

Conclusion: The Last Sacrifice and the Evocation

At the turn of the twenty-first century, there was a thought-provoking though not high-profile dialogue between a few scholars in the Chinese-language community. In his unfinished draft speech intended for the Conference on Europe, Asia and Africa over the Past Millennium, the American sinologist Benjamin Schwartz (1916–1999), who died soon after the dialogue, expresses his deep concerns over uncontrollable consumerism and materialism. After that, Yu-sheng Lin (1934–) offered an interpretation to Schwartz’s speech and introduced it to Wang Yuanhua (1920–) in his 2001 Shanghai trip. After a careful reading, Wang expresses his thought as follows:

In my humble opinion, the posthumous speech tries to convey a message that in the rapidly developing economic-technological society, man can have increasingly plentiful material comforts, thus forming consumerism and materialism. However, in such pure material pleasure and purely personal satisfaction, many people are not fully aware of the many ethical consequences of the economic-technological progress. Those die-hard followers of consumerism and materialism believe that by focusing on the economic-technological side of life, a brand-new way can be found which can eradicate the root of all sufferings in life. This is what is called by Schwartz “millenniumism.” When consumerism and materialism, which originated in America, begin to spread to the rest of the world, Schwartz’s speech literally throws a question to people today: “Can man, as man, live a happier life as they have more material pleasure and gratification?” I believe he may try to convey that consumerism and materialism will render the world spiritually barren. (140)

Schwartz, Yu-sheng Lin, and Wang Yuanhua share the same concern over the twenty-first century: The deprivation of spirit by consumerism and materialism, which means, in a time of affluence, man will lose his soul, whether he is in the city or in the country. An opportunity, if not a turning point, is that traditional Western humanism is trying to form an alliance with Nature, and therefore “reveres eco-movements” (149). Schwartz believes that in Western literature, the Shakespearean narrative does not suffice any longer. Should people today also draw inspiration from the Chinese tradition of Nature and man? Tao Yuanming’s philosophy of “knowing the bright but cleaving to the dark,” his abandon, aloofness, and serenity, his romantic resignation to Nature’s transformation, his returning to Nature, his pure and simple *tianyuan* complex, and his honest poverty, ease

and idling—could all these inform and inspire people today who seem to go in an opposite direction of Tao?

In this ecological era when the issue of “Nature and man” is not a meta-question, but the meta-question of humanity, people have to consider where they are going. In fact, the unknown poets in *The Book of Poetry*, Qu Yuan, Tao Yuanming, Wang Wei, Li Bai, Du Fu, Bai Juyi, Su Shi, Lu You, Xin Qiji, Tang Xianzu, Cao Xueqin, Shen Congwen, Wang Zengqi, Wei An, Hai Zi, and to today’s migrant worker poets—they all go along a road with an intersection of Nature and man. Tao Yuanming, the poet of poets, founder of the *tianyuan* school, avatar of Nature, and epitome of poetic dwelling, remains an eternal soul in the history of Chinese literature.

Tao Yuanming was a prophet of the meta-question of Nature and man. His writings convey his natural philosophy whose core is “knowing the bright but cleaving to the dark,” which, in turn, has influenced Heidegger’s philosophy.

As an oriental naturalist romantic poet, Tao has a number of Western naturalistic romanticist soulmates, including Rousseau and Thoreau.

Tao’s reception in China has been changing with the fundamental realities and ethos of the times. His second death in contemporary China, following his true death about 1600 years ago, symbolizes the decline of his poetry, of the pursuit of spiritual well-being, of poetic dwelling, and of human existence today.

However, according to Derrida, a specter never dies; it is also the nostalgic waiting for redemption, then people today have every good reason to wait for Tao’s tender ethereal specter’s breaking of the cage built with iron and concrete, rubber, institutions, consumerism, and materialism. Tao’s specter may help reveal the truthfulness and naturalness of Nature and evoke a truly beautiful existence. The many consequences of modernization urge the world to think about returning to the true, the simple and the natural, which is at the core of pre-modern oriental wisdom of life. In this post-modern context, the image of Tao Yuanming and his soulmates such as Rousseau and Thoreau loom large.

Lao Tzu says, “Now *ta* (great) also means passing on, and passing on means going Far Away, and going far away means returning.” (53). When modernism and post-modernism go to extremes, there should be, and possibly will be, some form of return in the same way a caterpillar returns after it reaches the end of the twig for its own sake.

Will Tao be resurrected at all? Now that the crises of contemporary times, ecological, spiritual, or otherwise, are escalating, man, who is being driven into desperation, may be forced to “return” or “regress” before he is past salvation. Though agricultural civilization is slipping into oblivion, yet it, along with the beautiful dwelling it nurtures and nourishes, still has tremendous appeal, at least for the specter of Tao and for those who are aware of the significance and returning. We are waiting for the return of Tao’s specter.

It may not be inappropriate to cite a stanza of Qu Yuan to serve as the finale:

I gaze into infinity,
My heart aching at the spring scene.
Oh, Soul! Return! The south’s imbu’d
With a yearning for you so keen! (Zhuo 197).

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