

## Allusions in Gary Snyder's "The Canyon Wren"

LING CHUNG

Gary Snyder's poem "The Canyon Wren"<sup>1</sup> has attracted considerable critical attention. The most notable one is the debate between John Whalen-Bridge and Rajeev S. Patke published in *Connotations*. Instead of offering an interpretation of "The Canyon Wren" as a whole as these two did, my essay will delve into the meaning of several allusions in the poem and into the structural significance of the poem in the context of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. It will also respond to some points raised by Whalen-Bridge and Patke.

"The Canyon Wren" was written in 1981 after Snyder and James and Carol Katz rode a raft down the torrents of the twisting Stanislaus River in the Sierra Nevada, California. They made this trip because that stretch of the river would soon go under the waters of the New Mellones Dam.<sup>2</sup> The poem first describes the landscape from the viewpoint of the rafters who watched the wall-like cliffs,<sup>3</sup> experienced the churning waters and encountered three different birds: a hawk, a mallard, and a wren. It was the wren's song that stayed with them during the day and throughout the journey. However, in the poem, they had listened to two tunes of nature: one being the wren's song, and the other the stream's song. When they camped by the stream, it was the song of the stream they heard consciously or unconsciously all night.

---

<sup>1</sup>Reference: John Whalen-Bridge, "Gary Snyder, Dōgen, and 'The Canyon Wren,'" *Connotations* 8.1 (1998/99): 112-26; Rajeev Patke, "Response to Gary Snyder, Dōgen, and 'The Canyon Wren,'" *Connotations* 8.2 (1998/99): 261-67; John Whalen-Bridge, "My Poet Is Better than Your Poet: A Response to Rajeev Patke," *Connotations* 9.2 (1999/2000): 167-73.

When Snyder dealt with the essence and the metaphysical transformation of the water element, he employed neither allusion to English nor to American literature. Instead, he cited quotations from Chinese and Japanese writers: a great Chinese poet, Su Shih (alias Su Tung P'ò 1036-1101), and a Japanese Zen master, Dōgen Eihei (1200-1253). I think the reason why these two writers were chosen is that not only had both written beautiful lines permeated with a Zen flavour, but also that Snyder was fully aware of the relationship between these two writers, in that Dōgen had looked for spiritual guidance in Su Shih's work. Snyder quoted Su Shih's lines in his essay "The Old Masters and the Old Women: Foreword to Sōiku Shigematsu's *A Zen Forest*," "Valley sounds: / the eloquent / tongue— / Mountain form: / isn't it / Pure Body?" and pointed out that "This is part of a poem by Su Shih. The Japanese master Dōgen was so taken with this poem that he used it as the basis for an essay, *Keisei Sanshoku*, 'Valley sounds, mountain form'" (*A Place* 104). No wonder in "The Canyon Wren" Su's lines were placed before Dōgen's. Snyder adequately rendered the title of Su Shih's poem "*bai-bu hong*" as the "Hundred Pace Rapids" and translated one of its lines (Su 891-92) as: "I stare at the water / it moves with unspeakable slowness" (*Axe* 111). A literal rendering of the Chinese line by Su Shih should read: "I turn back to watch this water. It flows extremely slow and easy." Snyder's rendering of the line as "I stare at the water" has omitted the act of "turning back."

This omission may be due to the fact that the mind of the persona in "The Canyon Wren" did not travel across extensive time and vast space, so there is nowhere to "turn back" from. On the other hand, the imagination of the persona in Su Shih's poem soared as the persona and his friends sped down the torrents of the river. In fact, his imagination traveled from Xu Zhou<sup>4</sup> in southern China to a northern foreign country, Korea, and then returned seven hundred years to the fourth century to visit the bronze camels that had guarded the Lo Yang palace in central China. Here Su Shih referred to an allusion of So Jing in the "Biography of So Jing," an official in the fourth century

who had predicted an oncoming rebellion, and prophesied that thorns would bury the bronze camels and the palace (*Jin Shu*, *juan* 60, p. 22). It is only after Su Shih's imagination had traveled across a vast terrestrial space and through seven hundred years that the swift rapids would look "slow and easy."

Space and time in Snyder's poem do not expand as much as those in Su Shih's, nor is there a quasi-shamanistic journey of flight like that in Su's, for the space covers only a short stretch of Stanislaus River in the Sierra Nevada and the time returns a little over one hundred years to the period of the Gold Rush. Thus, the space and time continuum in Snyder's poem is far more limited in scope than Su Shih's. However, Snyder's poem carries its own touching power by presenting a strong contrast between the experience of the objective reality and different visions of that reality. In other words, the torrent image of the Stanislaus River is set against Su Shih's and Dōgen's visions of slow-moving water: Su Shih's vision being "I stare at the water. / It moves with unspeakable slowness" while Dōgen's being "mountain flow / water is the palace of the dragon / it does not flow away" (*Axe* 111). Here Snyder presents the different perspectives of two Far Eastern men of wisdom to form a multilateral dialogue on the perception of the water element.

This poem, similar to the "*bai-bu hong*" by Su Shih, demonstrates an attempt to widen one's perspective. Su Shih's vision can indeed be used to mirror the torrential water of the Stanislaus River. In the future, after the filling of the Mellones Dam, it goes without saying that the water in the reservoir will move "with unspeakable slowness." Dōgen's seemingly illogical statement—"mountain flow"—makes sense if one shifts one's perspective. If one views the change in the mountain form from the angle of the cosmic continuum, the corrosion takes effect so swiftly that the mountains would flow away in a blink. Rajeev Patke points out correctly that beneath Dōgen's lines lies the concept of mutability: "mountains might appear emblems of fixity, but in a world where nothing stays unchanged, their slow progressive alternation is like a flowing away" (263). And from the

viewpoint of the creatures living in the river such as the fish and dragons, the water that surrounds them certainly "does not flow away," just as human beings would feel that the air around them does not flow away though in actuality the particles of air always do. In other words, one can enlarge one's perspective by striving to empathize with the minds of other men or of other species. By adopting the visions of two men of wisdom, Snyder presents the perspectives of the future, of the cosmic, and of other species, which enables one to contemplate a northern American landscape. These two quotations are interpreted by some critics as revealing moments of enlightenment. Leonard Scigaj thinks they offer the reader the experience of the "self and lived environment as a single totality flowing through the succession of temporal moments" (133) while Rajeev Patke views them as the revelation of "transcience" and mutability, two crucial Buddhist concepts, and that of "the resolution" of the "paradoxes" (263). Furthermore, when the quotation from a great Chinese poet is juxtaposed with that of a sagacious Japanese Zen master, the water undergoes metamorphosis: the speed of the water is changed from swiftness to slowness, or even to almost a standstill. These two quotations can serve to break human obsession with the logicity of our cognition, especially the cognition of speed and fluidity. Aesthetically, the multifaceted imagery of water, from the turbulent white sprays and spumes to the crystal still water, is presented lucidly and beautifully throughout the poem.

This poem also touches upon a historical, archaeological issue in the early 1980s: quite a few historical sites of the Gold Rush were about to be sunk to the bottom of the Dam. The China Camp<sup>5</sup> is one among many historical sites of the Gold Rush along the Stanislaus River. The image of the stone piles at the camp not only denotes an embodiment of the Chinese laborers' contribution to the development of California's history but also an integral part of the Sierra Nevada landscape. The place where the persona and his friends, who are white Americans, "sleep all night long by the stream" is exactly where the Chinese miners slept more than a century ago. The palimpsest of today's

American campers over the Chinese miners coincides with the essence of water that looks flowing and yet still, is changed and yet unchanged.

There is another Chinese literary allusion hidden in the last lines of "The Canyon Wren": "These songs that are here and gone, / Here and gone, / To purify our ears" (*Axe* 111). On the surface, "these songs" that can "purify" the ears could refer to the wren's song and the verses by Su Shih and Dōgen, but they could also refer to the sound of the stream. When Snyder and his friends camped by the stream, it was the song of the stream that picked up the wren's as it roosted at night. These two songs of nature on the American continent give the poem a sense of unity and continuity. The unobtrusive allusion of "to purify our ears" can be traced to a poem by Han Shan (seventh century) that Snyder translated around 1955, twenty-six years before "The Canyon Wren" was written. The last two lines of no. 12 of the "Cold Mountain" poems rendered by Snyder are as follows "Today I'm back at Cold Mountain / I'll sleep by the creek and purify my ears" (*A Range* 38). Han Shan, in turn, alludes to the words of Sun Chu (218-293), who, when he decides to become a recluse, says in the "Biography of Sun Chu" that "I would pillow myself on the stream, for I'd like to cleanse my ears" (*Jin Shu*, *juan* 56, p. 19). Thus, the last line of Snyder's "The Canyon Wren" makes a covert allusion which once uncovered, will furnish much meaning relating to the noble minds of ancient Chinese hermits. What the Chinese hermit refused to hear by cleaning his ears with the song of the stream were the shouts and quarrels stemming from the human greed for power, fame and wealth. Similarly, Snyder believed that songs of nature could purge one's ears and fend off polluted language such as that of commercial and industrial expansionism, which is spurred also by human greed.

Interestingly, John Whalen-Bridge thinks there is more Chinese cultural content in "The Canyon Wren": the word "wren" is a homophony of a Chinese character "ren" which means "a human being." According to him, what human beings believe to be solely their superior endowment could also be owned by other species like birds.

Thus, Whalen-Bridge concludes, "The wren's song purifies our ears of the notion that our lively awareness, which we mistakenly call our humanity, is the singular, unique possession of human beings. Chinese workers, poets from various centuries, and birds all have this awareness, and it can be shared" (124). However, "wren" is not exactly a homophony for the Chinese character which means a human being. The pronunciation of the character sounds closer to "rein" or "reign" (*rein*) than to "wren" (*ren*). Furthermore, in order to illustrate Dōgen's idea that "To advance your own experience onto the world of phenomena is delusion," Snyder again employs the example of someone seeing a wren:

To see a wren in a bush, call it "wren," and go on walking is to have (self-importantly) seen nothing. To see a bird and stop, watch, feel, forget yourself for a moment, be in the bushy shadows, maybe then feel "wren"—that is to have joined in a larger moment with the world. (*Place* 179)

If in this passage the word "wren" is selected because it is the homophony for the Chinese character which means a human being, it would confuse the reader and would defeat the purpose. How could the "wren" mean a human being while it is precisely the "self important" obsession of a human being that one should liberate oneself from? In a similar vein, the wren in "The Canyon Wren" should not be an analogy of a human being as it is hinted at by Whalen-Bridge, for it is precisely the self that one should "forget" so that the human consciousness can merge into the song of the wren. Also, seeing the wren as an analogy of a human being is an exercise "to advance" one's "own experience onto the world of phenomena," an exercise denounced by Dōgen as a "delusion." Though Whalen-Bridge's concept of shared awareness appears to be pertinent to the theme of the poem, I think the seeming homophony of "wren" and the Chinese character is merely a coincidence and was not deliberately contrived by Snyder. It must have been a wren and not any other kind of bird that Snyder actually heard on the Stanislaus River.

The fact that "The Canyon Wren" is included in Section III of *Mountain and River Without End* shows that the poem was considered by Snyder as an integral part of the epic scheme of the book. It seems for the purpose of integrating the poem into the whole, the postscript is removed to the endnotes and is shortened (*Mountains* 161). Both the imagery and theme of the poem echo the major ones in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. The setting of the poem displays mountains and waters, the lofty mountain walls and the white waters in the canyon: "but we're swept on by downriver / [...] / rock walls straight up on both sides" (*Mountains* 90). Most poems in the book also portray mountains and waters, both those on the Turtle Island and those on Chinese landscape scrolls of the classical periods.<sup>6</sup> Behind the imagery of mountains and waters looms Snyder's complicated concept of Nature which incorporates Taoist, Zen Buddhist, American-Indian, ecological and other ideas. In his "Singing the Dyads: The Chinese Landscape Scroll and Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*," Antony Hunt studies this important concept of nature and terms it "the mountains-and-waters dyad" (33). Hunt points out that the imagery in many poems reminds one "of the interpenetration of the mountains-and-waters dyad. We feel the intense energy, the dance, and sheer rhythm of spirit moving in these lines" (33). Therefore, the landscape depicted in "The Canyon Wren" coincides with the key imagery and theme of the book.

Furthermore, the main human activity described in "The Canyon Wren" is a boat ride which echoes the opening imagery of the book. The boat is an important vessel in the grand scheme. A boat ride is also a frequently used metaphor for being delivered to an enlightened stage in Mahayana Buddhism. "Endless Streams and Mountains: *Ch'i Shan Wu Chin*," the first poem of the book, starts with a scene of a river, a lake and hills in an ancient Chinese painting, and the mind of the persona participates in the boat ride among the mountains and waters painted on the scroll:

Clearing the mind and sliding in  
to that created space,

a web of waters streaming over rocks,  
 air misty but not raining,  
     seeing this land from a boat on a lake  
     or a broad slow river,  
     coasting by. (*Mountains* 5)

The persona in the boat is doing something similar to that in "The Canyon Wren": both are viewing and contemplating the landscape. Also, Leonard Scigaj associates this boat in "Endless Streams and Mountains: *Ch'i Shun Wu Chin*" with Dōgen's boat which symbolizes a non-dualistic perspective on the self and on the universe:

In the very first stanza of the opening poem of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, Snyder invites us to take a ride on his boat. Throughout all of the following poems of the volume, the artifice suggests that we experience Snyder's journeys from the perspective of Dōgen's boat-ride, a ride where subjective and objective, absolute and temporal, language and social action, interconnect in perpetual nondualistic birth. (129-30)

In fact, the boat ride imagery is foregrounded in several poems in the book such as "Boat of a Million Years" (39) and "Afloat" (130-32). Just like the boat ride in "The Canyon Wren," both boat ride experiences not only enable the persona to feel profoundly the non-dualistic unity with nature, but teach him to widen his perspective in order to achieve enlightenment. In a word, "The Canyon Wren" embodies both the major theme of the mountains-and-waters dyad, and key images such as the boat ride, which are exactly the focuses of the grand scheme. Furthermore, the meaning of the poem is enriched by the illuminating Far Eastern visions on the essence of the water. In the poem, Snyder fuses twentieth-century ecological concerns for a river<sup>7</sup> in northeastern America with metaphysical visions from the Far East so that diverse ways of perceiving the water are presented whether it is turbulent, tranquil, slow moving or still. As a result, the complexity and multiplicity pertaining to the essence of things could be unraveled. Here is an apt example to illustrate how Far Eastern concepts and poetic images of the northern American landscape are to be joined so that a richness of multiculturalism and depth of meaning



can be achieved. Also, an apt example to show that Snyder is so well-read in Asian literatures that he can employ and integrate the allusions and make them part of English literary traditions.

Hong Kong  
Baptist University

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"The Canyon Wren" appears in three of Snyder's poetry collections: *Axe Handles* (1983), *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (1996) and *Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry, and Translations 1952-1998* (1999). The version in *Mountains and Rivers Without End* differs slightly from the other two.

<sup>2</sup>The New Mellones (Melones) Dam's embankment was completed in Nov. 1978, and the initial filling of the reservoir occurred in 1983. The passage that Snyder and the Katzes rafted through must be under the water of the reservoir after 1983. The Dam is located about 110 miles east of San Francisco, covering an area of 12,500 acres, and built mainly for the purpose of flood control and electricity generation.

<sup>3</sup>The southeast canyon wall forms the northern end of the 1865 foot high Peoria Mountain and the left abutment of the New Mellones Dam. The northwest canyon wall is the southern end of Bostick Mountain, elevation 1814 feet, and the right abutment of the dam. Both sides of the canyon slope toward the river at an average of 38 degrees from horizontal.

<sup>4</sup>The rapids Bai-bu Hong are located near Xu Zhou in today's Jiang-su Province in southeastern China; the rapids are part of Si Shui River.

<sup>5</sup>The China Camp is located "camp 9 to Parrott's Ferry" (*Axe* 112). At present, the camp should be under the water of the north corner of the New Mellones Dam, where the bridge of the Parrotts Ferry Road is.

<sup>6</sup>The imagery of mountains and waters appears in almost all poems in the book with the exceptions of "The Blue Sky" (40-44) which consists of Buddhist chants, and "The Market" (47-51), "Mā" (57-60) and "Instructions" (61), poems about human life.

<sup>7</sup>Before the completion of the Dam, there were concerns over the damage it would do to culture and the environment. The controversy focused on the loss of a popular stretch of recreational white water, inundation of archeological sites, and flooding of the West's deepest limestone canyon.

## WORKS CITED

- Hunt, Anthony. "Singing the Dyads: The Chinese Landscape Scroll and Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 23.1 (1999): 7-34.
- Jin Shu. *Si-ku Quan-shu Hui-yao*. Taipei: Shi Jie Bookstore, 1988.
- Patke, Rajeev S. "Response to 'Gary Snyder, Dōgen, and 'The Canyon Wren.'" *Connotations* 8.2 (1998/99): 261-67.
- Scigaj, Leonard M. "Dōgen's Boat, Fan, and Rice Cake: Realization and Artifice in Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers without End*." *Studies in the Humanities* 26.1-2 (1999): 124-36.
- Snyder, Gary. *Axe Handles*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983.
- . *Mountains and Rivers without End*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1996.
- . *No Nature: New and Selected Poems*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992.
- . *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995.
- . *A Range of Poems*. London: Fulcrum Press, 1966.
- Su Shih. *Su Shih Shih-chi*. Peking: Chung Hua Bookstore, 1987.
- Whalen-Bridge, John. "Gary Snyder, Dōgen, and 'The Canyon Wren.'" *Connotations* 8.1 (1998/99): 112-26.