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Naturalness in Ancient Chinese Literature

Throughout ancient Chinese literature, naturalness is a commonly touched theme to express a multitude of emotions and ideas. This theme is seen in both Confucian and Daoist thought across centuries of ancient writing. For Daoist writings, naturalness is expressed through the idea of wu wei, or “non-action,” as well as seeing all things as one with the Dao or a part of “the way.” Confucian writings tend to include more on social harmony than that of nature, however Confucius still placed importance on ethics and morals as a reflection of and attempt to align with natural harmony. This essay touches on these philosophical concepts of naturalness through a variety of poems and writings, from the Anthology of Chinese Literature Volume I, on wine drinking, the symbolism of plants and animals, and whether emphasis in life is placed on either natural or social order. By examining these aspects of naturalness in ancient Chinese literature we will better be able to understand the integration of the topic into a broader cultural context.

When the concept of wine drinking or the consumption of alcohol in general is brought up in Western societies, the reaction is typically negative, befitting the negative connotation given to wine and alcohol by Greek philosophers and Judeo-Christian religious texts. This is the complete opposite in ancient Chinese philosophy and literature, as wine drinking is seen as a part

of naturalness and can allow one's true beliefs and thoughts to be verbalized. The drinking of wine is also seen depicted by many poets and writers as essential to Daoist thought and being one with "the way." Li Bai's poem "Drinking Alone by Moonlight," the first of "Four Poems on Wine," (Li 230) gives the reader a glimpse into a drunken, solitary night where the subject, presumably Li Bai himself, personifies and appreciates the nature around him to share the night with. Mentions of flowers, the moon, and even his own shadow dancing around, all to keep him company, creates a sense of oneness and unity between all things natural, later solidified by Li Bai's promise to "meet again far in the Milky Way." (Li 230) Another poem written by Li Bai, "Written While Drunk," (Li 184) describes a house surrounded by beautiful scenery filled with plants and animals. At the end of this poem he states "Within these things there is a hint of Truth, But when I start to tell it, I cannot find the words." (Li 184) This statement combined with the title of the poem itself, once again, provides an explanation to the description and appreciation for all things natural while in a drunken state. "The Truth" here is Dao, its existence a part of all mentioned within the poem, only for Li Bai to be unable to find the words to express this idea whether due to his drunken state or the sheer grandness of the concept. These poems show wine as a tool for the reflection of Daoist ideologies and allows for genuine connection with nature and "the way."

Another aspect of naturalness in ancient Chinese literature is the fixation of symbolism to animals and plants such as geese, chrysanthemum, bamboo, and pine trees. This symbolism is often used in poetry and writing to depict a certain image or ideal that relates back to the culture of the time. These cultural symbols have extended even into modern time because of their significance in ancient writing. The first of these symbols are geese, seen in ancient Chinese literature and culture as a family animal, always migrating with each other in large flocks. This

migration is due to the seasonal and temperature changes and typically marks the beginning of spring or autumn, depending on the direction the geese are heading. This makes geese an important symbol for the seasons cyclical nature, passages of time, and determining when a written work is set in the year. In “Written on the Ninth Day of the Ninth Month of the Year” (Tao 187) written by Tao Yuanming, in addition to the dulling of green seen in the plants mentioned in the poems, Tao also uses “A flock of geese goes crying down the sky.” (Tao 187) to signify the beginning of Autumn. Secondly, as one of two of the Four Noble Plants in ancient Chinese culture, the chrysanthemum is a flower seen as a symbol of resilience, as it “only bears buds when autumn falls and as other flowers wither,” similar to its companion the plum blossom. (Zong, 2020) It is also seen as a symbol of unity as its petals bloom and wilt only together. Next, the second of the two Four Noble Plants Mentioned in this essay, bamboo is seen as a symbol of uprightness, adversity, and acquisitiveness. Just as bamboo remains upright and unbreaking throughout tough conditions, Confucius argues that to be a virtuous person, one must also place an emphasis on moral character and uprightness. He believed this uprightness was key to creating a harmonious and fulfilled society, as seen by his mentions and symbolism of bamboo in his teachings. He also used bamboo’s adaptability and hollowness to symbolize the adaptability and continuous self-improvement through knowledge acquisition that he believed all humans should adopt. Lastly, pine trees are a popular symbol used in ancient Chinese literature as their evergreen nature and vitality no matter the season or conditions is another great way to symbolize resilience and ability to thrive throughout the cyclical nature of life. By analyzing the symbolism of different geese, chrysanthemum, bamboo, and pine trees, it is revealed how their naturalness is related to humanity and the interconnectedness of life through Dao.

Daoist and Confucian ideas conflict on which guiding order leads their life and this concept is illustrated in these philosophy's corresponding texts and poetry. In Daoism, the concept of natural order places importance on living in alignment with the Dao, or "the way." Daoist philosophers such as Laozi and Zhuangzi emphasize the importance of natural order and living together as one with nature. This natural order extends beyond the physical world and encroaches on a more spiritual oneness with the universe. Another big part of the Daoist belief in natural order is wu wei or "non-action." This means only acting without exerting great effort and allowing the natural course of events to take place. A great example of this concept can be seen in Liu Tsung Yuan's "Camel Kuo the Gardener" (Liu page) where a tree planter nicknamed "Camel" is able to let trees grow through natural processes without interfering. This creation of optimal growth conditions and then not so much as looking at the trees, allows for the trees to grow bigger and stronger than everybody else around him. The concept of wu wei and daoism is throughout this entire story, showing the benefits of following the natural order and letting things develop on their own without interference. As mentioned previously, Daoism also emphasizes the cyclical nature of life. This cycle of life and death are also reflected throughout a lot in the natural world such as the seasons, the tides, and even the phases of the moon. These themes can be seen in many ancient Chinese poems and writings embracing the natural order and further developing the idea of naturalness.

In contrast to this, Confucian ideas and writings recognize the importance of natural order but place heavier importance on social order and becoming a proper member of a larger whole. This means it is important to fulfill a certain role in society and emphasizes a hierarchical structure based on age and authority. This structured society has clearly defined roles and rituals that allow for a more orderly society. Confucius placed emphasis on moral values and ethics as

well as specific behavior over the non-action or spontaneity seen in Daoism. This sense of social order over natural order even extends towards family and natural instinct. In a hypothetical, a father commits a crime and his son witnesses it. A Daoist way of thought is to preserve the father's innocence due to the familial relation (natural order), while a Confucian way of thought is to do the right thing and follow the virtuous, moral path of turning the father in. Confucianism prioritizes this kind of social principle and calls for those to abandon natural inclination for better social cohesion. Both Daoism and Confucianism have naturalness embedded into their schools of thought, however, Daoism prioritizes a more natural order while Confucianism recognizes naturalness yet prioritizes social order.

The interaction of concepts related to naturalness in ancient Chinese literature shows just how intricate of a topic it is. Wine drinking, symbolism of natural beings, and the connected yet contrasting nature of social and natural order layer to create the concept of naturalness as a whole. Many poems call on all three of these topics and more to relay the cultural importance of naturalness. Wine drinking creates a sense of interconnectedness with the universe. This interconnectedness can also be seen in the reflection of symbolic creatures and plants onto that of humans. Humans tend to lean towards this natural interconnectedness to create a sense of belonging and explanation for that which is bad in the world. The previous poem "Drinking Alone by Moonlight" sheds insight into the easing of the pain of loneliness through drinking and therefore appreciation for nature. In times of hardship humans looked to the plants and animals to create a sense of self, ie. the chrysanthemum as a sign to stick together or the evergreen to be resilient through all conditions. If not for this kind of literature the ancient Chinese culture would look completely different even today. Whether or not a family aligns with Daoist or Confucian ideas today heavily influences the way they go about their lives. This deep rooted cultural

identity stems from the poems and writings described in the analyses of the above concepts. This directly contrasts to that of Western culture as Western literature placed different importances on the three explored concepts. Wine drinking was looked down upon due to the Greek philosophical idea that it clouds the mind and the Judeo-Christians believed it was sacred and not for recreation. The natural symbols used in ancient Chinese literature are completely opposite as our more prized symbols are the eagle or the rose. The eagle represents freedom and being independent, unlike the goose which represents family, while the rose wilts a petal at a time unlike the chrysanthemum which blooms and wits together. The only real comparison is the debate between natural and social order also exists within Western society, typically leaning more towards the latter. This is most likely due to the West's importance on individualism and lawfulness instilled in them from the beginning of their history.

In conclusion, through wine drinking, natural symbolism, Daoism and Confucianism, and all of these concepts embedded in literature, one is able to delve into naturalness in the ancient Chinese world and leave with more wisdom than without. Daoism emphasizes not trying too hard to interfere with things that are naturally progressing and allows for humans who understand its concept to exist in a more harmonious manner. Confucianism's contrast allows for provoking thought on the differences while also instilling a balance between naturalness and social order. Wine drinking and the symbolism of animals and plants allow for a feeling of interconnectedness between humans and the environment around them. Enacting this naturalness in the modern day reminds us of its timeless nature and also reminds us of our place within the world. Ancient Chinese literature, especially those instilled with naturalness ideas, allow for not only inner reflection but also harmony within all beings enlightened to its wisdom.

Works Cited

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