong Poems, P. 137

For these young famers who have left their homeland and moved to work in cities, the rural values have been lost completely. But in the city, where they have participated in its construction and development, it is also difficult for them to find meaning,

Over the years, the city was in a glory
Yet we are getting old
Sadness and joy, luck and misfortune
And tears and sweat, once we have had
By the city, collected and built into walls
Nailed to products or buried underneath cement roads
a landscape came into being, warming someone else's dream
Zheng Xiaoqiong Poems, P. 58

We can not but see that in the early memory of these young, sensitive migrant-workers poets, homeland and farms have been far less beautiful and relaxing, and that Tao has become an ancient and vague dream, and even a "rusty tin drum." In their minds, even the remote and relaxing idylls have become incredible.

It passes through the valley in the distance of our view
But couldn't reach the village we are overlooking
So said the hermit Tao Yuanming
Knocking on a tin drum and singing the songs of blood
Zheng Xiaoqiong Poems, P. 117

Contrary to the grief and despair found in the migrant-worker poets, there is a flooding optimism towards urbanization and agricultural modernization in academic circles and public opinion. Chinese people might hope to model themselves on the patterns of urbanization and modern agricultural production practiced in developed Western countries, without realizing that this kind of model to achieve maximum economic development based on advanced technology and industrial management tools has already been seriously questioned even in the Western developed countries. Facts, such as rapid decline in groundwater level, mass soil erosion, rapid extinction of species, energy being on the verge of depletion, air pollution and the temperature increasing year by year are shaking people's established faith. Traditional agricultural life is not without merit, and the modern urbanization does not guarantee people's better lives.

In the past it was held as a self-evident truth that on the path of the development of human history agriculture was more backward than industry, peasants were more conservative than workers, rural areas were more ignorant than cities, and therefore, the only approach to social development and globalization lay in taking the road to industrialization, to marketization and to urbanization, and in transforming farmers into citizens and businessmen, which could be regarded as the perfect end of history. All of these ideas, although appearing in the name of "national policy" and "public opinion", remain to be proved as to their rationality, enforceability and their ultimate significance and value. There should be - an alternative discussion and choice regarding the future of agricultural civilization and the fate of human society.

The history of mankind has long been built on the foundation of agricultural civilization which features a close and compatible relationship between man and nature. However, the modern society bent on the complete

expense of the rural areas in exchange for the city's rapid development, which may not be a successful experience of modernization, but rather a point deserving serious reflection.

In fact, from time to time some of the latent painful feelings have been revealed in migrant-worker poems. That is, an endless and heartbreaking nostalgia and a tender concern for the origins of their lives these young men and women have got, after they departed from their homeland and migrated to cities. They subconsciously concluded that only in the rural countryside is the place where their lives take roots.

So writes a migrant worker in his poem,

Years later, I'm (still) missing the humble villages
In the hills of north Jiangsu Province, rivers are flowing around the village
Sparrows, haystack, magpies, poplar, swallows muttering on beams
The cold eye of an owl on the old locust tree outside of the village
Sunset on the bull's back, a flock in the sunset and the dog in the flock
The dog is following closely a crow, quack, quack, quack, a sudden whistle
An immature sound, dark eyes emerging from under the pond

Homeward by Han Mo, September 2009

What the poet looked back at in the poem reminds us of scenes found in Tao's poems 1,600 years ago, and there is the same cordial tenderness and the same natural naivety.

The simple truth is that the process of urbanization at the cost of huge consumption of resources and energy always goes against ecological conservation. In any case I can't believe that it is social progress when all human beings are moving to live in cities. Moreover, I dare not imagine that the land of China is capable of sustaining an urban population of more than one billion . Then what is the way out?

Ancient Chinese philosophy talks about "All things submitting to *yin* and embracing *yang* (negative and positive aspects of something coexisting and complementing to each other) and "knowing and observing all but staying obscure". I think the implied theory can also be applied to the understanding of modern urban-rural relations. A city constructed by steel and concrete cannot replace a village surrounded by streams and flourishing grass and trees. Likewise, a city brightly lit day and night cannot replace a star-shining and moonlit countryside. Just as motherhood is implied in restrained tenderness and mystery is hidden somewhere dark and deep (Not long ago Tsung-Dao Lee made the point during a speech in Shanghai, that the unseen dark matter accounts for more than 95% of the total mass of the Universe, and the dark energy 14 times the amount of the energy known to us), urban civilization should not take the place of rural civilization. Instead, urban ecology should be attached to and protected in a favorable rural ecology, which illustrates "all things submitting to *yin* and embracing *yang* " and "knowing and observing all but staying obscure". The real home for human is nature, and there should be a way home for the city.

To become a better era than the "modern" one, it is necessary for the men of a "post-modern" era to learn the lifestyle and living wisdom as much as possible from the "pre-modern" era, including Tao's pastoral poetry. In the western eco-criticism movement, Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), who lived in Concord a hundred and fifty years ago, has become a "post-modern saint". Why can't we expect Tao, our Chinese pastoral poet, to shine again in the current era of a gloomy night?

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