

Zhang Wei and the Soul of Rural China

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ABSTRACT

Zhang Wei has made a reputation for himself as a fierce defender of the traditional culture of China's rural areas, especially that of his home province of Shandong. For this reason he is often considered a "nativist" (xiangtu zuojia). He has been compared to Faulkner, for his preoccupation with the life of the small region of Shandong where he grew up and still spends much of his time. Others have seen him as sharing territory with the "root-seeking" (xungen) school for his consistent reference to Chinese cultural traditions and for his romantic idealism. His later writing style, at least as evidenced in *September Fable* and subsequent fiction, is probably best described as "magic realism," or "new realism." This paper explores the contribution that Zhang Wei makes in freeing China's rural spaces from their role in contemporary social and political discourse as symbols of conservatism, ignorance and poverty. Rural China is often contrasted with the burgeoning urban landscape which is generally seen to embody the positive values of progress, enlightenment and prosperity. Using his essay "Blending into the Untamed Land" (Rongru yedi) as the main point of reference, this article explores the manner in which Zhang reverses the field. He depicts the urban environment as corrupt and artificial, while the "untamed land" offers that which is genuine and pure. For him, the significance of the countryside is not primarily cultural and economic, but spiritual and artistic. He argues that rural people, through their labour and their intimate, physical contact with the ancient land, have maintained an intuitive unity with Nature and its mysterious forces.

KEY WORDS

Zhang Wei
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September Fable



The language that I seek can reach in all directions, it is something that originates amid the mountain ranges and the clods of earth. It is as vital as life itself and as hard as hard rock, it has form and is formless, has a voice yet is soundless. It is scattered over the very surface of the untamed land and lies hidden among the things of creation.

This paradoxical statement is taken from an essay by the contemporary writer, Zhang Wei. The text is entitled “Blending into the Untamed Land” (*Rongru yedi* 融入野地, hereafter “Blending”) and has been used as a post-face to Zhang’s novel, *September Fable*, (*Jiuyue yuyan* 九月寓言). In this paper I shall be discussing this essay and the vision that it presents of man’s relationship to nature, and especially to the rural landscape. Perhaps more than any other contemporary Chinese writer, Zhang Wei has personally maintained an intimate relationship with rural China and argues eloquently for a reinstatement of the countryside and its cultural meaning in the collective consciousness of the nation. He views the rural landscape as a source for individual and communal restoration. While he employs none of the terminology of post-modernist cultural criticism, his message is extremely modern and pertinent to contemporary debates over modernism, subjectivity, and the Chinese identity. What I hope to show is that the “language” referred to in the opening quotation represents an aesthetic subjectivity located in the traditional values of Chinese rural life. Unlike many contemporary Chinese writers and critics, Zhang apparently feels that such a language need not be

constituted with the vocabulary and grammar of Western philosophy. Thus “Blending” along with much of his literary output, can be approached via traditional Chinese ways of knowing.

Since the publication of his first full-length novel, *Old Boat* (*Gu chuan* 古船) in 1986, Zhang Wei has occupied a position in the first rank of novelists in China. *Old Boat*, as well as his second novel, *September Fable*, published in 1992, has also enjoyed considerable popularity in Taiwan and Hong Kong. As a writer, Zhang is known for his fierce devotion to the traditional culture of China’s rural areas, especially that of his home province of Shandong. For this reason he is often considered a “nativist” (*xiangtu zuojia* 鄉土作家) and mentioned along with fellow Chinese author Zhang Chengzhi 張承志. For his preoccupation with the life of the small region of Shandong where he grew up and still spends much of his time, he has been compared to Faulkner (Wang Jiaming 7). Others have seen him as sharing territory with the “root-seeking” (*xungen* 尋根) school for his consistent reference to Chinese cultural traditions and for his romantic idealism (Nan Fan 252). His later writing style, at least as evidenced in *September Fable* and subsequent fiction, is probably best described as “magic realism,” or “new realism.” This has invited comparisons with such figures as Gabriel García Márquez (Wang Binbin 271; Nan Fan 252; Li Jiefei 301). Zhang is also much motivated by a philosophical concern with man’s relationship to his environment and this has led some critics to identify similarities with Heidegger (Yin Changlong 223–224; Ding Shaolun 214). Like most other writers, Zhang Wei himself wishes to avoid identification with any particular school or writing style. Considering the rapidity with which literary trends in modern China appear, then pass from fashion, this is understandable.

Even a superficial reading of his fiction or nonfiction allows us to place Zhang Wei among those in contemporary China who cherish profound reservations about the rapid progress that the country is making in the direction of technological and industrial development. It is a theme that runs very explicitly through much of his work. In “Blending,” we are presented with perhaps Zhang’s most deeply philosophical response to this phenomenon. Here he combines intimate

and personal impressions of life in the countryside with broad cultural and metaphysical speculation. In simple terms, he is pleading for some pause for consideration in the mad rush to produce wealth and material comfort. He is particularly disturbed by the loss of traditional values: not moral values in the narrow sense, but spiritual values such as are absorbed from a close relationship with nature, a relationship enjoyed for thousands of years by the Chinese peasantry. In this respect we are reminded of the ruralist and anti-technological tendencies of twentieth century German philosophers Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, both of whom have shared Zhang's suspicion of mass produced culture and concern for recovering the basic spirituality afforded by pre-modern modes of living.

"Blending" opens with Zhang's version of the urban/rural dichotomy and its implications for matters of perception and being. The city is described as "a piece of untamed land which has been recklessly embellished." Along with its cultural constructs, it is seen as unstable and impermanent. It represents a barrier to genuine perception and direct experience of the world, but is something that we feel we must endure despite our instinctual wish to refuse it. The basic assumption of the "information age" is that cognitive, scientific knowledge is all-important. Unfortunately, under the impact of multimedia-driven information culture, people are not encouraged to develop the basic skill of discerning true from illusory. They passively receive, but have no time to perceive. As Zhang says, "Traditional 'knowing' and 'seeing' give to us, and also hide the truth from us. Therefore we must seek a new manner of perceiving, and be vigilant over our own sight and hearing" (328).

Where are we to find that new manner of perceiving and knowing? Zhang responds that it is in the fields and on the hillsides of rural China. The countryside, the "untamed land," is perpetual, real, and full of wonder. It holds the key to restoring our connection with the world. Those who live in the countryside implicitly understand this. Unlike their urban cousins, they have retained their connection with the earth and with Nature. The dualism of human-subject/Nature-object is not so deeply ingrained in them because they live physically closer to the

earth and have very tangible evidence of their close relationship to the natural world around them. The romantic valorization of rural peasant culture is a theme that runs deeply through Zhang's work. It could be viewed as a "political" cause, linking him to the social leveling policies of the Chinese Communist Party (a cause now all but abandoned by the Party itself). But any similarities between Zhang's affection for rural culture and Maoist anti-élitism is superficial. Ultimately it is not social leveling that concerns Zhang but a reaffirmation of fundamental truth. It is a truth that he has found in the simple, unmediated relationship between peasant and land.

As a long time resident of rural Shandong, Zhang Wei feels the very soil of his native place to be the source of his being, body and soul. He feels tremendous joy when reunited with the natural landscape and with the uncompromised peace of mind that he finds there. Yet when he describes the pleasure of wandering the fields and mountain slopes, the seductive pull of the simplest objects of nature: "a single hawthorn tree, a clump of grass," he is fully aware that these things, however real in their own context, are also symbols in the emotional and psychological composite of his life. This is critical to understanding the true meaning of "Blending". Zhang repeatedly stresses that personal experience of "Nature" and the "ancient land" is a necessary starting point. But it is clear that ultimately these things are to be taken figuratively, as well as literally. We must understand that the "land," even the "untamed land," is more than a place. It signifies cultural content. It is the substrate of our social, as well as spiritual, being.

Zhang's use of the agrarian paradigm is related to the particular relationship existing between rural people and the environment around them. That relationship is formed not through abstracted aesthetic or philosophical appreciation, but through labour, the labour that is so much a part of agrarian life. He views the work of rural peasants as being the essential language that bonds them to the land. He describes this poetically in the following passage:

There are many people labouring in the fields. They crawl on the ground, covered with dust. The green of the grain stalks obscures

their bronze-coloured bodies and absorbs them into a single sheet. Labour is the language that connects humans with the land. In the midst of their labour people forget the common speech of society. When that happens they join with the earth and all the life forms surrounding them to form a single body. (330)

The peasant may not possess the literate vocabulary of scholars and artists, but he/she participates in a physical dialogue with Nature that has far greater tangible content than that engaged in by those who simply stand and admire. Through its physicality, the peasant's connection with the land is also a dynamic one. This critically enhances the quality of communication. According to classical Chinese understanding dating from as early as the *Book of Change* (*Yijing* 易經), relationships must be dynamic to continue and grow. The very essence of the Dao is dynamic. As Schipper puts it: "The Tao is flux, transformation, process ('way') of alternation, and principle of cyclical time" (4). The absence of change is equated with death.¹ Thus for language to be effective it must continually transform itself and reaffirm its links with the world it seeks to describe.

But, like the Dao of the classical Daoist texts, the truth of Nature cannot be expressed with words. Truth may only be apperceived after ordinary language has been cast aside. For those who have once forsaken the land and succumbed to the draw of the city and the comforts that it affords, this is no easy task. One response is return to live in the countryside and remain as close as possible to the land and the lives of the people there. Zhang himself has chosen this path. He firmly believes that meaning can only be recovered in Nature, a universe whose structure and content are not determined by human design. In the bosom of Nature the rational structures of the human intellect lose context and efficacy. The only manner of approaching it is by "blending in" (*rongru* 融入). To blend in is to abandon the artificial constructs of human understanding and seek direct union with Nature. It is to cast aside modern rationale and subjectivity and open ourselves to non-rational, nonlinguistic, non-dualistic ways of knowing. It is to accept one's place as but one of the myriad existences in Nature's

maternal embrace.

The theme of mystic union is central to “Blending.” It is the process by which one loses the sense of individuation and becomes one with all things. In Zhang’s words:

I seclude myself in this integrated whole, [and] ordinary eyes have no way of distinguishing me. Our breathing combines to form the wind. . . . The wind washes away my fatigue and weariness as it enfolds our unison song. . . . I have become the voice of nature.
(336)

Elsewhere Zhang describes the process of union as being like moving close to a great shadow figure: “Stalks of grain, grasses, forests; people, ants, horses; subject, like kind, parasites . . . all are entwined and born as one body. I gradually draw close to a gigantic shadow” (327).

This shadow may perhaps be identified as the creative force *yin*, the Mother spirit of Daoist mysticism. There are several passages in the *Daode jing* wherein this female creative power is alluded to. For example in Chapter 52 we read:

That which was the beginning of all things under heaven
We may speak of as the ‘mother’ of all things.
He who apprehends the mother
Thereby knows the sons.
And he who has known the sons
Will hold all the tighter to the mother. (Waley 206)

Waley indicates that the “mother” may be identified with the Dao itself, and that the “sons” can be viewed as the myriad existences of the universe, and he is almost certainly right in doing so (206). Daoist tradition has distinguished itself from Confucianism by recognizing the feminine quality of the essential creative force underlying the universe. Zhang follows the Daoists in making consistent use of maternal images to express the procreative and nurturing potential of Nature. He evokes

the maternal paradigm expressed in the relationship between Nature (*dadi* 大地) and all things that live and grow. He speaks of the wild earth as the birth mother of all creation, a mother who never grows old though her offspring flourish everywhere. All things are cared for and nourished by Mother Nature, and she serves as a common link between all beings: “They drink at the same breast and give off the same milky smell” (335).

Acknowledging the common bond with Mother Nature that we share with all living things is an important step towards relinquishing our imagined position at the centre of existence. The next step, that of blending into the untamed land, is more difficult. It implies abandoning altogether the subjectivity so highly prized in modern society. But this is essential if Nature’s reality is to be experienced fully. As Zhang puts it: “After having transcended the boundary of subjective thoughts [the things of Nature] can truly and genuinely be touched” (335).

The slide of the subject into a state of non-awareness and the transformation into a new subjective existence is an important process for the artist, one that may be facilitated by a physical return to nature’s embrace. But one cannot expect to achieve such a subtle and sublime feat by randomly crashing off into the underbrush, literally or figuratively. The point of entry must have a very special resonance for each individual. For Zhang Wei, that point is found in one’s place of origin, one’s ancient land (*gudi* 古地). This is the gateway to Mother Nature’s domain. We all have an ancient homeland and we are its product. It not only determines our hopes and desires; it gives us the power to see and feel. There is a psychological need to be grounded in one place that is familiar and secure. Only with such grounding can people feel confident as they venture forth into the world outside; Zhang says, “when a person grows up and goes off to enter the bustling city, . . . he will still stubbornly maintain: my old home is at the center of the earth. His entire world is born and extends out from that little piece of land” (327). “That little piece of land” is, of course, more than an accumulation of dirt; it is not simply a physical existence; it is the sum total of cultural sedimentation produced by a given locale over the course of history. It is a heritage that is so much a part of our identity

that we are often unaware of its presence. Nonetheless, as we grow older and encounter the complexities of life, that heritage serves as a baseline, a frame of reference from which to evaluate our experience and to determine our behavioral response.

In his analysis of “Blending,” Ding Shaolun offers a critique of the concept of mystic union from the point of view of modern, that is to say, Western philosophy. He questions what union with Nature means in terms of subject and object. It would seem to imply that Nature has become the subject and that the human subject has either disappeared, or become the object. Since subjectivity involves intentionality, we are faced with the proposition of a purposive Nature and a non-purposive human object. Ding sees this as an interesting challenge to the “limits of logic” (211). In the context of traditional Chinese mysticism, however, it is logic that limits. It is the objective of spiritual training to break through that limit and the deluded picture of reality it presents.

Without specific reference to Zhang Wei, the contemporary Chinese philosopher, Liu Zaifu, sees the merging of the subjective with the objective as being the necessary process by which literature and art are created (57). The production of literature and art is the result of the subject transcending passive, cognitive experience and entering into a participatory experience with Nature as object. He refers to this process as the “objectification of the subject” (64). Zhang Wei’s understanding of the merging of subjective and objective is very close to this. It approaches, but does not make the final leap to the non-dualistic ontology of Daoism and Buddhism that see subjectivity and individuation as fundamentally illusory. A passage in “Blending” demonstrates this very poetically:

I can see that my limbs have been entangled by green vines.
Lichens have grown over my forehead. This is not death, it is life. I
can be a tree, thrusting down my roots to become a sense organ on
this place. From now on my sighs will no longer be my own, nor
will I be in control of them. A man has perished and a tree has been
born. Life still remains, but there has been a qualitative
transformation. (336)

In this context, the opposition of subject and object is blurred to the point where the author feels that he no longer perceives the world with his own sense organs. His personal identity has been merged with that of a tree. There is still experience of the world, but it is not an individuated, subjective experience.

It is not enough simply to feel the wonder and mystery of existence; it is a human imperative to communicate those feelings. But since the language of common society is constructed on the basis of the subject-object duality, it is artificial and detached from its roots. That language cannot be used to convey ultimate realities. Zhang recalls the happiness of his childhood when he had not yet mastered the common, dualistic vocabulary (suci 俗詞兒) of urban culture. He believes that his joy was the result of being not yet “completely . . . separated from nature’s maternal body.” In other words, his subjectivity was not yet fully developed. This, ironically perhaps, allowed him to enter into a “dialogue with nature.” Here one is reminded of the Daoist concept of “childish ignorance” (tongmeng 童蒙), a desirable state for those seeking union with the natural cosmic forces and the immortality that accompanies such union. Zhang is not an immortality seeker, yet there is a distinctly mystical aspect to the language he hopes to recover. It is not only the ability to express (biao 表); it is a principle (li 理). “It has its own life, its own quality and colour. It is magically transformed spiritual energy” (330). In other words, it is art.

The defense of art and artistic work is at the primary motive of Zhang Wei’s critique of subjectivity. Like Liu Zaifu, he sees artistic creation as a non-cognitive activity, one that cannot be contained by ordinary discourse or narrative. Artistic creation is transcendent and mystical. It allows us to explore the mysteries of life as no logical, rational discourse can. Art stands in opposition to the world of material desire and technology. That world has destroyed our inner tranquility and devalued the concept of spirituality. The ethos of science and scientific thinking has broken the ancient link between humanity and nature. In the countryside, in China’s rural areas, one can still find people who exist in a state of harmony with nature, who yet know how to enter into a mystic dialogue with the untamed land. The key to the

maintenance of these powers is honest labour. Whether a person ploughs the fields or toils at literature, labour is the medium through which people communicate with the world around them; it is indistinguishable from art. Zhang Wei conjures the image of a silversmith who labours through the night under the light of a candle ("Blending" 338). The smith represents the inseparability of art and labour. Through the labour of art alone can we unearth the millions of years of history interred in the ancient soil. Only through art can we give expression to the secret meaning of nature's endless cycles of life, death and rebirth.

Despite Zhang Wei's personal disaffection with the urban, the industrial and the mass-produced, in "Blending" he is not promoting a back-to-nature movement in any literal sense. His romanticism may be advanced, but he is certainly not suggesting that people abandon the cities *en masse* and return to the farm villages. Nor is he directly arguing for a reinstatement of traditional mysticism, whether Daoist or Buddhist, as the primary ideology of China's writers and intellectuals. What Zhang Wei is pleading for is some space for mystery, for the irrational, and the intuitive in contemporary cultural discourse. As modern life becomes increasingly framed by the terms of technology and science, this space is essential if people are to maintain their emotional and spiritual equilibrium. In this regard, art plays an indispensable role. Only through art, and its ability to distinguish the genuinely beautiful from the genuinely vulgar, can people find an understanding of truth and reality.

Finally, it must also be acknowledged that with "Blending" Zhang Wei makes a great contribution in freeing China's rural spaces from their usual symbolic role in contemporary social and political discourse. For many contemporary Chinese, the city embodies the positive values of progress, enlightenment and prosperity, while the countryside harbours negative qualities such as conservatism, ignorance and poverty. Zhang reverses the field. He considers the urban environment to be corrupt and artificial, while the "untamed land" offers that which is genuine and pure. For him, the significance of the countryside is not primarily cultural and economic, but spiritual and artistic. He further

argues that rural people, through their labour and their intimate, physical contact with the ancient land, have maintained an intuitive unity with Nature and its mysterious forces. Their subjectivity is less highly developed than that of urban dwellers, and this allows them a more wholesome relationship with the world around them. In “Blending into the Untamed Land,” Zhang Wei is arguing against the positive glorification of subjectivity in modern urban culture and for a return to a more direct, unmediated relationship with our world, a relationship consummated through the mysterious language of art, not through discursive analysis. There is a wonderful passage in “Blending” that I think sums up this message very nicely and I shall end my discussion with it: “I know from direct perception alone that it is only in the truly untamed lands that people can ignore the ordinary and discover the dance of the immortal cranes” (326).

NOTES

¹ For another discussion of the concept of transformation or metamorphosis in classical China, particularly in reference to Daoism, see Robinet 233–57.

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