

THE COUNTRYSIDE IN THE SINOSPHERE'S MEDIEVAL POETRY

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Abstract

The Countryside in the Sinosphere's Medieval Poetry explores the literary and cultural relationships between East Asian countries, specifically Vietnam, Korea, and Japan, and their shared influences from Chinese literature during the medieval period. The research outlines how Confucian thoughts and concepts of nature and humanity influenced medieval poets in these countries, while also highlighting the unique cultural values embedded in their countryside-themed poems. Despite geographical differences, East Asian countries shared historical and social similarities that fostered the development of medieval literature, particularly poetry that depicted rural life and nature. The study examines how each country's medieval poetry reflected its own identity through its portrayal of nature and rural life. Korean sijo poems and Japanese haiku, for example, are distinct in their depiction of natural beauty and human emotions. Vietnamese poetry, influenced by classical Chinese and Nôm characters, depicted the rural landscape and life with simple yet profound imagery. It also discusses the impact of individual poets, such as Nguyễn Trãi and Nguyễn Khuyến, who vividly portrayed the countryside's seasonal changes and the lives of rural people. It concludes that medieval countryside-themed poetry in the Sinosphere is characterized by a deep connection to national culture and customs, reflecting the poets' love for their homeland and national pride. This body of work not only enriched literature with humanistic values but also demonstrated the unique identities and cultural exchanges within the Sinosphere.

Keywords: Sinosphere, Medieval poetry, Countryside, Cultural influence, Confucianism

In the Middle Ages, countries belonging to the Sinosphere (or the Chinese cultural sphere) had a special cultural and literary relationship. Vietnam, Korea, and

Japan were influenced to a certain extent by Chinese literature. Confucian thoughts and the concepts of nature and humans partly affected the sensibilities of

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medieval poets. Besides that influence, each literature also had its own identity and flow in its process of formation and development. Among them, medieval countryside-themed poems depicting nature and rural people always contained the unique cultural values of each nation.

1. THE BASIS OF THE SINOSPHERE'S MEDIEVAL POETRY ON THE COUNTRYSIDE

Although East Asian countries have geographical differences, they have similarities in the formation and development of medieval literature (from about the 10th century to the end of the 19th century). Korean medieval literature is from the Koryo period until the end of the Choson period (10th century - late 19th century), Japanese medieval literature is from the Nara period to the Meiji Restoration (from the 8th century to 1867), Vietnamese medieval literature is from the 10th century to the end of the 19th century. Furthermore, these countries also have similarities at some historical points. For example, they were all invaded by the Yuan army in the 13th century, and their feudalism ended when Western forces invaded them in the mid-nineteenth century. Due to historical and social similarities, East Asian countries shared things that were the premise for developing poetry, especially countryside-themed poetry.

Like the literature of other Sinophered countries, Vietnamese medieval literature was affected by

Chinese literary concepts: "Like Japanese and Korean literature, this was a literature belonging to the Chinese cultural sphere where Vietnamese, Japanese, and Korean literature played peripheral roles, and the focus for them to admire was Chinese literature" (Nguyễn Huệ Chi 2013, 997). On that basis, each literature "admired" Chinese literature according to its aesthetic vision, absorbing foreign influences and promoting its national spirit. Therefore, the aesthetics of Vietnamese medieval literature, like that of other "peripheral" countries, was both influenced by Chinese literature and carried the national spirit and signatures of the era.

Besides this, medieval poets were mainly from the feudal intellectual class, including kings, mandarins, monks, and intellectuals. On the one hand, poets were familiar with the official literary style and noble literature. On the other hand, their pens aimed at the reality in the countryside, rural scenes, and the countrymen's feelings. This literary trend went with the nationalization of literature, opening up a deeply humanistic lyrical flow, including poetry about the countryside.

Furthermore, because medieval Vietnamese Confucian scholars always emphasized origin, family, and ancestors, their pens were always aimed at the countryside. Therefore, "compared to other countries in the [East Asian] region, Vietnamese Confucian scholars were more inclined to be farmers, while Chinese Confucian scholars and Japanese

warriors had a stronger merchant and burgher character. This was also clearly reflected in each country's poetry" (Đoàn Lê Giang 2007, 233). In the Middle Ages, national characteristics were often associated with agriculture, "simple elements replaced lavish elements" (Nhật Chiêu 2010, 147). Rural beauty was a cultural characteristic of each nation. Even if one country was invaded, foreign elements could not replace the beauty that existed thousands of years ago. Poets, no matter what class they came from, always used their pens to show the beauty of nature and the national soul through simple, rustic images of the countryside. That created patriotism, pride, and national self-respect in medieval poetry: "Oriental poetry (specifically Vietnamese, Chinese, Indian, and Japanese ones) shows that each country's poetry was determined by the space and time in which they appeared" (Nguyễn Hữu Sơn 2007, 531).

Thus, although the countryside was not the official topic of Confucian literature, it was formed and developed during the medieval era in each nation, creating cultural diversity and a spirit of nationalization, and democratization in its literature.

2. DIVERSE AND COLORFUL PICTURE OF RURAL NATURE

Oriental culture considered nature as an important aesthetic object in artistic creation because it was one of the three elements creating a unified existence in the universe (Heaven - Earth - Humans). Poets found peace and sharing in nature, considering

nature as their friend to express their emotions. Nature became the standard for poets to describe human physical and spiritual beauty. Medieval people were closely associated with agricultural life, natural phenomena, and landscapes. "Which natural images were emphasized and appeared with high frequency in poetry depended on the natural landscape in each country and each region" (Trần Nho Thìn 2009, 29). Nature became the highest artistic level in the human world.

Poems about nature are poems on the natural world, such as the sky, earth, clouds, wind, trees, plants, birds, and flowers, among others, and human-made landscapes like temples and landmarks. All natural landscapes were viewed in a relationship with humans, being an endless source of aesthetics for poets of every time. Oriental literature often described nature in harmony and closeness; mountains, rivers, and other natural landscapes were always close to medieval people. Nature was not only a beautiful landscape to enjoy but also a place to protect people and a place for them to express their feelings because it was in harmony with people's inner world. Religious doctrines all mention and appreciate nature. In each nation and each period, nature had different aesthetic values.

Next to China and located in Northeast Asia, Korea was also influenced by Chinese culture. Korean poetry tends to express human emotions. However, whether nostalgia, sadness, or excitement, poets still had to use natural paintings to manifest their feelings. Sijo poems

of the late Koryo period described nature with its unique beauty. A short sijo poem was also capable of painting a unique picture of nature: "Pear blossoms, bright moon, and milky way/ Spring has come, rhododendrons are singing/ Amorous people do not sleep peacefully" (Lee Cho Nyon). Using only three short verses, the poet sketched a picture of the spring landscape with the sounds of birds and images of pear flowers. The colors and lines were harmonious in the bright scene of spring.

Sijo poems take readers into a different space, not the lively, simple nature of Vietnam, nor the quiet and meditative nature of Japan, but a magical mixture of feelings and scenes of Koryo. For example, the unique features of autumn in Northeast Asia were described in the poem *Autumn Landscape* by Kim Chon Taek in the 18th century: "White clouds, green streams around the valley/ Red maple leaves are more beautiful than spring scene/ Heaven gave me that scene." In this piece, "the poet believed that the image of the autumn mountain with brilliant colors of maple leaves was decorated by God and reserved for him. This showed that the poet immersed himself in nature, nature merged with the poet's mood" (Multiple authors 2009, 194). The poet "described the beautiful scenery of maple leaves in autumn and he said that the scenery of maple leaves in autumn was more beautiful than the flowers blooming in spring" (ibid.). It was also the familiar autumn color in ancient Oriental poetry, but in this poem, readers still see the unique beauty of Koryo.

Japanese poetry developed diversely and had many brilliant achievements, but it also had a simple and rustic nature according to the Wabi aesthetic principle, which considered simplicity and purity as beauty. Even the crudeness contained an unexpected magic. From renga poems to haiku ones, all portrayed Japanese peace and tranquility. Considering nature as the aesthetic object of literature, Japanese poets "depicted the mountain scene in the early morning of spring with fog, the scent of plum blossoms, and the banks of the Minasi River, then turned to autumn with the late moon and a late autumn afternoon in the fields" (Nhật Chiêu 2010, 161).

Cherry blossoms appeared many times in medieval Japanese poetry, representing the Japanese soul and the pride of the Japanese people. If Vietnamese poets appreciated lotus and apricot flowers, Japanese poets cherished cherry blossoms symbolizing purity: "Quietly on a deserted mountain/ A branch of cherry blossoms with only me/ Heaven and earth seem suddenly calm/ Flowers and I have been friends for many years" (Poem No. 66, Gyouson). 1205 witnessed the appearance of the new poetic masterpiece *Shinkokinshu* (including 1979 poems), which not only had the spirit of Yugen, and spiritual nuances but also the simple beauty of the peaceful countryside. In particular, a collection of Renga poems that appeared in 1356 included short but profound poems, delicately describing Minase village, a location

which was between Kyoto and Osaka. This 250-line collection combined the talents of three poets Sogi, Shohaku, and Socho: "There is still snow left/ Fog on the mountainside/ A spring afternoon" (Sogi); "The distant stream/ Passing through the village fragrant with plum blossoms" (Shohaku); "The wind blows from the river/ A green willow grove/ Hello spring" (Socho).

The above poems describe the mountainous landscape in early spring with fog, apricot blossoms, green willows, and the banks of the Minase River, a calm and peaceful scene against pure, white snow. It can be seen that although they all wrote about the changes of the seasons, each nation's poetry had its characteristics. In particular, Matsuo Basho's poetic diary *Oino Kobun* [A Record on a Pilgrimage Bag] (1688) and *Sarashina Kiko* [Diary of Sarashina Village] (1688) show a poetic and simple picture of the countryside. Matsuo Basho "praised nature passionately, earnestly calling for a return to nature" (Nhật Chiêu 2010, 265). Basho lived in a tent built by his students in Fukagawa. There are many banana trees in his garden. At the end of his life, the poet lived alone, quietly: "It was said that the door was closed all day long and it only occasionally opened when there was an 'event' like the morning glory flowers blooming on the hedge" (Nhật Chiêu 2010, 267). Nature in Basho's poetry was simple, having the beauty of rustic everyday life: "The tent is silent/ A woodpecker/ Knocks on the porch pillar."

Nature in rural Vietnam had common features of nature in East

Asia but also had unique characteristics. Typical authors of Vietnamese medieval literature were also authors who wrote delicately and artistically about nature. Nature in the countryside in medieval Vietnamese poetry was both simple and rustic, elegant and beautiful. The classical Chinese and Nom-character works by Nguyễn Trãi, Lê Thánh Tông and other poets of his time, Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, Nguyễn Du, Hồ Xuân Hương, Đặng Huy Trứ, and Nguyễn Khuyến, among others drawn idyllic, rustic, poetic, and lyrical countryside painting.

Nature in medieval Vietnamese poetry had characteristics appropriate to the climate and geography of each region. Nature in Nguyễn Trãi's works had the marks of Đại Việt in the 15th century, such as rafts of water spinach, malabar spinach, *oroxyllum indicum*, storks, cranes, which were familiar in the countryside. In medieval Vietnamese poetry, there were also many poems written about spring, but spring in Vietnamese poetry does not have white snow, pear flowers like in Korean, or cherry blossoms like in Japanese, but tiny chinaberry flowers in the spring rain: "Coots call at the end of spring/ Chinaberry flowers bloom in the light rain" (*Immediately Recording the Scene at the End of Spring*). Meanwhile, Nguyễn Khuyến sketched the unique features of the countryside in Northern Vietnam in the 19th century with close, familiar images in colorful four-season paintings. Readers can feel the heat of summer, the coldness of winter, and the clear air of autumn through his descriptions: "The autumn sky is high and blue/ The wind blows gently on

the ragged bamboo branches" (*On the Autumn*).

Spring was described by the poet with the image of "tilting bamboo hedges, rainy and gloomy sky" and "a lonely flamingo fleeing back from somewhere and perching on a tree in the field/ Vast green grasslands stretching to the riverbank" (*Inspiration in spring*).

It can be seen that nature in the countryside was a familiar topic in the Sinosphere's medieval poetry. Although the poets were influenced by Confucian ideas of composition, they had primitive sketches of rural scenes. Rural nature was reflected in different periods, regions, and poetic forms with distinct characteristics. The common point of those works was medieval poets' love for the homeland and national pride. The diverse and colorful pictures of rural nature partly outlined the landscape and people of each country in the East Asian region.

3. RURAL LIFE WHICH WAS CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH NATIONAL CULTURE AND CUSTOMS

The space in each nation's poetry had its unique features. Although poets from all countries wrote about the countryside, each country's countryside had its own cultural identity. The simple, rustic poems provide modern readers with knowledge about the culture and people of the past. From the perspective of the feudal class, "when writing about social life, especially the

life of farmers, medieval authors often evaluated and judged the politics of the time. In an agricultural country like our former country, referring to the people mainly focused on rural life, including farmers' activities and labor" (Trần Nho Thìn 2009, 130).

However, readers can feel the intimacy in the picture of the Japanese countryside, where the landscape and people were in harmony with each other, creating a quiet, peaceful space: "Around the mill/ There was white daisies/ A little bit of bran dust fly/ In the fisherman's tent/ Among the fish and shrimp/ There's a cricket/ I take off my thick cotton shirt/ Putting it on my bare shoulder/ Wearing a different shirt when the season changes." The images mentioned in the poem showed the natural beauty in harmony with daily activities. Japanese Haiku poetry had the Wanbi quality, which is defined as "the ordinary simplicity that we encounter in the humblest and seemingly poorest things" (Nhật Chiêu 2010, 273). Poems about the peaceful countryside showed the beauty of the people and the charming landscape of a country, a nation. In particular, poems about the countryside expressed the unique cultural characteristics of the Japanese soul: "Beauty is simplicity and purity" (ibid, 148).

A peaceful, hard-working life appeared in the morning mist: "At dawn, the sky is slightly bright/ The mist gradually melts/ Here and there are bright coops/ Sometimes hidden and sometimes visible on the Uji River" (Poem No. 64, Sadayori).

Overcoming the formulaic descriptions of Chinese canon, Japanese poets brought simple, rustic images of everyday life into poetry. Those images became a unique feature of Japanese culture.

In paintings of the Vietnamese countryside, there was not only colorful nature but also rural people and their working and spiritual lives. In their classical Chinese and Nôm-character poems, Nguyễn Trãi and Nguyễn Bình Khiêm wrote about the lives of “experienced farmers who understand farming well” and their elegant pleasures in the countryside. However, rural life was only expressed most fully and vividly in Vietnamese poetry in the second half of the 19th century. Among the poets of this time, Nguyễn Khuyến was the poet who lived most of his life in the countryside, so he understood countrymen’s working life, customs, and spiritual life. The scenes he described in the celebration of longevity, the Mid-Autumn Festival or Tet holiday evoked the warm, familiar traditional culture of the countryside: “Inside the house, people are busy wrapping up chung cakes/ Outside the door, others are excitedly inviting each other to share pork” (*Scene on the Tet holiday*).

As one of the cultural specialties of Vietnam, the year-ending market in villages was where rural people gathered warmly at the banyan tree or village temple: “Đồng Market is held on the 24th day of the 12th lunar month/ Is the market crowded this year?/ A little rain is better than cold/ How many wine tasters are there next to the wall of the village temple?” (*Đồng Market*).

Medieval poems about the countryside in the Sinosphere created poetry that was nationalistic and had a unique identity. The picture of rural nature and the lives of rural people was depicted with simple, realistic, and close lines and colors. They showed the national spirit and the poets’ love for their homeland. Medieval poetry about the countryside also demonstrated the tendency to nationalize literature and realize literary genres, which enriched literature with humanistic values.

Note

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