

Nature as a Theme in China

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T'ai Chi is a martial arts form that encourages participants to re-educate the nervous system and human movements. Symbolized by the Chinese symbol of yin-yang, T'ai Chi exercises focus on responding to the world in a balanced manner, embodying the harmony of opposites. This form of martial arts is characteristic of soft style, as opposed to the hard style associated with Karate (Miller). Li-Po, a prominent Chinese poet of the T'ang Dynasty, used nature to connect people to the relevance of their lives during his time. In China, the seventh century was a time of economic prosperity, war and palace intrigues, artistic brilliance, and cultural refinement (Rothermel 358). Li-Po responds to this world, establishing in his poetry an important connection between daily life and nature, which is also a fundamental aspect of T'ai Chi.

Li-Po reflects the preoccupations of China in his poem, "On a Picture Screen." Not only does he reflect on the naturally beautiful characteristics of the Chinese landscapes while discussing the scene depicted on the picture screen, but he also discusses palace intrigues and his depressive feelings when compared with his outlook during pre-war times:

Ah, those lonely pines murmuring in the wind!
Those palaces of Yang-tai, hovering yonder—
Oh, the melancholy of it!—
Where the jeweled couch of the king
With brocade covers is desolate, — (Li-Po 359)

Li-Po incorporates cosmic qualities, important during this time of scientific discovery when addressing the peaks of Wu-shan:

Have they flown into the gorgeous screen
From the heaven's one corner? (Li-Po 359)

In "By the Great Wall," Li-Po gives a chronological procession of events during a time of strife, connecting these events with nature. The attack of the "barbarian horde" comes at the end of summer upon autumn's arrival. Autumn is a time of change and death. In nature, this change is recognizable by the accumulation of dead vegetation and cooler temperatures. For China, the attack of the "barbarian horde" was a time of upset, a transition of power, and the death of Chinese citizens. Li-Po reminds readers that nature is always present:

The moon in the wilderness
Follows the movement of his bow,
And upon his sword the desert frost blossoms. (Li-Po 360)

In the cover of night, the moonlight reflects off the exposed bow, illuminating its path, and making its presence known. The reader is reminded, not only of nature when the frost collects on the sword, but also of its power. Normally one thinks of the cold as being invisible, something felt rather than seen. Sometimes people use the ability to see their breath in the cold as a measure of its severity; however, frost collecting on a warrior's blade is an even more powerful indication of the extremely cold temperature; it has moved beyond something intangible or seen only for a fleeting moment, like breath, to something more permanent.

This re-establishment of power and significance, to elements that have lost their significance is also present in "On Hearing the Flute at Lo Cheng One Spring Night" and "Nocturne." Li-Po restores the significance of the unseen, reminding people to pay attention to all of their senses. Li-Po attributes lifelike characteristics to sound:

Whence comes this voice of sweet bamboo,
Flying in the dark?
It flies with the spring wind,

Hovering over the city of Lo. (Li-Po 361)

Li-Po has given bamboo, a part of nature, a voice and the ability to tell a story, reminding readers that nature is present even when it is dark and that it is always “hovering.” In *Nocturne*, Li-Po describes some of the visible nature but reminds people that if they pay attention to all their senses, they will discover additional stories.

Paying attention to all of one’s senses is also applicable to the proper execution of T’ai Chi. With T’ai Chi, it is not important to take the life of an opponent in a gory mess, but rather to last long enough so that the opponent is responsible for most of his own demise. When people do not connect to nature, a lot is lost. This connection to the world gives people balance because they are aware of the resources available and the best way to use them. Most often people do not use all of their senses. The need for people to connect with nature is evident when reading the poetry of Li-Po and when analyzing the philosophy of T’ai Chi. Li-Po’s poetry connects nature and man; this connection with nature and man is also the guiding philosophy of T’ai Chi.

T’ai Chi and the poetry of Li-Po both work effectively because of their balanced connections between nature and daily life. T’ai Chi encourages practitioners to retain their own balance by extending no energy, while absorbing and redirecting the energy extended by the opponent (Miller). The purpose of T’ai Chi is for the opponent to become tired and unbalanced as energy extends in the form of blows and tightening of muscles. Once the opponent has lost his or her balance, he or she is more vulnerable to an attack. Responding to the world around him, like a practitioner of T’ai Chi responds to his opponent, Li-Po establishes a connection between people and nature, reminding people of its presence and its balance.

Works Cited

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