

# The Application of Natural Images and Embodiment of Taoism in Li-Young Lee's Works

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**Abstract:** As a cross-cultural poet, Li-Young Lee has unique-styled works that convey a mixture of ancient Chinese wisdom and his understanding of the world. This article aims to discuss the embodiment of Taoism in Li-Young Lee's poetry through a detailed analysis of the natural images in his poetry. The article has chosen two representative images: flowers and birds to discuss how Taoism is conveyed in these images. The article argues that Li-Young Lee experienced mental changes and gradually turned to composing poetry on philosophic themes like nature and human origin under the influence of Taoism.

**Keywords:** Li-Young Lee; Taoism; Natural images; Chinese philosophy

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## 1. Li-Young Lee and his writing technique

Li-Young Lee (1957—) is an American poet. He was born in Jakarta, Indonesia. His maternal grandfather was Yuan Shikai, China's first Republican President, and his father was a personal physician to Mao Zedong while in China. Due to his parent's special identities, Lee has a special imagination and feelings toward China.

Lee is good at using natural imagery and elements of Chinese and Western culture to describe personal experiences and feelings. His poetry delves into his personal and family history while also pondering profound questions about life, the cosmos, and what makes poetry.

In traditional Chinese poetry and art, plants and animals are frequently celebrated. Due to his special identity as a Chinese American, Lee likes to use such natural images to express his reversed feelings towards family and life.

## 2. Natural Images in Lee's Works

*Flowers.* The first collection of Lee's poems is *Rose*. According to incomplete statistics, five poems are themed

around flowers in this collection. Additional poems that focus on flowers can also be found in *Night of the Book* and *Behind My Eyes*.

Flower images domain Lee's first collection. He likes to associate flowers with life. Flowers blooming symbolize the start of life, while their wilting signifies its death. In his work *Between Seasons*, Lee brings cold white chrysanthemums, a flower that thrives in the cold, to his late father. The poem repeatedly evokes the emotion of "grief", which appears five times in the poem, to convey the deep respect and fond memories Lee holds for his father. However, in stanza 2, Lee portrays chrysanthemums as resilient, capable of withstanding the cold and flourishing. And he says: "Truest to your nature were chrysanthemums (Lee, *Rose* 69)" <sup>[1]</sup>. This shows his father's tenacity and incorruptibility.

Chrysanthemums often appear in ancient Chinese poems as the object of praise. In ancient times, plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum were called "the four gentlemen" because of their uprightness and nobility despite the cold weather. The attributes of chrysanthemums resonate with Taoist philosophy, advocating for harmony with nature and a life of seclusion. The thought of seclusion in Chuang Tzu helps to understand the root of Chinese hermit culture and the personal spirit of Chinese intellectuals. In ancient China, it was common for poets to retreat to the mountains in search of harmony with nature. In the West, there is also such a trend, especially in the period of Romanticism. Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau spent over two years living aside Walden a simple life which is a kind of revolt and escape from the city. Li-Young Lee is also considered a transcendentalist. However, in his early work, the revealing nature of the pursuit of freedom is not that obvious. Instead, it is his father who lives a relatively free and isolated life.

In *Between Seasons*, Lee expresses his admiration for chrysanthemums, viewing his revered father as embodying the unity of humans and nature, much like the flower. His father used to wander among chrysanthemums emotionally. His tears imply that this father knew his imminent death but he persevered through the winter as chrysanthemums. Through the description of his father's lonely tomb, Lee expresses a sense of seclusion whether his father is dead or not. The last two lines suggest that despite his father's passing, his spirit will last long.

Lee gained a view of China from his parents, especially his father. They had a great impact on Lee's understanding of Chinese culture and his later transformation. In his early works, he frequently mentioned his parents showing his love and reminiscence. However, the themes Lee addresses in his third collection *Book of My Nights* explore further into to philosophic field compared to his earlier works. He frequently mentions words like God, fate, and night... to name a few. His flower image becomes more abstract and ambiguous referenced. In *Black Petal*, he writes:

"Now he answers to Vacant Boat,  
Burning Wing, My Black Petal.

.....

and when I spy the wind's numerous hands  
in the orchard unfastening  
first the petals from the buds,  
then the perfume from the flesh (Lee, *Book of My Nights* 23, 24)" <sup>[2]</sup>.

In *Stations of the Sea*, he writes: "Crying, my body turns to dark petals (Lee, *Book of My Nights* 66)" <sup>[2]</sup>. Lee uses black (dark) petals to show the pain and grief of life. In his fourth collection *Behind My Eyes*, the transition is more obvious in that he no longer relies on the implication of flowers. In *Dying Stupid*, he writes:

“human voices are Creation’s most recent flowers,  
mere buds of fire  
nodding on their stalks (Lee, *Behind My Eyes* 90)”<sup>[3]</sup>.

Recent flowers referring to the voice are Lee’s exploration of the pure nature of humans. Human voices refer to Lee’s interest in human origin. Lee once said: “Anymore I have given up distinguishing between my voice and my father’s. The question for me is: When I say ‘me, ... It’s like the Taoists say: In the ten thousand directions, where can I look and not look by the light of the self?’ what do I mean by ‘me’?(Matthew 84)”<sup>[4]</sup>. In his last three collections, Lee gradually downplays the influence of his family and turns to thinking about the origin of humanity which is deeply influenced by Taoism.

*Birds*. The bird image appears many times in Lee’s later works. He likens birds to humans. There are four poems themed or titled by birds in his third collection *Night of the Book*. In the work *Praise Them*, Lee says:

“The birds don’t alter space.  
They reveal it... (Lee, *Book of My Nights* 48)”<sup>[2]</sup>.

This indicates that free birds can fly only relying on the space of the sky. This shows Lee’s thought of Taoism as keeping a harmonious relationship with nature because natural creatures show us the beauty of the world in the way they exist, not change. In the following lines, he points out that humans are birds, showing his idea of the unity of humans and nature. Additionally, the line

“...The sky never fills with any leftover flying.  
They leave nothing to trace (Lee, *Book of My Nights* 48)”<sup>[2]</sup>.

depicts the ethereal beauty of birds flying by without leaving a trace, which emphasizes the complete beauty of the natural world, providing a new perspective that how Lee constructs the relationship with nature.

“... See  
how three birds in a winter tree  
make the tree barer.  
Two fly away, and new rooms  
open in December (Lee, *Book of My Nights* 48)”<sup>[2]</sup>.

On the surface, this line uses compares and contrasts, using the birds’ perching to contrast with the bareness of the branches in winter. However, it to some extent symbolizes humans’ interactions with nature. Our attempts to contribute to nature may not be feasible if we break the law of life.

### 3. The reflection of Taoism

When it comes to the law of nature, Taoism considers Tao as the core of nature which generates the whole world and it is also the rule for natural creatures to obey which is the law of life. According to the founder of Taoism Laozi, he raised “The Dao begets one, one begets two, two begets three, and three begets all things” showing that Tao is the origin of everything. Lee once said: “There’s this Taoist tradition that the world was conceived out of a syllable, and out of that syllable...”, “In the Taoist version they say there was an S-U sound, that’s the seed, and out of that sound things got more and more differentiated, and everything came into being (Bilyak 606)”<sup>[5]</sup>. In Lee’s point of view, Tao externalizes into a voice from which everything comes from this voice. This voice for him is an inner voice from somewhere between two inches below his navel and the soles of his feet, somewhere around there (Bilyak 607)<sup>[5]</sup>. Feet stand for human root while navel in Chinese culture

stands for the region called *Dantian*.

*Dantian* is a concept raised by Taoism. It embodies the spirit and strength of the human body, which are generated from nature. In Taoism, Qi is a main factor of the spirit and strength. According to Chuang Tzu, humans are the gathering of Qi. Only when people know how to control and lead Qi to Dantian, can they learn the key to keeping healthy. As intangible issues, directing Qi is a practice in which people control their own lives under self-awareness. That is the deepest consciousness of human thought—a combination of rationality and sensibility. The awareness of the origin and mixture of the human body and thought is the first step in the pursuit of nature and eternity.

Taoism believes that human natures are “Emptiness” and “Quietness”. “Emptiness” means leaving space to allow the laws of nature to take effect, while “Quietness” denotes inner peace and detachment from the noise of the outside world. They show that people are weak compared to nature so they should obey natural rules rather than attempt to change them. In Taoism, it refers to the concept of non-action. In Chuang Tzu, there is a line: “The general idea of Chuang Tzu is to show the happy excursion, the indulgence in the way of non-action and self-enjoyment (*Chuang Tzu* 38)”<sup>[6]</sup>. The state of non-action is also the display of obeying the natural rule by doing nothing. In Lee’s other work *The Sea with Fish*, the last two lines

“Stranger Going Along,

Blind but Fixed Between Wings That See (Lee, *Behind My Eyes* 61)”<sup>[3]</sup>.

can be traced to Chuang Tzu’s *The Happy Excursion*: “In the Northern Ocean there is a fish, by the name of kun, ... When this bird moves itself in the sea, it is preparing to start for the Southern Ocean, the Celestial Lake (*Chuang Tzu* 38)”<sup>[6]</sup>. The transition from “Kun” to “Peng” indicates the change and growth which implies the writer’s groping along the way of life and his brave conquer of the unknown. Furthermore, the “Blind but Fixed” in Lee’s lines does not mean ignorance. The writer may also imply the intuition and personal choice of the future. Even if one is in the unknown and the uncertainty, he still needs to adhere to and comply with the natural law, just like Peng. Despite its blindness, Peng can complete the leap of life with the help of the wind, which reflects the obeying of natural rules, especially Tao. At the same time, this phrase symbolizes that while people follow the laws of nature, they also need to exercise their subjective initiative, using their inner wisdom and intuition to perceive and grasp the rhythm of life. This intuition and choice are the “non-action” in the face of natural laws — not a passive doing nothing, but an active adaptation and integration. Moreover, expressions like “Who would have guessed...” and “My father never... (Lee, *Behind My Eyes* 61)” on one hand as unfinished exclamations that arouse readers to imagine, on the other hand, also reflect the humble attitude of the poet and his father in the face of life and the laws of nature<sup>[3]</sup>. They do not passively accept fate but based on the understanding of nature to experience life with a sincere state of mind. It is the expression of Taoism’s non-action.

Therefore, from Lee’s perspective, he believes that human beings come from nature and should live in harmony with it. “He thinks that people, especially poets, connect with the universe by making their bodies and minds ‘Emptiness’ and ‘Quietness’.” “It’s about quieting the brain and consolidating 60,000 thoughts into one coherent thought instead of a jumble of thoughts (*Long Jingyao* 79)”<sup>[7]</sup>. In Lee’s opinion, the best way to reach the level of “Emptiness” and “Quietness” is through listening to the sound that can relieve one’s mind. To him, this sound is poetry.

In Lee’s work, the emphasis on natural law not only reflects the impact of Taoism but also encompasses other schools of thought in Western culture. Lee has a special concept as “the Universe Mind.” He thinks that all

things in the universe originate from this mind and their existence reflects the existence of the Universe Mind in turn, though the nature of his mind is intangible (*Long Jingyao* 77) <sup>[7]</sup>. It resonates with Western concepts found in the West. According to JingYao Long: “It’s evident from Li-Young Lee’s expression that his understanding of the universe aligns with both Chinese Taoist thought and Western pantheism, particularly Spinoza’s.” Spinoza saw nature as God. In Western culture, God, mostly referred to as the God of Genesis in the Bible, is meant to be infinite all-powerful, omnipresent, and omniscient. Thus, he cannot perceive breaking away from maturity. Therefore, God is nature. It is similar to the concept of Taoism, which suggests that people are inherently part of nature and should abide by nature’s rules. “Laozi proposed that Tao penetrates all things ... He also said, ‘All things return to their roots.’ The ‘universe mind’, ‘law’, and ‘logos’ mentioned by Lee, as shown above, are the same as ‘Tao’ mentioned by Laozi (*Long Jingyao* 78)” <sup>[7]</sup>.

Transcendentalism also develops similar ideas. They believe that humans have an inherent understanding of truth or acquire knowledge beyond sensory perception. They think that being in nature is elevating and that every person possesses a divine quality. “In Emerson’s view, spirit and oversoul are synonymous. The oversoul is everywhere in the universe ... While it is also a tangible, close at hand, can touch the reality of existence. Everything in the world, including man and nature, is its embodiment. ‘The human soul is a part of it.’ ‘Every soul exists within a great soul.’ All men have one spirit in common (*Chang Yaixin* 182)” <sup>[8]</sup>. Lee’s theory is to some extent similar to Emerson’s according to his “Universe Mind.”

As a Chinese-American poet, Lee’s works deliver a thought-provoking sense of where Chinese and Western philosophical theories intertwine. His Chinese identity, particularly under the influence of Taoism, is the foundation of his worldviews of his life and poetry. Lee shares the most similar idea with Taoism in his concept of the world. Although most theories mentioned above agree that humans and nature are integrative, Taoism introduces the concept that Tao is the natural rule and origin that generates and controls the world, rather than nature itself. It finds a parallel in Lee’s “Universe Mind” that this mind is the natural origin. This concept is not merely a philosophical notion but a mental practice in his poetry. It is a form of introspection and meditation that allows him to delve into his personal experiences and distill from them a deeper, more profound understanding of the universe and nature.

#### 4. Conclusion

From his work, it can be seen that the change in his choice of image symbolizes his transformation in mental level in his lifetime. At an early time, he was a talented and special poet as a Chinese-American. His special early years unsettled experience and special identity as a cross-cultural poet make him a representative symbol. Later, he turns to focus more on cultural differences and applies his unique understanding to his works. His thought is a mixture of manifold schools like Taoism and Transcendentalism. Many people identify him as a transcendentalist because of “the disavowal of his ethnic identification (Xu 156)” <sup>[9]</sup>. However, “His wish to be stripped of all cultural identifications and politics ironically places him squarely within American transcendentalist and sublimic tradition (Xu 157)” <sup>[9]</sup>. Lee used to say “I don’t feel at home anywhere (Matthew 87)” <sup>[4]</sup>. This might explain why he eventually discards the extraneous and cultivates the idea of “the Universal Mind.” In essence, Lee’s work is a poetic bridge, spanning the chasm between Eastern and Western thought, between the individual and the universe. It is a testament to the power of poetry to transcend cultural and philosophical boundaries, forge new pathways of understanding, and inspire people to think more about the

relationship between man and nature. Lee's "Universe Mind" is a call to recognize the intrinsic connection to the world around people. It is a reminder that people are not isolated beings but integral components of the whole world. His poetry serves as a connection between the seen and the unseen, between the tangible world and the ineffable mysteries of existence. Through this link, people are encouraged to embark on a journey of self-discovery that is also a journey of cosmic awareness, for in the end, the exploration of the self is inextricably linked to the exploration of the world.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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