

Chinese Poet in Focus

Travel, Nature, and Life Consciousness: On Three Poems by Guofang Zhu

Poems by Guofang Zhu
Commentary and Translation by Hao Wu

Author Note

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Abstract

This article examines three poems written by Guofang Zhu during his travels at the age of twenty-six: *In Sertar*, *Hokkaido*, and *Lake Baikal*. Focusing on geographical landscapes, existential consciousness, and emotional experience, it explores how the poems employ the religious imagery of Sertar, the tranquil scenery of Hokkaido, and the primal natural world of Lake Baikal. Together, the poems trace the poet's movement from reflections on death, love, and time toward an affirmation of present life and nature's essential truth. Through concise language, rich natural imagery, and fairy-tale-like imagination, Zhu creates a poetic space of resonance between humanity and nature, revealing a spiritual quest and existential meditation informed by the Chinese ideal of the unity of Heaven and humanity.

Keywords: travel poetry; natural imagery; existential consciousness; unity of Heaven and humanity

Editor's Note:

This section presents three original poems by Guofang Zhu (朱国方), written during his travels at the age of twenty-six. Guofang Zhu graduated from the English department of the School of Foreign Languages, Sun Yat-sen University with a Bachelor's degree in 2012. He keeps writing poetry all through his school days and professional career. From the Tibetan Plateau in southwest China to the lakes and forests in northern foreign lands, the poet captures various human and geographical landscapes through his poetry, creating a poetic map of his

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twenty-sixth year. In Chinese culture, the idea of “Tianren heyi” (the unity of Heaven and humanity) has long emphasized the harmony between humans and nature. Through the introduction to these three poems, this section seeks to present a high degree of unity and resonance between geography, poetry, and emotion, allowing the reader to experience the philosophical insights that the earth itself imparts to the world. In summary, Zhu’s poetry possesses a fairy-tale-like purity and profound philosophy, blending elements of the natural environment, imagination, and self-reflection. His poetry, through concise language and rich natural imagery, showcases the deep connection between humans and nature, as well as reflections on life, time, existence, and the imagination of true love.

Commentator and Translator:

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Chinese Version:

在色达

秋天的黎明静静燃烧

每一个孩子

睁开眼睛如太阳般明亮

谁不值得拥有

清凉的玻璃窗

和草尖银闪闪的愿望

人们戴起银的项链

朝着太阳的方向

从锁骨和灵魂开始衰老

那天我走在高高的山岗上

穿行在光滑的黎明

不问来世

不转佛塔

那天我走在高高的山岗上

一地风马

满山秃鹫

我思考黎明和死亡

黄昏与重生

我想起你

和秋天清凉的玻璃窗

——2015.10.14（26岁）

English Version:

In Sertar

The dawn of autumn burns in silence

Each child

opens their eyes as bright as the sun

Who is not worthy

of a cool glass window
and a silvery wish resting on the grass's tip
People don silver necklaces
heading towards the Sun
aging from their collarbones and their souls

That day I walked on the high hills
walking through the smooth dawn
not asking the afterlife
not rotating the Buddhist stupa
That day I walked on the high hills
where the prayer flags flutter across the ground
Vultures circling the entire mountain
I meditate on dawn and death
dusk and rebirth
I thought of you
and the cool glass window in the autumn
——2015. 10. 14 (Age 26)

Commentary:

In Sertar is a poem filled with tranquility and religious and philosophical reflections. The poem is divided into two parts: the first part sketches the landscape of life in Sertar through the descriptions of the autumn dawn and the religious practices of its people; the second part delves into the poet's contemplation of life, death, and philosophy through memory. The poem incorporates numerous elements of Tibetan culture, such as “风马” (prayer flags) and “佛塔” (Buddhist stupas), which has imbued the poem with a deep religious and cultural foundation.

Notably, the depiction of the rotation of the “stupa” and the “prayer flags” not only describes the rituals of Tibetan Buddhism but also represents the poet’s philosophical reflections on life, death, and afterlife. These religious symbols add a layer of mystery to the poem, deepening its philosophical dimensions. At the same time, the natural imagery is infused with philosophical thought. The poet contrasts “dawn” with “rebirth” and “dusk” with “death,” showcasing the cyclical nature of life and the impermanence of time. Dawn and dusk symbolize the beginning and end of life, while death and rebirth reveal the eternal cycle of the universe and existence. This contrast not only reflects the natural cycle but also offers a profound reflection on the Buddhist view of life, death, and reincarnation. Despite being immersed in the strong religious atmosphere of Sertar, the poet provides his own answer to the contemplation of life and death: the last two lines of the poem transcend the grand narrative of life and return to the simple, true existence of life itself. What the poet thinks of is still a concrete person, a specific autumn, and a cool glass window and this is the return to the essence of life.

The image of the glass window appears both at the beginning and the end of the poem, carrying rich symbolism. First, the word “cool” conveys a sense of purity and tranquility. It may represent the poet’s longing for inner peace and harmony with nature. Autumn often symbolizes gentleness, maturity, and harvest, and the cool glass window enhances this image with beauty and serenity. It symbolizes the poet’s pursuit of a simple, pure, and idealized state of life. Second, as a physical boundary, the glass window symbolizes the poet’s separation from the external natural world. The glass window allows one to see the outside world but not fully touch it, creating a sense of distance. This boundary suggests the poet’s reflection and introspection about the outside world, demonstrating a calm and fresh connection with the natural world. At the same time, it may also symbolize a beautiful and innocent love, as the poet’s final thoughts turn to his lover and this glass window, representing the purest and most beautiful fantasy of love in the poet’s heart.

Chinese Version:

北海道

她把棉袜踩在松软的阳光

北海道晴天

这里的门廊可以听见海

蓝蓝地打湿清早的眼睛

青色的瓷瓶在转

时间被长发卷起又落下

此刻活着

我全然幸福

不看花开出海的颜色

不听风吹天空，金属的声音

不骑白色的马

走进绿色林子的深处

不想你

黑色的长发睡在白色的棉绒

三月

天空的光静静降临

滴答，滴答

篱笆，烈火和樱花

——2015.3.17（26岁）

English Version:

Hokkaido

She steps in cotton socks on the soft sunlight
Hokkaido, a sunny day
The porch here can hear the sea
Blue waves wet the morning eyes
A turquoise porcelain bottle spins
Time is rolled up in long hair, then falls again
Alive in this moment
I am utterly happy
Not watching the flowers bloom in colour of the sea
Not listening to the wind blowing through the sky, the metallic sound
Not riding the white horse
into the depths of the green forest
Not thinking of you
Black long hair sleeps in white cotton fluff
March
The light from the sky quietly descends
Tick-tack, tick-tack
The fence, the blazing fire, and the sakura
——2015.3.17 (Age 26)

Commentary:

Hokkaido continues the stylistic tradition of the poet's works from this period: tranquil,

delicate, conveying inner peace and a longing for, as well as an appreciation of, beauty. The overall rhythm of the poem is calm, with concise yet expressive language. Through the depiction of Hokkaido's natural scenery, the poet presents a fresh and warm natural landscape. The sunlight, sea, sky, flames, and sakura of Hokkaido added together have created an idealized, serene world. These images not only reflect the external world but also carry the poet's emotional fluctuations and unique insights into life. At twenty-six, the poet's life was far from the serene and graceful version portrayed in the poem (he was then busy with his company's training courses, flying between cities every week); rather, the busy and tense pace of work was his norm. However, through the poem's complete immersion in "this moment," the poet finds the meaning of life and love in the actual or imagined or recollected natural environment of Hokkaido.

The short yet powerful line, "In this moment alive/ I am utterly happy," expresses the poet's deep appreciation of the present. In this tranquil natural world, the poet feels the fulfillment of life, completely immersed in the experience of the moment, with no concern for the past or future, only focusing on the happiness of this moment. The line "Not watching the flowers bloom with the color of the sea" signifies the poet's refusal to focus on distant things, instead concentrating on the scene before him. The blooming flowers and the color of the sea often symbolize beauty, hope, and the future, but the poet chooses to give up on looking afar, emphasizing the peacefulness and calmness of the present.

Similarly, "Not listening to the wind blowing through the sky, the metallic sound" shows the poet's choice to ignore the noise of the outside world. The "metallic sound" hints at the mechanical or indifferent nature of modern life, while the poet desires to distance himself from these distractions, immersing himself in the natural sounds to seek inner peace. The line "Not riding a white horse, but walking into the depths of the green forest" contrasts the mythical or idealized white horse with the real, profound green forest. The poet abandons the illusory

ideal and chooses to enter a more genuine, natural world, reflecting his longing for a simple life and natural tranquility. The line “Not thinking of you” directly cuts off the poet’s thoughts of others, signaling that his focus is not on external relationships, but on his own feelings and connection with nature. This self-centered experience reflects the poet’s yearning for inner peace.

Finally, the depiction of “the fence, the blazing fire, and the sakura” in the poem’s closing brings forth an emotional return to nature and simplicity. The fence, fire, and sakura symbolize a simple life, the passion of existence, and the beauty of nature. Through these natural symbols, the poet expresses his pursuit of the true essence of life.

Chinese Version:

贝加尔湖

贝加尔湖的天空深蓝

星星在咀嚼青草

老人笑着驱赶狼群

我闭上眼睛

躺着飞

森林的冰层在碎裂

篝火熄灭又燃烧

谁在铸造铁甲与金盔

我的头颅沉入湖底

心心念念

西伯利亚的春天

没有礼服与长裙

没有爱情和灯火

只有森林

和我一起活着

已经很美好

干燥的星星在爆裂

红血丝在生长

湖面轻轻打碎

我好奇地呼吸

翻起一块新生的泥土

——2015.2.16（26岁）

English Version:

Lake Baikal

The sky above Lake Baikal is deep blue

Stars are chewing on the green grasses

An old man laughs as he drives away the wolves

I close my eyes

flying while lying down

The ice in the forest is cracking

The campfire dies and then flares again

Who is forging iron armor and golden helmet

My head sinks to the bottom of the lake

keeps thinking about
the spring of Siberia
No gowns, no dresses
No love, no lights
Only the forests
living with me
so beautiful already
Dry stars are exploding
Blood vessels are growing
The lake surface softly shatters
I breathe in curiosity
turning over a clump of new earth
——2015.2.16 (Age 26)

Commentary:

Lake Baikal is a profound and tranquil poem, and compared to the previous two, it can be considered the poem closest to nature. While in *In Sertar* and *Hokkaido* the poet is still contemplating the feelings of life and love, in Lake Baikal, the poet is completely immersed in nature: “My head sinks to the bottom of the lake / keeps thinking about / the spring of Siberia.” He has fully entered a meditative state, returning to the purity of the heart and the true state of nature. “No gowns, no dresses / No love, no lights / Only the forests / living with me / so beautiful already,” through this contrast, the poet expresses his transcendence from the material world and his return to the primal essence of life and the truth of nature. “Dry stars are exploding / Blood vessels are growing / The lake surface softly shatters / I breathe in curiosity / turning over a clump of new earth,” he is like a newborn, returning to the moment of rebirth with the life of nature, feeling the growth of life anew. Overall, in this poem, the poet uses

concise language and rich natural imagery to present a beautiful depiction of the harmonious coexistence between life and nature.