Su Shi's "Transforming into Bamboos" and John Keats' "Negative Capability": A Comparative Study

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Abstract

The seemingly identical artistic terms put forward respectively by the Chinese poet Su Shi and English poet John Keats, "Transforming into Bamboos" and "Negative Capability" contain significant differences due to their distinct cultural context and the poets' personal experience. Firstly, their subjective mentalities are different. Rather than the total repression of human faculties and the Taoist world-weary attitude, Su Shi advocates an initiative subject, a fully charged mind with a deep humanistic concern; while for Keats, a state of passiveness and receptiveness overwhelms the exercise of intelligence and reason. Secondly, their ways of approaching "Truth" are different. Su Shi values both talent and hard practice, together with a dialectical attitude towards language and media while Keats emphasizes a dispossessed ego, an imaginative soul，a chameleon quality, and a full trust on language and symbols. Thirdly, the claimed "Truth" they are pursuing are different. For Su Shi, the goal of "Transforming into Bamboos" is to catch *Li*(理) , a Confucian variant or derivation of Tao while what Keats looks for through "Negative Capability" is an aesthetic utopia where he finds justice for his art and himself under an age of industrialization.

Keywords: transforming into bamboos, negative capability, Su Shi, Keats, comparison

1. Introduction

Literary theories are composed of a set of terms or key words. Those terms have their own origins, developments and variations, and are woven together through the history of literary practice. The meanings of these terms are in most cases contextual rather than literal. Therefore, when talking about the poetics between the West and China, "...we find mainly differences: in the kinds of assertions made, in the genres, and in the basic structure of literary thought." (Owen, 1992, Introduction) However, this doesn't mean the incompatibility of Chinese and Western literary theories. Chinese forerunner Scholars in comparative literature like Qian Zhongshu(钱钟书), Zhu Guangqian(朱光潜) and Zhang Longxi（张隆溪）have shown us the inner-connections and coincidences between traditional Chinese poetics and Western theories. Studies on Derrida, Heidegger and Foucault also have shown the underlying interactions between contemporary western thoughts and the ancient Chinese philosophy. Nevertheless, as the Chinese scholar Zhang Jing(张晶)insists，"after the consensus of a comparable bilateral relationship and the seeking of common ground and similarities at the first step, further study of their differences is necessary. " (Zhang Jing, 2017, p.34) Cao Shunqing (曹顺庆) also says, "under the 21st century context of Globalization and multiculturalism, the're-birth' of comparative literature lies on … re-examining the space of cross-civilization comparison. Based on the exploration of 'heterogeneity'，more non-western cultures and literature should be included into the scope of comparison." (Cao, 2020, p.78) All these viewpoints are calling for a more realistic and productive attitude toward comparative poetics between East and West.

However, how could we conduct these comparisons? Chinese theorist Tong Qingbing has suggested the following principles for the practice of comparative poetics. First, priority to history. Only be put back into their historical and cultural context, the true value and significance of these theories could be understood. Second, a dialogue mode based on mutual subjectification. The purpose of the study should be mutual inspiring and mutual enlightening. Third, self-consistency in logic. It will be futile if we just stop at "dressing Chinese poetics with a western suit, or dressing western theory with a Chinese Chi-pao". (Tong Qingbing, 2016, p.15) Under these principles, What this article provides is a comparison between two important literary terms put forward by the 11th century Chinese poet Su Shi and the 19th century English poet John Keats on art creation.

"Transforming into Bamboos"(竹化 *Zhu Hua*) was proposed by Su Shi when he was explaining why his cousin and friend Wen Yuke, a famous painter at his time, could produce the best bamboo paintings. Su Shi thought "he (Yuke) has got bamboos living in his mind before he starts painting (Su, *On Wen Yuke's Painting of Slanting Bamboos in Yundang Valley* 文与可画篑筜谷偃竹记,1079) and "by **transforming into bamboos**, he creates the most fresh and lively bamboo paintings" . (Su, *Three Poems on Chao Bu's Collection of Yuke's Paintings* 书晁补之所藏与可画三首, 1087) (Note 1) Similar thing happened to John Keats when one day he suddenly realized what makes Shakespeare the greatest poet: "at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean **Negative Capability**, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching

after fact and reason." (Keats, Letter to Tom and George, 1817) (Note 2)

These two terms are similar in many perspectives. They were both invented by a great poet; they are both describing a particular subjective condition during art creation; and the conditions they are describing are both very similar to the Chinese Taoist philosophy. Although until now, there has been no direct comparative study between them, they have each aroused great interests among scholars in literary theories. Among them, Fu Xiuyan (2021), Huang Qing & Xu Yufeng (2015) and Voller (2011) all studied the state of subjectivity in Keats' "Negative Capability". Zhou Yanming (2017) and Xu Xiaofeng (2019) explored the Buddhist, Confucian and other elements in Su Shi's life and writing besides the well-known Taoist influence. Some of these studies have built a hidden bridge between these two terms. Here, the author of this article tries to reveal their innovative quality and artistic significance in their own culture through a comparison between them from three perspectives. Each of the perspective will be conducted through contextual analysis and mutual interpretation with an aim of discovering artistic laws.

2. Different Subjective Mentality

Su Shi's "Transforming into Bamboos" could easily remind us of the Taoist master Zhuangzi's dream of butterfly. In his dream, Zhuangzi could not tell the difference between him and the flying butterfly and was lost in the blurring of subject and object. Su Shi confirmed this relevance in his *Three Poems on Chao Bu's Collection of Yuke's Paintings*, "Who would know this spiritual concentration, if there was no Zhuang Zhou?" However, it would be risky to say Su Shi's artistic view is fully within the frame of Zhuangzi or Taoism as many scholars have pointed out. As a literary Giant of his age, Su Shi's aesthetic ideology was a complicated mixture. According to his brother and life-long friend Su Zhe（苏辙）, Su Shi had the widest scope of learning, "at first he loved the works of Jia Yi and Lu Zhi… Then he began to read *Zhuangzi*, …Later he read Buddhist canons… In his late years, he started reading *Yizhuan* (易传 *The Book of Changes*)". (Chen Hongtian, 1990, p.1126) Even his biographer Lin Yutang(林语堂) found it difficult to define him, "Out of the Buddhist faith to annihilate life, the Confucian faith to live it, and the Taoist faith to simplify it, a new amalgam is formed in the crucible of the poet's mind and perceptions." (Lin Yutang, 2009, p.7) Naturally, these learning were intertwined with his tempestuous political career, and left traces on his mind and writing.

The distance between Su Shi's "Transforming into Bamboos" and Zhuangzi's "Objectification（物化 *Wuhua*)" is that Zhuangzi believes there is a natural equality and unity between the subject and the object, while Su Shi holds a more humanistic view toward the world and emphasizes the initiative power of human beings. Therefore, a consciousness of self or subject is the beginning of art creation, and "transforming into bamboos" demands a clear subjective effort. In his writings, there is always a concern for human world, and he values communications both between man and nature and between man and man. For example, when he talks about Yuke's painting, he writes a lot of details describing the social contacts between him and Yuke or Yuke and his fans. Actually, the whole prose of *On Wen Yuke's Painting of Slanting Bamboos in Yundang Valley* is more like a eulogy to his talented

friend than a demonstration of poetics.

However, in Zhuangzi's system, humans are no better beings than crickets or ants, and he does not show any preference for human beings in his philosophical system. On the contrary, he is quite tired of man's exerting endeavors. Through the story of carpenter Chui（工锤）or cook Paoding (庖丁), he demonstrates the happy union of the fingers and the object, "whenever you forget the existence of your feet, they are comfortable." Although this state of living is highly adopted by later critics as a guide for artists in creation, it is not Zhuangzi's intention. What he advocates is an artistic way of living with no concern for art creation. This state of spiritual freedom and carefree coincides with his yearning for an Absolute Freedom (*XiaoYao* 逍遥), which is impossible for any human beings living in a society.

What is Keats' attitude toward the world and human beings? As a challenge to the Platonic insistence of truth-seeking and his contemporaries' moral-seeking and individualism, Keats' "Negative Capability" praises the importance of the faculty of human imagination and sensations and values a special poetical quality(capability) to abandon personal emotions, rational reasoning and moral judging. In his *Republic*, Plato accuses poets for not being helpful in either illuminating truth or cultivating the good, saying "The imitative art is an inferior that marries an inferior, and produces inferior offspring" only achieving "an inferior degree of truth" and proposes to send the poets out of the state. Like Zhuangzi in China, Plato has a deep resistance or distrust towards human beings. What they value is something beyond this world: the universal "Tao" for Zhuangzi and "Truth" for Plate, both are located far beyond human reach. However, Plato insists on a moral dimension for human activity while Zhuangzi ignores it completely.

As the source of the western intellectual and artistic orthodox, the influence of Plato's warning was far-reaching, especially in the empirical and didactic England. In the enlightening 18th century, with the theory of Tabula Rasa of John Locke, the English middle-class writers and artists self-consciously took the responsibility to improve the social morality. Hogarth painted modern moral stories like the fallen life of the country girl or the wastrel son from the upper class, because they could entertain and improve the public mind and be of public utility. Richardson wrote *Pamela* and *Clarissa* to assert the importance of virtue. Accompanying that, English literature and art developed a strong preference for realism, banishing the "illusive" art produced by the European artists for Charles I in 17th century, and nearly all the artists liked to claim their work had a true source in real life. The renowned Dr. Johnson even said, "I had rather see the portrait of a dog I know than all the allegories you can show me." (Pevsner, 1956, p. 31)

The emphasis on reason and didactic end was challenged in the 19th century with the upsurging of romanticism. Those romantic poets valued language in life, true feelings, the beauty of nature，and most importantly an elevated ego instead of the moral teaching or truth imitation instrument. Under the influence of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Coleridge cultivated "the active and creative role of mind in the formation of human knowledge". (Kitson, 2008, p. 318) He divided mind power into fancy, the primary imagination and secondary imagination, and applied it to his own writings like *The Ancient Mariner* and

Kubla Khan. With the invention of "Negative Capability", Keats joined the romantic justification for imagination but not the egotism. In contrast to Wordsworth's "overstated" subjectivity, Keats asserted a different quality of a poet, i.e. the ability to keep passive and dispossessed, the ability to be open and receptive. He compared it with bees gathering honey: "however, it seems to me that we should rather be the flower than the bee" ,"but let us open our leaves like a flower, and be passive and receptive, budding patiently under the eye of Apollo and taking hints from every noble insect that favours us with a visit." (Keats, Letter to Reynolds, 1818）Although Keats used the word "noble", he did not refuse the visiting of something mysterious or sinister as he talks about Shakespeare, "It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen." (Keats, Letter to Woodhouse, 1818) Actually, quite to Plato's disappointment, the romanticists in the later 18th and early 19th century seemed very much obsessed with the depiction of mysterious past, evil monsters, Gothic ghosts and wicked women. Therefore, what Keats really innovated was his stress of the poet's ability to abandon his thinking faculty or moral preference and being totally carried away by his wild imagination or sensual conceptions. If the other romanticists had lifted the subjective poet to a place of self-reference, and denied the outside criterion like truth or morality, Keats went further to legitimize the autonomy of art, throwing away the bondage of various utilitarian concerns of art, and calling for a self-sufficient territory of art, in which the poets could forget his social roles and the self-taking responsibility of moral lifting and could just be a passive blooming flower waiting for the visiting of the bee muse.

On the surface, the precondition of "absolute quietness, void-quietness(*Xu Jing* 虚静)" for Su Shi's "Transforming into Bamboos" seems very much the same with Keats' passivity, and the term "Transforming into Bamboos" looks so similar to Keats' "chameleon quality". However, they are essentially different in at least two perspective. First, for Su Shi, the state of "absolute quietness" or "void" doesn't mean a passive or inactive subject, like what he said in his poem *To The Master Can Liao* (送参寥师), "catching all the moves by being quiet, and containing everything by being void". "Catching all the moves" means a thorough observation of the object, "containing everything" means the huge covering scope of the mind. While Keats thought "As to the poetical Character itself, ...it is not itself-- it has no self-- it is everything and nothing- It has no character." (Keats, Letter to Woodhouse，1818) Therefore,"Negative Capability"emphasizes "the equality between subject and object, and a unity between the two." (Huang Qing & Xu Cheng, 2015, p. 95)It is very much the case of the Chinese Taoist existence which Su Shi had kept a distance from. Second, after this preparation period, the poet or painter of Su Shi will focus on the object with a creative exaltation, trying to catch the essence of the object with an active mind: "staring at it with a brush in hand, and seeing the picture in his mind," (Su, *On Wen Yuke's Painting of Slanting Bamboos in Yundang Valley*)and "when Yuke is painting bamboo / he sees nothing but bamboos / not only he sees nobody around / he himself is lost too."(Su, *Three Poems on Chao Bu's Collection of Yuke's Paintings*)Therefore, the Su Shi's poet or artist is a keen observer and initiative subject rather than a Keats' receiver. By being in a state of absolute emptiness, he drives away the interference of worldly affairs but not intelligence. It is not a state of "self-denying". Instead, it asks for a full alertness and exercise of the senses and reason. While Keats' "self-denying" advocates "the artist's quality to dissolve his ego, and

forget his own nature at the same time throwing himself into the world of creation and the life of the object" (Xu Yufeng, 2017, p. 74) to achieve a state of "no judgement, being mysterious, no exploring and seeking" (Keats, Letter to George and Tom, 1817) and record whatever floods into his mind like a dreamer writes down his dream.

3. Different Ways to Approach "Truth"

Su Shi's "Transforming into Bamboos" and Keats' "Negative Capability" both argue for an ambiguous "Truth" as the end of art creation, but their ways to approach "Truth" are different. For Su Shi, a sudden encounter with "Truth" might be achieved through years of hard practice and an active effort of the mind, and the "Truth" could be subtly conveyed through language or other means. His way to approach "Truth" is neither an aimless floating mind nor a total matter of craftsmanship, but a combination of keen observation and a dialectical realization through artistic media. But Keats' way is different. In order to reach "Truth" or rather "Beauty", Keats emphasizes a passive self, an imaginative mind, a sensitive soul and a chameleon quality catering to the objects. Like many of his contemporaries, Keats puts a full trust on language and creates a world of beauty through symbols.

Quite a revolutionary in his age, Keats' approach to reach "Truth" was through the abandoning of self and being fully occupied by the imagination and sensual feelings inspired by the object he was experiencing. What Keats advocated is to catch the "truth" through aesthetic experience, in which what is physical or imagined makes no difference. For him, both sensual and imagining experiences are beautiful, and beauty equals truth. Here Keats challenges the contemporary concept of "Truth", which means either the exact knowledge of the world or ideas lying behind it and should be obtained either through scientific probing or rational thinking. As a forerunner of aesthete, Keats considered the world as largely sensual and ideal. It exists because it can be felt and those feelings are holy and real. He embraced "... a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!" (Keats, Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 1817) Inspired by the earlier sentimentalists and Coleridge and Hazlitt, Keats tried to suggest a new method and a new aim for art creation.

Though criticized by his contemporaries, John Keats strongly opposed the New-Classical creed which had a strong tendency for literary utilitarianism, looked for moral instructions, and relied more on reason. He was bold enough to advocate the importance of uncertainty and was lingering in an area of sensual autonomy, which was the prelude of the later slogan of "art for art's sake". Because his "Truth" or "Beauty" is not always something pleasant or positive, and "the reality disclosed may be distressing and even cruel to human nature", (Bates, 1966, p. 243) Keats was content being staying at half way and understanding only part of the knowledge which he thought Coleridge could not do. He asked the poets to be like a chameleon, and ready to change their character according to the object they were addressing. In his writing of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Keats let his imagination rule:

What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape

Of deities or mortals, or of both.

In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

by posing a series of questions, Keats showed us a picture of his flowing imagination and deep involvement with the urn. The key words of Keats' poetics are "humility" and "disinterestedness", which mean to lower the ego and respects the objects or the idealistic dimension of the poet. In this poem, Keats focused on his imagination and emotion aroused by the design on the urn while renouncing the cognitive exploration of the Urn and the possible didactic instruction drawn from it. By inventing the term "Negative Capability", Keats insisted the way to achieve artistic "Truth" was through the denying of self. What Keats didn't say but obviously suggested was his trust in language, and his confirmation of the holiness of the poets was a confirmation of art itself. Through the forsaking of moral implications and intelligent reasoning, he put his focus on the beauty of forms and imagination, which he had clearly demonstrated in his poems.

Rather than the Classical clear and rational language, Keats valued more of the imaginative and sensual aspect of language, and was obsessed with the illusions and the acoustic, gustatory, and passionate textures it aroused. Keats' view of language was similar to Coleridge, who took language as something real: "the focal word has acquired a feeling of reality—it heats and burns, makes itself be felt." (Keach, 1993, p. 111) In his Biographia Literaria chapter XVII, Coleridge related language with imagination by saying "The best part of human language, properly so called, is derived from reflection on the acts of the mind itself. It is formed by a voluntary appropriation of fixed symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of imagination" (Coleridge, 1983, p. 54). In the same manner, Keats no longer thought language as an imitation of thought or ideas. He took it as real, "The spiritual is felt when the very letters and points of charactered language show like the hieroglyphics of beauty; - the mysterious signs of an immortal free masonry!" (Bates, 1966, p. 245) Like Shakespeare, Keats regarded language as something immortal, so as to the imagination, which was conducted through language, "The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream – he awoke and found it truth". (Keats, Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 1817) Besides language, Keats also believes in the power of affections, saying "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination". (Keats, Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 1817) From Plato onward, such human attributes as language, imagination and sentiments were belittled as something inferior. But Keats praised loudly the three attributes, and opened up a new field for art, in which the only monarch was Beauty.

However, Su Shi's "Transforming into Bamboos" resorts to a cognitive model called "Direct Encountering with the Tao (*Zhi Xun* 直寻)", which means a sudden understanding of the Truth after a long time of practice. Whenever you have reached this state, you could produce perfect art with ease. By watching the bamboos for years and observing every move of them carefully, Yuke had merged himself into those bamboos, which indicates the painter has reached the state of "Transforming into Bamboos". This moment signifies a "Direct Encountering with the Tao", by which the artist reaches a stage of freedom so as to catch the

spirit of the object and reproduce it quickly.

As has mentioned before, Su Shi's "Transforming into Bamboos" is a derivation of Zhuangzi's butterfly dream. But he did not follow Zhuangzi to detest the human society or deny the value of human life. Instead, he was celebrating it all the time, "He regularly took particular experiences of daily life and used them as a springboard to reflect upon larger issues that transcended his immediate needs and interests." (Chang & Owen, 2010，p. 416)And there is always an optimistic tone in his writing, which is originated from the Confucian idea for positive social participation that he was brought up with and was quite dominating among the Song intellectuals.

As a humanist, Su Shi did not praise genius, (though he himself was one). He valued human endeavor and hard practice in the seeking of "Truth". He criticized those who ignored the importance of hard practice and ended up with surface knowledge, "those who have ideas in mind but no skilled operation with hand, though considering themselves as able, found them at loss when confronting the real situation". (Su, *On Wen Yuke's Painting of Slanting Bamboos in Yundang Valley*) Besides of this origin, Su Shi also absorbed the Taoist emphasis on a clear mind and concentrating faculties from the story of Paoding (庖丁) and Lunbian（轮扁). These two famous craftsmen both claimed they had encountered Tao during their work. This "clear mind" reminds us of Keats' "Negative Capability" in that they both insisted on the exclusion of worldly concerns before the real start of art creation. However, their difference lies in the following process. While Keats allowed a possessed mind floating with sensations and imagination, Su Shi demanded a fully charged mind to get close to the Tao. Instead of giving up the control of the world, Su Shi's "Transforming into Bamboos" summoned highly alert senses and a meditating mind. Thus, it was not a total passive or numb condition for the faculties. The artist should be both an active participant and a rational observer, "to meditate with an empty heart, while try to catch the object and the rules regulating it." (Zhou Yanming, 2017, p. 67)

Unlike Zhuangzi's image as a mute sage opposing language, Su Shi had a dialectical attitude towards language. On the one hand, he did not share the Taoist contempt for language. The Chinese scholar Cao Shunqing has summarized this Taoist tradition this way: "through a kind of intuitive thinking to reach a state of 'catching the meaning while forgetting the language (得意忘言)' is the mysterious path Zhuangzi has pointed out to understand the whole mysteries of the universe." (Cao, 2010, p.23) While, Su Shi's approach to Truth was not through mere intuition and his aim was not the final truth or eternal law of the universe but something more specific and more human related. Therefore, he was never tired of expressing himself through language and left us a huge quantity of writings depicting his life. On the other hand, Su Shi also believed the Taoist saying "meaning is beyond words(言不尽意)", which questioned the absolute authority of language and asserted the best art could always convey more meaning than the mere form. This could explain why Yuke said "the bamboos in this painting are just several feet tall, but possess the air of the bamboos of thousand feet tall." (Su, *On Wen Yuke's Painting of Slanting Bamboos in Yundang Valley*) So the "Truth" was conveyed through the language while it went beyond the language, just as Su Shi said "Yuke has taught me this. Although I cannot make it, my mind can understand the truth in it,"

(Su, *On Wen Yuke's Painting of Slanting Bamboos in Yundang Valley*) which showed the Classical stand of Su Shi. He enjoyed poetry or paintings, but his pursuit was always something beyond.

4. Different Pursuits via Artistic Practice

The reason why these two concepts demand two different subjective involvement and two different ways of approaching Truth is that they are heading for different pursuits. What Su Shi inherited is the Confucian tradition that "writings are for conveying Truth (文以载道)" and " there must be something Substantial in writing(言之有物)"，namely, literature or art should be instructive and illuminating. However, this Truth or Substance does not always refer to the Confucian concern of moral teaching. For Su Shi, who bears a heavy influence from Taoism, it refers to the catching of the spirit of the object, namely the truth or law behind the object or phenomenon for one thing. Furthermore, this "truth" contains an ethical dimension. In the Song Dynasty, with the blending of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, the end of the art was called ***Li* (理)**，which was popularly mentioned in the contemporary intellectual world. Lin Yutang explained the term in this way:

The Sung school of philosophy was called the study of ***Li***. Under the influence of Buddhist metaphysics, the Confucianists turned their attention from rules and forms of government and society, and began to delve into problems of the mind and the universe. With the help of Hindu mysticism and metaphysics they began to speak of this ***Li***, which broadly means "reason" in nature and human nature, or "the laws of nature", or the "inner spirit of things." (Lin Yutang, 2009, p. 7)

So, The "Truth" or ***Li*** (理)is more of the essence of the object than just a formal similarity or naturalistic imitation. This can explain why language or other artistic media is not adequate to convey it, just as Laozi, the founder of the Taoism, says " the Tao that is utterable is not the eternal Tao(道可道，非常道)" . This denial of the validity of the language or any media of human beings shows a fundamental distrust towards anything artificial. In both *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, there are numerous stories to show the importance of keeping natural and simple or even mute because the Tao in the universe is something to be understood rather than expressed. Qian Zhongshu stresses this in his *Limited Views* (管锥编)，in which he compared the Chinese Tao with the Western Logos, points out that the meaning of the Greek logos contains both "truth (ratio)"and "language (oratio)", and infers that "rational" almost equals "lingual" (Qian, 1986, pp. 408-410). The Chinese Taoism holds that even the creator himself could not create according to a certain abstract knowledge (language) or sensual experience, because he has to reach the state of seeing without looking or hearing without listening, and is encountering the truth with his mind, just like the Paoding said, "I see the ox with spirit rather than eyes". (*Yangshengzhu* 养生主，*Zhuangzi*）Nevertheless, Su Shi's situation was more complex than just a combination of Taoism and Confucianism. He also absorbed a lot from Zen Buddhism during his exile. In the Zen culture, it is a common practice for the monks to learn Zen through questions and answers. It is more like an intellectual contest between monks to see who could be freer from human desires, and there will be several layers of Tao to be mounted, and the man who reaches the top wins. Similar to the creation of

arts, the superiority or inferiority of the artist are decided by which level of Zen or Tao he has reached through his artistic practice. It is usually the work with higher value conveys a truth more universal.

This dialectical quality of Tao also exists in *Zhuangzi*, where there are many interesting stories related to this kind of argumentation, in which there is usually one who claims he has grasped the Tao, while the other will go further to state another level of the Tao. Their argumentation often carries illuminating message. Su Shi practiced this dialectical thinking in his own life. When he was banished to Hainan Island, the most remote and rural area in the Song Dynasty without knowing "when could I leave this island?" He felt so frustrated and worried that he even began preparing his coffin and funeral. While in meditation, he realized that the whole world was on water, all the countries were surrounded by oceans, and the empire of course was also on water. On this account, "who is not living in an island?" (Zhu Bian, 2002, p.153) Therefore, Truth is something living within the object. It is not something absolutely objective, but an understanding of the universe through human intelligence and meditation. There is no absolute end in the understanding of the universe, just as there are different layers of natural law of the universe. The more you could immerse into the object and activate your mentality, the further you could go to reach it.

Compared with the slippery Tao in *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* and the metaphysical Zen from Buddhism, **Li** is something specific and could be caught through the diligent exploration of the subject. "The life realization of Su Shi draws from his true feelings towards the world around him and his pursuit of **Li** (理, the law of inevitability) lying behind it". (Xu Xiaofeng, 2019, p. 87) Therefore, the object you are observing or creating could be considered as the house or the symbol of *Li*, but not the *Li* itself. That is why Su Shi said, "Junzi(君子 a man with noble character) could convey implied meaning through objects, but would not stop at the objects."（Su，*Bao Hui Tan Ji* 宝绘堂记, p.1077）Although having both Taoist and Buddhist friends, Su Shi was a hidden humanist compared with the Taoist Zhuangzi and the Zen poet Wang Wei. With many years of exile life, Su Shi had cultivated a deep sympathy for the poor and ordinary people. His unfortunate experience built his unrestrained personality on the one hand, on the other endowed him with a more benevolent heart. Although being unjustly treated by the court, he was always a conscientious official who served his people with intelligence and loyalty. In other words, Su Shi is a philosopher of practice, never denying the dynamic role of human beings.

Thus, what Su Shi advocated in "Transforming into Bamboos" is the state of absorbing spirit of the bamboo while exercising mental faculty to the full through clearness, concentration and meditation. Therefore, the encountering with the **Li** really happens in the brain rather than in the art itself. At this ecstatic moment, the artist frantically follows his brain and takes record of what he has seen with his mind eye. Just as Su Shi described Yuke's explaining of his painting process, "you should have the bamboos in your mind before you really start, then when you hold your brush, you can see what you want to draw, and following it immediately, you can finish it within minutes." (Su, *On Wen Yuke's Painting of Slanting Bamboos in Yundang Valley*)Thus, with his outstanding ability of digestion and assimilation, Su Shi accommodated the untouchable Tao, the realistic Ren (仁 Benevolence) and the dialectical

Zen, and cleared a field for humanistic art, and pointed *Li* (理) as a new pursuit of artistic creation, which focused on the spirit of the object and was neither too close to the metaphysical Tao nor too close to the didactic Confucian *Ren*. All his life, Su Shi was standing on this humanistic middle zone and lived his life like the weather-beaten bamboos in Yuke's painting, who had endured a lot of tortures and sufferings, but still possessed a penetrating spirit of life. This enlightening revelation of great art is the pursuit of Su Shi's goal of writing.

But for Keats, the poems written under the state of "Negative Capability" themselves could be taken as the end of art creation, and what upset him was the Classical reason and the contemporary egotistical sublime. He strongly advocated the sensual or aesthetic aspect of art, stating his redefinition of truth bravely: "beauty is truth, truth is beauty." Whenever someone's feelings is inspired by the object or his imagination, he is experiencing the sense of **Beauty**, and equally he is catching the "**Truth**". As for the blurring of these two terms, his biographer Bates explains in this way: First, Keats doubted the absoluteness of any knowledge system, and encouraged the assistance of an open imagination; Second, this imagination is not something wild, but more like a "sympathetic identification " with the object, which means the subject should restrain his own ego and improve the "receptivity to reality"; third, an "active cooperation of the mind in which the emerging 'Truth' is felt as 'Beauty', and in which the harmony of the human imagination and its object is attained." (Bates, 1966，p. 249)

However, this article holds that Keats was more radical than this, because he went further to give up the ambiguous term of "Truth", and stated "with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration". (Keats, Letter to George and Tom，1817) This "every other consideration" of course includes "Truth" with its common implications as ideas, nature, reality or morality. This revolutionary gesture of Keats was also confirmed by the great romantic critic Brandes, who commented "his poetry does not contain that kind patriotic tone of Scott or Mill, or the revelation for freedom in Shelley or Byron; his poetry is pure art and imagination is his only inspiration." (Brandes, 1997, p.166) Therefore, although Keats claimed "What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth". We should be aware that Keats' "truth" means an "artistic truth" rather than a "scientific truth" or a "philosophical truth", "Unlike philosophy, which seeks truth through reasoning or other cognitive processes, poetry should insist on its artistic stand, i. e. seeking beauty through imagination and creating beauty through sensations." (Fu Xiuyan, 2021, p. 55)

How could a poor, disease ridden young man be so bold to challenge the traditional ideas of poetry and replace "truth" with "beauty"? Actually, for a penniless marginalized but talented intellectual, this gesture is possibly the only gesture he could make. With these radical expressions, Keats endowed significance to his unfortunate or "futile" life. It is known that the words on his tombstone are "here lies one whose name was writ in water". That could be read as his own note for his life. Since he had chosen a life of art rather than business, he had to give value to the "valueless" matters as sentiments, imagination and beauty. Also, the misunderstanding from friends and relatives and the underestimation of his published pieces from critics stimulated him to justify his profession and and his works. The Russian critic Plekhanov once shrewdly pointed out "the foundation of 'the art for art's sake' tendency put

forward by the artists and art enthusiasts is an unsolvable conflict between those people and their social environment" (Plekhanov, 1958, p.57).

In one letter, Keats expressed his boredom towards the over -exercise of the faculty of reasoning and thinking, declaring that no truth could be really achieved through this egotistic invasion of rationality into the realm of art: "how anything can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning". (Keats, Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 1817) In another letter, he not only agreed with Byron "knowledge is sorrow", and but went further to state "sorrow is Wisdom." (Keats, Letter to Reynolds, 1818) This were his sentiments upon his age, or a lament for the lost medieval innocence, organicism and simplicity in a roaring world of industrialization and urbanization. The uprising philistine middle class was breeding a culture of calculating, snobbishness and fierce competition. English citizens in the later 18th and early 19th Century enjoyed more material convenience with the sacrifice of feelings, dreams, mysteries and beauty. Under this situation, the circle of literati were tired of the pragmatism and the instrumental rationality of this age and were yearning for a field of sentiments and imagination, which was the soil for the Romantic movement.

Therefore, Keats was one of the few who first asserted the independent status of poetry and art, and the particular contribution of passivity, imagination and the sensitive receptions during the process of art creation. Only through the denial of intelligent vanity and controlling impulse, could the poet stand proudly as an inspired genius, driven only by his imagination and feelings. For Keats, the sense of Beauty equals Truth, and the truth lies in the true feeling and the expression through poetry (language) or other forms of art like an urn. Therefore, on the one hand Keats strongly opposed the exercise of reasoning or benefit counting. On the other hand he put his whole trust on language and creates a sensuous language style. In a way, we could see Keats' sanctification of art as a proletarian revolution in the domain of aesthetic ideology.

5. Conclusion

Both talented Men of Letters and "losers" in life, Su Shi and John Keats simultaneously turned to art for pleasure, satisfaction and worthiness. Unable to fit in their environment, they both took art as an important way of living. They were among those earliest writers in their own culture to promote literature into a nearly autonomous position and inject their whole life into it. However, due to the different cultural context and their personal experience, they each explored the different dimensions of art creation. Su Shi's "Transforming into Bamboos" was a product of his accommodation of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhist Zen, through which he exhibited his humanistic concern and his pursuit of an enlightening *Li* (理)during art creation. This rather classical view was largely a fruit of his twisty official career and his intellectual aspiration. The former gave him a compassionate heart for the grassroots while the latter endowed him the convenience to meditate and express. John Keats' "Negative Capability" was a radical expression from a deprived and marginalized individual under the crush of instrumental rationalism and utilitarianism. Through his famous equation of "Truth" to "Beauty", Keats invented a utopia of sensations and sentiments where he could find justice for his art and himself.

As what has been demonstrated, a comparative reading of the Western and Eastern literary theories could be both fascinating and enlightening. It shows how far and how close the two cultures could be. During this kind of studies, an upholding attitude should be a respect for the uniqueness and fluidity of each culture, and we have reason to look forward to a more fruitful landscape based upon their inter-communication and mutual understanding.

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Notes

Note 1. Unless otherwise noted, all the mentioned works of Su Shi in this article are from *Collected works of Su Shi.* Proofread by Kong Fanli. (1986). Beijing, China: Zhong Hua Shu Ju.

Note 2. Unless otherwise noted, all the mentioned letters and poems of John Keats are from *Complete poems and selected letters of John Keats.* http://www.modernlibrary.com. The Modern library, New York.

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