Aesthetic Comparison of Chinese and Western Landscape Culture

JUAN XU

ABSTRACT

There are very obvious differences between Chinese and western landscapes aesthetics. In terms of the relationship between human and nature, while Chinese philosophy advocates the "harmony between man and nature," and "the unity of subject and object," western philosophy holds the opposite relation between human and nature. This philosophic difference will inevitably lead to their difference in landscape aesthetics. Therefore, Chinese and westerners have their own different characteristics in respect of aesthetic perspective, preference, interest, inner meaning, and humanistic performance and so on.

KEYWORDS

Landscapes aesthetics, aesthetic perspective, and humanistic performance.

INTRODUCTION

Landscape is in particular referred to the typical natural scenery with fine ecological environment. It is a natural synthesis with certain cultural accumulation and aesthetic, cultural and scientific values. Having certain cultural accumulation means that natural mountains and rivers have accumulated influential cultural relics in their region, including both tangible, touchable material cultural relics occupying certain space and invisible spiritual cultural heritage with long history and profound influence, such as the patriotic complex of “to be the first to worry about the affairs of the state and the last to enjoy oneself” and the free spirit of “interacting with the spirit, not with the trivial world”. The so-called “to have aesthetic, scientific and cultural values” means that the natural landscape has multiple functions to meet tourists’ requirement of sightseeing, aesthetics, research and cultural education, etc.

There are very obvious differences between Chinese and western landscapes aesthetics. In terms of the relationship between human and nature, while Chinese philosophy advocates the "harmony between man and nature", and "the unity of subject and object", western philosophy holds the opposite relation between human and nature. This philosophic difference will inevitably lead to their difference in landscape aesthetics. Therefore, Chinese and westerners have their own different characteristics in respect of aesthetic perspective, preference, interest, inner meaning, and humanistic performance and so on.
THE STARTING POINT OF LANDSCAPE AESTHETIC AND INTERNAL DRIVING FORCE

In China, the aesthetic thought of bi de (a kind of metaphor which means “to grant moral quality such as morality and intellect to natural landscape, then enjoy it aesthetically to gain moral enlightenment) has always restrained Chinese people’s habits of appreciating natural beauty, especially in terms of the beauty of mountains and rivers. Deeply under the influence of Confucian culture valuing practice and reason, Chinese people often take mountains and rivers as a kind of spiritual sustenance or spiritual detachment and emphasize the assimilation of landscape and aesthetic subject. They believe that the beautiful mountains and rivers are not only their spiritual symbol or externalization, but also their spiritual sustenance or support when they feel sorrow and depressed. Moreover, they even think that object is the same with person and has heart, just like the portrayed artistic conception in Li Bai’s “From a pot of wine among the flowers I drank alone; a toast to invite the moon, on the film into three” and Du Fu’s “The emotional sigh makes flowers spill tears and hatred for leaving makes birds fell soul stirring,” both of which are typical aesthetics of “object-mind connection”. Confucius said, “The wise love water, benevolent mountains.” This is a high generalization for this trend.

On the contrary, westerners will not rest their ethical and moral content on natural landscapes. They just enjoy the beautiful mountains and rivers to get physical and mental pleasure. They think landscape and human are separated. Mountains and waters are just kind of landscape, and visitors are just humans themselves. There is always a certain distance between human and nature, and viewers are always independent and self-conscious in presence of scenery. When people praise the beauty of mountains and waters, they just focus on the natural beauty, not their emotional feeling. In other words, in westerners’ mind, landscape is kind of natural beauty existing objectively which will never replace or contain people’s feelings.

AESTHETIC PREFERENCES OF LANDSCAPES

Generally speaking, odd rocks, rivers and lakes, streams and waterfalls, rare trees and flowers are beloved both in China and the west. But if we understand the concept of natural mountains and rivers in a broad sense, we can find some differences. When enjoying landscape, westerners usually focus on external beauty from the aspect of luster, figure, color, sound and so on; while Chinese people tend to pay attention to the cultural value and humanistic spirit that landscape contains or reflects. Because of their aesthetic trend of personality, they often project their ideal personality onto landscape from natural mountains and rivers to trees and flowers. For example, “four gentlemen” -- plum, orchid, bamboo, chrysanthemum, are based on this point of view. Similarly, the aesthetic of "water" scene also reflects the differences between Chinese and western culture. Chinese people enjoy the feminine and tender beauty of water like softness, smoothness, cleanliness and refinement, etc. But for westerners who have different characters and mind, in addition to that tender beauty of water, they are more interested in its masculine beauty like vastness, roughness and surge, etc. So westerners prefer sea, bay, island and beach more. Apart from the plants directly living in mountain and water, westerners also like the air and sunshine over the mountain and river. Although Chinese people love the sun, they prefer the moon.

870
There were countless poems about the moons both in ancient and modern times. In Thoughts in the Silent Night, Li Bai said, “Beside my bed a pool of light. Is it hoarfrost on the ground? I lift my eyes and see the moon, I bend my head and think of home.” Through the moon, the great poet expressed his strong feelings to miss home. Comparatively, there are few poems about the sun in Chinese poems. On the contrary, the sun god “Apollo” has always played a very important role in western culture.

**HUMANISTIC PERFORMANCE**

Landscape is the carrier of culture; culture is the soul of landscapes. As people's aesthetic consciousness gradually became awakening, their aesthetic needs for landscape progressed accordingly and has been embodied in all aspects of landscape culture, which was immeasurable in the process of the formation of Chinese landscape culture. Tourists are attracted by many fantastically beautiful scenic spots, like Lushan Mountain, Mount Huang, Yandang Mountain, Mount Wuyi, the Three Gorges of Yangtze River, Guilin Scenery and West Lake of Hangzhou, etc. At the same time, literature and art came into being, taking landscape as performance object. The colorful landscape aesthetic culture has afforded a magnificent view, showing the development of Chinese aesthetic consciousness and creative talents. China is famous for its beautiful sceneries and well-known by its scenic poems. Natural landscapes have produced countless poems. Scenic poems appeared during the Eastern Jin Dynasty. Xie Lingyun was regarded to be the first poet who completely depicted landscape in his poems. In Tang Dynasty, the development of Chinese landscape poetry entered a mature stage and emerged many peaks by making brilliant achievements. Since then, it experienced a long time of prosperity, producing various and colorful landscape poems. Additionally, keeping pace with the landscape poetry, some travel notes have gradually developed which mainly portrayed natural landscapes. This kind of works can more freely and fully paint a beautiful mountains and rivers in many aspects to show authors’ aesthetic experience. Many famous masterpieces with era characters and distinct personalities emerged in endlessly, which made couplets here and there in Chinese places of interests. Chinese couplet combined language art and calligraphy art, and is a kind of art form of Chinese nation.

Regarding humanistic performance of landscapes, China is greatly different from the west. In China, most famous natural landscapes are mainly characterized by their unique features. For instance, Mt. Tai, the first of the "Five Sacred Mountains" in China, is known for its grand scenes; Mount Huang is famous for its wonder sights; and Huashan Mountain appeals to tourists by its surprising risks. In ancient times, many letters of men used to personalize natural landscapes. For example, Su Dongbo (A.D.1037- A.D.1101), a well-known poet in Song Dynasty (A.D. 960-A.D.1279) and also one of "The Eight Great Men of Letters," sang high praise for the West Lake in his “Drinking and Sightseeing on the West Lake,” “The brimming waves delight the eye on sunny days. The dimming hills give a rare view in rainy haze. The West Lake looks like the fair lady at her best. Whether she is richly adorned or plainly dressed.” There are some historical stories, myths and legends piling on the scenes, such as the legends of entertaining a high ambition to be first-rate or the champion on Mount Tai, and the legend of the Godness Peak at Taihang Mountain, etc. In addition, Chinese natural landscapes were usually closely connected with religion. For instance, it was said that there were lots of monks in famous mountains. Besides, the Buddhism
coming from the west and Chinese native-born Taoism have played an irreplaceable role in the development and construction of Chinese natural landscape. Where there are famous mountains and waters, there are Buddhist architectures. Wutai Mountain, Jiuhua Mountain, Mount Emei, and Mount Putuo have become well-known Buddhist Mountains in succession overseas. Taoists advocated that they should cultivate themselves according to Taoism doctrine to promote longevity. So, they choose lofty mountains and steep hills as their best place to cultivate themselves. With the wide spread and development of Taoism, there formed a unique “cave culture”, including “Ten Big Caves,” “Thirty-Six Small Caves” and “Seventy-Two Blessed Land.” Most of these actually existing blessed spots usually lie in lofty mountains with beautiful scenes of streams around and tall and straight pines. There Taoists built cottages and temples with twist-grasses where they cultivated themselves, offered sacrifices and held religious activities, which played an important role in constructing mountain scenic spots in China. Taoism declares that people should recover their original simplicity and return to nature. In natural mountains and waters, people can swim and run to their heart’s content, free of all constraints and attachments, thus to reach the highest spiritual state of the “unity of people and nature”. Zhuang Zhou (B.C. 369-B.C. 286), a famous psychologist in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, used to say, "It’s self-evident that heaven and earth have made great beauty of universe; four seasons are regulated clearly; all things on earth are in accord with certain reason”, which pointed out clearly that heaven and the earth are superior to human beings. Zhuang Zhou is the first person who affirmed nature as an aesthetic object.

Relatively speaking, some of the natural scenic spots in the west are not so humanistic like that in China. Instead, most of them are purely natural and original ecologically. Natural landscapes usually attract tourist with their charming shapes and mystery which encourage them to enjoy or conquer. Western cultural landscapes are mainly portrayed as the environment in some dramas, novels and films, and attachments of some legends. Generally speaking, Chinese depict the humanity of natural landscapes in praise of braveness, wisdom and defeating evils. While in the west, they are always with somewhat legendary and tragic colors. With the development of the society, our ancestors improved themselves in the process of using and transforming the nature, which has constantly enhanced their own feelings and abilities of thinking. On this basis, they have also gradually produced aesthetic demand of nature. Holding aesthetic attitude towards mountains and rivers, they have established aesthetic relations with landscapes. The beauty of landscape embodies kind of spiritual value, which is the special performance of close and harmonious relations established between human and nature. The establishment and development of the aesthetic relationship between man and landscape is the characterization of the development of human civilization in essence. Different cultural traditions between China and the west caused different aesthetic spirits and aesthetic tastes. Chinese people appreciate the natural landscape, believing that the highest level is the integration of human and nature, namely the “identity between object and person”. When enjoying sceneries, westerners also pay attention to the connection between their mood and nature, but they put themselves and landscape in different places respectively instead of integrating them, making both of them infect each other but with no sharing everything between each other. For example, some beautiful poems are always popular among Chinese people for their artistic conception, such as
“Osman thus falls by the side of the idle poet. The spring mount is empty in the quiet night. The birds are much startled by the moonrise. Chirping now and then over spring streams.” While in the eyes of westerners, it’s nonsense for they may think that the poet is just moaning and groaning without being ill or just making a fuss, and they can’t tell the trace of the poet in this scene.

CONCLUSION

Western landscape aesthetic is inclined to enjoy the form of landscape from the pure perspective, which often releases aesthetic subject from various spiritual desire and totally immerses themselves in the beauty of natural landscape to gain spiritual pleasure. But at the same time, they may easily fail to slightly enjoy the relations in harmony and unity between their subjective spirit and natural landscape with intrinsic rhythm, and couldn’t get the rich charm. Chinese landscape aesthetics has always regarded the “fusion of feelings with the natural setting” as the highest realm of aesthetic enjoyment, which is just the representation of Chinese traditional culture and national consciousness in the landscape aesthetic. In Chinese traditional philosophy, people always believe in “unity of man and nature”, “unity of knowledge and action” and “unity of feelings and scenes”. In other words, since ancient times, what Chinese people have long been eager to and believed in is the harmonious, close and integrated relation between man and nature. The ideal state of “mind wondering with things”, of which Chinese landscape aesthetics is in pursuit, is the accumulation of national consciousness. But this aesthetics tends to cover the independent physical beauty of landscape from rational perspective like bi de. Therefore, we can conclude that both Chinese and western landscape aesthetics have their own advantages and disadvantages. In modern times, we should not only appreciate the bright and colorful landscapes from physical perspective, but also enjoy and understand the inner charm of natural landscapes. It is not until we make both Chinese and western aesthetics learn each other's good points for common progress that we can finally enter the realm of beauty.

REFERENCES