

# Literary Representation of the Relationship between Man and Nature in Guo Muoruo's Poetry Anthology *The Goddess*

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## Abstract

One of the distinct characteristics of Chinese culture has always been its emphasis on the harmony of man with nature (*tianren heyi*天人合一). This is still widely accepted in Chinese intellectual discourse. However, few scholars have noticed that a new attitude towards the relationship between human beings and nature, which emphasizes the “greatness” of man and the battle against nature, began to germinate in the 1920s. In Chinese culture, the earliest and most impressive manifestation of this attitude was in Chinese literature. The literary revolution foreshadowed the overall intellectual movement of the “New Culture”. Guo Moruo's (郭沫若 1892-1978) poetry anthology *The Goddess* (*Nüshen*女神) (1921) was a representative example. It constructed the “greatness” of man and the myth of “man battling against nature” effectively by elevating the status of man in nature. This paper discusses how Guo Muoruo's ideas related to the social ideologies of the time (e.g. nationalism, Westernization, Romanticism, Expressionism, Marxism and leftist politics). Guo is a case study, demonstrating how social and political change influenced Chinese artistic expression in the 1920s and the 1930s.

**Keywords:** Guo Muoruo, *The Goddess*, representation, nature

## 1. Introduction

Guo Moruo was a prominent figure in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese aesthetics. He was one of the founders of modern Chinese poetry, and was one of the most important litterateurs, estheticians and critics of his generation. His poetry marked the beginning of the new ideas and new aesthetics. His anthology *The Goddess* is considered by Chinese scholars to be a milestone in the history of China's “new poetry”, laying the foundation for its subsequent development (Wei, 2005, p. 2). With its fresh ideas, unique style and fierce and vigour approach, *The Goddess* was representative of the “zeitgeist” of the May Fourth movement of spiritual liberation, influencing the literature, art and aesthetics of the entire period (Sun, 2007, p. 50). As Guo's contemporary Yu Dafu (1896-1945) commented, “The complete break from the fetters of the old poetry dates from *The Goddess*” (Yu, 1922). Wen Yiduo (1899-1946), another leading poet of the “new poetry” movement, also emphasized that *The Goddess* was completely in tune with the spirit of the time, that is, “the spirit of action” (in contrast with the traditional Daoist spirit of non-action), “the spirit of rebellion” (in contrast with the traditional spirit of harmony), and “the spirit of science” (Wei, 2005, p. 30). In this “spirit of the time”, Chinese traditional attitude toward the relationship between human beings and nature, which emphasizes the harmony of man with nature (*tianren heyi*), disappeared; instead, a new attitude, which emphasizes the “greatness” of man and the battle against nature, was prevalent. This paper analyzes the new ideas on the relationship between man and nature, which represents the “spirit of the time” and the change of social ideology, in several selected poems from *The Goddess*.

## 2. Methodology and Framework

In this paper, when I select the “representative” poems for analysis from the Poetry Anthology *The Goddess*, my primary criterion is that the natural world or natural force should be the main theme, (as in the poem “Drunken Song Under the Plum Blossom Tree” (*Meihua Shuxia Zuige*梅花树下醉歌), or at least that it should play an important role in the work (as in “The Heavenly Dog” (*Tiangou*天狗)). My second criterion is that the poem embodies the nationalist sentiment of the time. In *The Goddess*, the old and the new, the Eastern and the Western ideas are mixed, but in order to demonstrate that the new ideas on nature began to germinate in the 1920s, I will be focusing on the poems which emphasize the “greatness” of man and the battle against nature.

The discussion of specific representations (part 3 and 4) will be followed by a more general exploration of the ideology, aesthetics and social context that fostered those representations (part 5). My goal is to link the apparent phenomenon with its deeper sources of meaning. Given this conceptual framework, in which the focus is the significance of nature to humanity and to the human spirit, it is the ideology and aesthetics embodied in the poems that will be emphasized, not so much problems of the analysis of a poem itself. Therefore there is the problem of “context” versus “text”. This is not a study in literary criticism. It is a study in culture and aesthetics. It has been impossible to analyze individual texts in as much detail as would have been appropriate in a traditional critical study. For a thorough discussion of the underpinning culture, sometimes the account of the contextual and cultural background outweighs the detailed account of texts.

### 3. Representation of the “Greatness of Man” in *The Goddess*

The above-mentioned comments made by Guo’s contemporary scholars reflect the manner in which *The Goddess* rejected the traditional spirit of Chinese poetry. In terms of style, *The Goddess* was written in free style. The change from classical rhyming verse to the colloquial free style symbolizes the change from the old system of imagery and the old aesthetic principles, to the new. In terms of ideas, Guo’s aesthetic ideas in fact combined traditional Chinese and Western aesthetics. As was the case with many Chinese scholars during this period, he had absorbed both Eastern and Western ideas about society, nature and human beings. But the reason why *The Goddess* is regarded as embodying the new aesthetics is that it is permeated with a fighting spirit. In the relationship between man and nature, Guo’s image of man is seldom that of a small man harmoniously assimilated into the grandeur of nature, but rather that of a “great” man with supreme power equal to, or even superior to, the power of nature itself.

For example, in one of the poems in *The Goddess*, “Drunken Song Under the Plum Blossom Tree” (*Meihua Shuxia Zuige* 梅花樹下醉歌), Guo wrote:

Plum Blossom, Plum Blossom!	梅花呀！梅花呀！
I admire you!	我讚美你！
I admire myself!	我讚美我自己！
I admire the noumenon of the universe expressed by myself. (Note 1)	我讚美這自我表現的全宇宙的本體！

This poem shows how prominent the advocacy of the selfhood of human beings was in Guo’s early thought, consistent with the idea of pantheism. Pantheism was taken up by Guo Moruo during his search for the meaning of human life. It was a combination of both Eastern and Western philosophy (Note 2). Guo said, “As I like Zhuangzi and Tagore, so equally I was attracted by pantheism, and felt an affinity with Spinoza’s works and Goethe’s poems” (Guo, 1959, p. 143). Guo’s pantheism, however, was different from Spinoza’s pantheism. In Spinoza’s opinion, god was nature; in Guo’s opinion, humanity is as great as nature – both are the embodiment of god. This is demonstrated in “Drunken Song Under the Plum Blossom Tree”: the plum blossom is “nature”, and therefore “god”; “I” am “nature”, therefore “I” am also “god”. I am the noumenon which can represent the universe through the self. Guo expressed this idea in this way: “Pantheism is actually atheism. Everything in nature is the embodiment of god; I myself am also the embodiment of nature. I am god; everything in nature is also the embodiment of myself” (Guo, 1990, p. 311). Guo thought that human beings should not be bound up by feudal doctrines. The poem conveys the idea that by obtaining individual liberation a “great” human also attains a position of equality with god (Sun, 2007, p. 51). This self-image, this “I”, which denies all the gods in heaven and the human world, which breaks through all spiritual toils, is praised as the new god. This understanding of pantheism was beyond both Spinoza’s pantheism and traditional Chinese pantheism which only regards natural objects and phenomena as embodiments of god. On the one hand, Guo exalted humanity to a position of equality with “god”; on the other hand he considered all things in nature to be embodiments of human “selfhood”. In Guo’s pantheism the focus is on the human “self”, an expanding self, and the emphasis is on the limitless power of the human self. Pantheism in this way becomes the “pan-self”. This is Guo’s contribution. The power of humanity was elevated by Guo to a level never achieved in ancient Chinese literature.

### 4. Representation of the Fighting Spirit of Man in *The Goddess*

*The Goddess* not only elevates the status of humanity, but also, and more importantly, shows the fighting spirit of human beings as great battlers. It was seen as a clarion call to liberate thinking, first and foremost because it created a rebellious image of the human being (“I”) who had the supreme power: “I worship the destroyer of the God - I worship myself! / I am a destroyer of the God!” (Note 3) This dominant spirit of rebellion and confrontation in Guo’s poems is absent in traditional Chinese culture – not merely in Chinese poetry. Guo’s most famous poem “The Heavenly Dog” (*Tiangou* 天狗) in *The Goddess* exaggerated the extent of human power:

I am the Heavenly Dog!	我是一條天狗呀！
I've devoured the moon,	我把月來吞了，
I've devoured the sun,	我把日來吞了，
I've devoured all of the stars and planets,	我把一切的星球來吞了，
I've devoured the whole universe.	我把全宇宙來吞了。
Thus I've come into being as 'I'!	我便是我了！
I am the moonlight,	我是月底光，
I am the sunlight,	我是日底光，
I am the light from every star,	我是一切星球底光，
I am X-rays,	我是X光線底光，
I am the whole sum of ENERGY of the universe!	我是全宇宙底 Energy 底總量！
I gallop rapidly,	我飛奔，
I bellow harshly,	我狂叫，
I burn fiercely.	我燃燒。
I burn like a raging fire!	我如烈火一樣地燃燒！
I bellow as if I were the sea!	我如大海一樣地狂叫！
I gallop like electricity!	我如電氣一樣地飛跑！
...	.....

Here, the self-image "I" is compared to natural phenomena: the "moonlight", the "sunlight", the "light from every star", and even "the whole sum of ENERGY of the universe". Human action is endowed with the power of natural force: "burn like a raging fire", "bellow as if I were the sea", and "gallop like electricity". But human power surpasses natural force because it can "devour" the moon and the sun, and all of the stars and planets, and even the universe. None of this human dominance appears in traditional poetry. In another poem "The Pyramid" (*Jinzita* 金字塔) Guo once again shows human force as greater than nature:

Create! Create! Create with all your might!	創造喲！創造喲！努力創造喲！
The creative forces of man can rival those of the God!	人們創造力的權威可與神祇比伍！
If you do not believe, just look at me – the grand Pyramid!	不信請看我，看我這雄偉的巨制罷！
Even the Sun in the sky is bowing his head to me! (Note 4)	便是天上的太陽也在向我低頭呀！
...	.....

In these two poems, all the natural phenomena which have destructive or creative forces are praised, but the greatest praise of all is reserved for the force of humanity, which has a destructive or creative power greater than the force of nature itself. Humanity has the power to devour the energy of the whole universe; humanity has the force to destroy and create everything. It is not merely a lonely "self"; it is a "self" which embodies both the nation and the people. During the period of national adversity, it is a big "self" which condenses the essence of the whole of society and the whole of humanity, and which therefore can resist everything, including nature. Through this new "self", the intellectuals' ideal of realizing both "individual liberation" and "national liberation" is achieved. This echoes the "May Fourth" spirit, which pursued both individual and national liberation. The new elevation of the value, importance and dignity of the human being, usually integrally connected with a concern for the destiny of the whole country, is thus achieved at the expense of the old harmonious relationship between humanity and nature.

### 5. Reasons for the Ideological and Aesthetic Change

This construction of great human power, and its victorious domination of nature, is influenced by both the "zeitgeist" of this period and by imported Western ideas. The importation of Western culture led to a constant re-evaluation of traditional Chinese culture. Some Chinese intellectuals for the first time reflected on their own history and culture with a critical and negative eye. Of the Western philosophies, Marxism was the most influential on leftist thinking. Although Guo Moruo was not a leftist when he wrote *The Goddess*, he had for some time (when studying in Japan) been influenced by the leftist socialism flourishing in Japan, which advocated political democracy and freedom of the individual. The social context of China in the 1920s pushed Guo closer to Marxism. In the 1920s, the ideas of Science and Democracy were popular in China, and Marxism, especially its materialist

world view, was exerting an increasing influence on Chinese intellectuals. Marxism holds that nature is subordinate to human beings. The “subjection of nature’s forces to man”, noted in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, was one of several expressions of the triumphant power of the bourgeoisie, a measure of its mastery over the means of production as a whole. Capitalist or communist, humanity in the Marxist view was “the sovereign of nature”. Chinese leftists adopted the Marxist idea of the human “mastering of nature” when they constructed the new relationship between humanity and nature. *The Goddess* also exaggerates human power (especially the power of the masses). For this it was praised by leftist writers as the first great anthology of the new poetry, and as the representative of the May Fourth spirit (Wei, 2005, p. 37). Guo recollected later that at that time he was preoccupied by the ideas of “human freedom”, and had begun to be interested in the ideas of Marx and Lenin. The October Revolution in Russia provided an ideal of human society (Guo, 1957-1963, p. 166). In the poem “Lesson of the Big Cannon” (*Jupaozhi Jiaoxun* 巨炮之教訓), he declares that “the supreme ideal is in the world of peasants and workers” (Note 5).

In addition to Marxism, *The Goddess* is also influenced by Western romanticism and expressionism. Many Chinese scholars see Guo as principally influenced by romanticism, because his poetry is full of such passion and such transcendental imagination (Sun, 2007, pp. 48-49.). European Romanticism, with its criticism of feudal ideology and industrial civilization, especially its advocacy of subjectivity, selfhood, revolution and revolt, had a great influence on Chinese intellectuals at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Guo was certainly influenced by Romantic works and by the aesthetics of Romanticism when he studied in Japan. In the Introduction to his translation of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (<少年維特之煩惱>序引) he wrote that the romanticism in Goethe’s works resonated for him, especially Goethe’s admiration of nature: “he [Goethe] loves and worships nature. Nature bestows on him infinite love, comfort, consolation, enlightenment and nourishment, leading him to revolt against technology, established morality, the class system, established religion and all knowledge” (Guo, 1990, p. 311). As Guo publicly declared, he learned a great deal from Goethe, Shelley, Byron, Wordsworth and Whitman (Sun, 2007, p. 49). Wordsworth’s definition of poetry in *The Prelude* as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”, finds an echo in Guo’s statement that “good poems are the natural overflow of feelings” (Guo, 1990, p. 200). Yet Guo differed from Wordsworth. For Guo, poetry was not “emotion recollected in tranquility”. Guo was more deeply influenced by Walt Whitman. Like Whitman, he was unwilling to be tied by any restrictions: “Whitman’s poetic style which discarded all the old formulae is in step with the trend of the May Fourth spirit. I was totally captivated by his vigorous, bold and unconstrained style” (Guo, 1990, vol. 11, p. 143).

Despite this, I find Wei Hongshan’s argument that Guo was more influenced by expressionism than by romanticism, a convincing one. It is especially true of Guo’s concept of nature. Expressionism, which had its origins in Germany at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was introduced into China after the First World War. During the 1920s, the literary Creation Society (*Chuangzaoshe* 創造社) contributed greatly to the translation, introduction and publicization of expressionism. As a member of the Creation Society, Guo Moruo showed great interest in it. Expressionism was characterized by the expression of intense emotion in the works, with a strong sense of anti-tradition, dissatisfaction with reality, and a rebellious spirit, elements which often occurred during a time of social upheaval. The influence of expressionism on Guo’s poetry can be seen in his poems “The Heavenly Dog” and “The Pyramid”. During this period in China, the events that were shaping people’s ideas were similar to those in the West at the birth of expressionism. To put it another way, the rebellious ideology of expressionism and its dissatisfaction with social reality were in step with the Chinese “zeitgeist” of the period. The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the zenith of capitalist civilization in the West. Among the negative effects brought about by industrialization were the conflict between human beings, and human rebellion against the norms of society. Expressionism was an artistic attempt to reconstruct human selfhood consistent with the prevailing Nietzschean spirit of rebellion. Similarly in China, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a spirit of rebellion, and a consciousness of destroying the old world and creating the new, were beginning to evolve. At this time the new and old social powers and ideologies were contending vigorously. Confronted with a dark present and a stubborn feudal power, social reformists called for a spirit bold enough to rebel against the existing social system and established tradition, and to reform the national character. Expressionism, with its vehement sentiments of rebelling against authority and rejecting tradition, with its heightened passion and fury of expression, not only conformed to the requirements for artistic reform in China, it also satisfied the demand for ideological and political revolution. This can be seen in the reformists’ praise of Nietzsche and the Creation Society writers’ strong “identification” with expressionism and their praise for “vehement resistance” (Wei, 2005, p. 135). In this similar context of events and thought, the free and bold representation of subjective selfhood in Western expressionism won the favour of Chinese intellectuals.

Guo's acceptance of and identification with expressionism also arose from the demands of Chinese literature. In order to counter the influence of feudal literature and create a new literature, Chinese intellectuals introduced Western modern literature with the aim of accelerating modernization in form, style, language and ideas of their own literature. This newly emerging modern expressionism, with its spirit of anti-tradition coinciding with the May Fourth spirit, was embraced by Chinese intellectuals because it was in sympathy with the ideas then current in Chinese literary and artistic circles (Wei, 2005, p. 115). From the May Fourth movement to the end of the 1920s, as an innovation introduced from Western modern art and literature, expressionism attracted many Chinese intellectuals' attention.

For Guo Moruo, it was possible to empathize with expressionism and romanticism because they both possessed the same spirit of rebellion. In the idea of nature, romanticism had a close and intimate link to nature, the result of its opposition to the effects of industrial civilization. Artists and poets turned to nature to find their spiritual homeland. They eulogized pastoral life, looked to the power of nature to counter convention and corruption in society, and hoped nature's beauty could overcome the social corruption caused by industrialization. But expressionism could at times be critical of nature. From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, continuing industrial development had resulted in major changes to Western society and the natural environment. The tranquility of the countryside, formerly the refuge of the romantics, was shattered, and the harmonious relationship between humanity and nature was disrupted. These circumstances led some expressionists to reject "nature" as an unfriendly and sometimes even hostile force. Although both romanticism and expressionism are represented in *The Goddess*, the poems mentioned above mainly demonstrate the pride in human power, the revolutionary atmosphere generated by expressionism and the tone of indignation, exemplified in "The Heavenly Dog" by the line "I've devoured the whole universe". Guo proclaimed that "we should break all the bonds of nature and tradition, and free ourselves from their heavy shackles" (Guo, 1923). He broke free from romanticism and accepted expressionism (especially in his later works) by denying the harmonious relationship between humanity and nature. The Czech scholar Marian Galik has also noted this, and commented that Guo's opinions during this period undoubtedly embodied an expressionist spirit (Galik, 1997) (Note 6). Proof of this lies in two of Guo's essays published in 1923. In "Our New Literature Movement" (*Womende Wenxue Xinyundong*我們的文學新運動), Guo argued that in China at that time, there were only two ways forward: one was to "live a reclusive life in the mountains and forests, to be a friend of nature and to shun society"; another was "to bravely struggle to the end against the ugliness of society". He advocated that people take the second path (Guo, 1923). In "Nature and Art: My Empathy with the Expressionists" (*Ziran yu Yishu: Duiyu Biaoxianpaide Gonggan*自然與藝術 - 對於表現派的共感) he claimed that the artist should be the "father of nature" (Guo, 1923) (Note 7). This is in sharp contrast to the position of the traditional literati who saw nature as the teacher. The ideas of nature in both articles contradict the romantic ideas of nature which he expressed in the introduction to *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, discussed earlier.

## 6. Conclusion

From Guo Moruo's contradictory and complex ideas of nature – the pantheism of East and West, the romantic and expressionistic concepts of nature, the idea of elevating human power over nature, and the Marxist idea of achieving mastery over nature – we can see the trademark of the period: the mixed ideas of the old and the new, the East and the West. Yet Guo's primary contribution lies in his construction of the new myth of "men as great battlers".

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### Notes

Note 1. My translation.

Note 2. Cai Zhen's argument that "to Guo Moruo, pantheism was not a philosophy, but a poetics" is not convincing (see Cai, 2005). Poetic Feeling Towards Nature in *The Goddess* and Japanese Culture (<女神>對大自然的詩性感悟與日本文化). *Guo Moruo Studies* (郭沫若學刊), the 2<sup>nd</sup> issue).

Note 3. "我崇拜偶像破壞者, 崇拜我! 我又是個偶像破壞者啲!", from the poem "I Am An Idol Worshipper我是個偶像崇拜者", in *The Goddess*. My translation.

Note 4. My translation.

Note 5. "至高的理想只在農勞". My translation.

Note 6. My translation.

Note 7. My translation.

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