

Rural Idyll in Vernacular Landscape

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Abstract: The so-called “rural idyll” is considered the most poetic part of the traditional vernacular landscape. Although mostly appreciated by men of letters in their writings, rural idyll is a love song deeply rooted in local soil. It is local soil that is the ultimate producer of rural idyll. For a rural society, rural idyll also seems to be associated with “primitive.” There are significant cognitive differences in this regard between China and the West. Traditional Chinese rural society, full of soil fragrance and vitality, interacts with life and seasons to compose a harmonious man-earth symphony.

Keywords: rural idyll, soil fragrance, nostalgic landscape

Today a variety of government projects (urbanization, “Building a New Socialist Countryside,” etc.) are under construction in China, giving rise to issues such as similar urban view, shrinking agricultural areas and the loss of rural heritage. Primarily reflecting the will of planners, architects and engineers, these projects incur some criticism from others. Of course it is no use simply criticizing or blaming the experts concerned, who may ask in reply, “Where were all those cultural scholars, historians, anthropologists, folklorists and artists before? Why did they not say something earlier?” No one told those experts in advance what should be reserved, what elements should be kept and what should not be covered. In this sense, their retort is justifiable. To make it clear, perhaps more detailed and in-depth investigation and research is needed. It is precisely under such circumstances that the “reconstruction of rural landscape in China” has come into being. According to this program, a large number of well-trained scholars are expected to visit the vast

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① The countries or regions formulating commercial code separately from civil code include Germany, France, Japan and Macao (China). The countries or regions formulating only civil code without commercial code include Italy, Switzerland and Taiwan (China).

② Dong & Li, 2017.

rural areas of China, or rather the “simple and unadorned landscape” where they will investigate, discover and collect materials for compiling a “detailed catalogue of rural landscapes in China” with traditional characteristics. They will also listen to local people to learn about the past, present and future of their hometown landscapes, which can then be connected to form a historical epic of local life.

1. Rural Idyll

The term “rural idyll” as we use should be understood in a modern sense. It is a positive depiction of a “never-land” like vernacular landscape. It is also imbued with a certain “nostalgia.” In the West, rural idyll had another association, i.e. a utopia where one could escape the hustle and bustle of urban life. Against the backdrop of ruthless modernization, some people may have some doubts. Does “rural idyll” still exist today? Can the view depicted by ancient poet Du Mu in the verse, “A cowherd points to a cot mid apricot flowers.”^① still be found today? What about the carefree and leisurely lifestyle depicted by another ancient poet Tao Yuanming in the verse, “I pick fenceside asters at will; Carefree i see the southern hill.”^②

If “poetic landscape” was an ideal picture for ancient men of letters, particularly for those who withdrew from officialdom and led a seclusive life, such a poetic landscape somewhat embodied a “free and detached” life philosophy. According to Western scholar Malcolm Andrews, idyll is a way for people to imagine escaping from the pressure of urban or court life into a more innocent world. It is a way for people to escape into their painstakingly imagined innocent world which is in stark contrast with the reality of their complicated urban society (Andrews, 2014, p. 6). He also holds idyll in the golden era serves for nostalgic and Utopian purposes and that emotions evoked by nostalgic idyll are related to the idealized memory of one’s childhood (Andrews, 2014, p. 8). Thus it seems that those who create “painting-like” enchanting idylls tend to be men of leisure. They inject their “ideal beauty” into their literary and artistic scenarios and plots (Andrews, M. 2014, p. 56), reveling in their self-created beautiful views. In the West, “picturesque idyll” themes are primarily roots in the historical experiences of landscape paintings—both in arts and social spheres. In this sense, idyll as a symbol of reclusion has been shared by both Chinese and Western poets and artists. Still, each person has an “idyllic version” unique to themselves. After all, rural idyll, combining “Li Sao-style” passion with a poetic carefree attitude, is usually based on one prerequisite—one’s personal encounters.

If the rural idyll focuses on individual’s poetic sentiment or nostalgia, the so-called vernacular landscape tends to appreciate rural idyll as a real view. We believe that idyll does exist in a traditional rural society. Yet, can rural idyll still exist in the vernacular landscape in the context of urbanization? Here is the logic. If there is idyll, it can only exist in the countryside; its rural existence is based on soil, without which, idyll will not be nourished. Ultimately, soil is the very source of idyll. In *Peasant Life in China: A Field Study of Country Life in the Yangtze Valley* by Fei Xiaotong (also known as Hsiao-Tung Fei), there is a passage:

The relative inexhaustibility of the land gives the people a relative security. Although there are bad

① Quoted from Du Mu’s Qingming: “A drizzling rain falls like tears on the Mourning Day; The mourner’s heart is going to break on his way. Where can a wineshop be found to frown his sad hours? A cowherd points to a cot mid apricot flowers.”

② Quoted from Tao Yuanming’s Drinking: “In people’s haunt i build my cot; Of wheel’s and hoof’s noise i hear not. How can it leave on me no trace? Secluded heart makes secluded place. I pick fenceside asters at will; Carefree i see the southern hill. The mountain air’s fresh day and night; Together birds go home in flight, What revelation at this view? Words fail if i try to tell you.”

years, the land never disillusioned the people, since hope for plenty in the future always remains and is not infrequently realized. If we take the other kinds of productive work, we shall see that the risks involved in them are much greater. The sense of security is expressed in the following statement made to me by one of the villagers: "Land is there. You can see it every day. Robbers cannot take it away. Thieves cannot steal it. Men die but land remains." The incentive to hold land is directly related to the sense of security. The farmer says, "The best thing to give to one's son is land. It is living property. Money will be used up but land never." (Fei, 2006, pp. 125–126)

Therefore, for traditional Chinese village landscapes, those praising the land fall into the category of poetic ode, while those reminiscing the lost idyllic land fall into the category of nostalgic elegy. Today, with regretful loss of land as the dominant theme, nostalgic elegy has become the trend.

Specific vernacular landscapes are "dynamic." They refer to people's real-life scenes and also "vigorous" landscapes that contain traditional villages and natural scenery. The picture "Under a small bridge near a cottage a stream flows" (as depicted by Ma Zhiyuan in his verse) is very poetic (see Picture 1) and realistic (see Picture 2). That is what real villages are like. Being a visual pleasure, rural idyll determines a landscape's various possibilities and follows the laws of nature. A landscape in which human factors are subordinate to, compatible with, and integrated into nature (rather than imposed on nature) is without doubt deemed harmonious and delightful. The view "Under a small bridge near a cottage a stream flows" sets a good example in this regard. Such a landscape is described as "picturesque" and considered "suitable for a painting." In Western academic history, "picturesque" once became a special theme of research. Modern study of "picturesque" originates from *Italian Landscape in Eighteenth Century England* by Elizabeth W. Manwaring, published in 1925 and *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* by Christopher Hussey (published in 1927) (Andrews, M. 2014, p. iii). By contrast, in the history of Chinese painting, such a special theme of research can hardly be traced. Nevertheless, there has been no lack of rural idyll in China's vernacular landscapes and it is an important part of traditional Chinese painting.

There are plenty of idyllic vernacular landscapes in China. And each ethnicity, region, natural environment and culture has their own version of a "never-land" vernacular landscape, where there



Picture 1. Wu Guanzhong's Painting



Picture 2. Jiuzhou Village, Jingxi, Guangxi (Photographer: Huang Ling)

are mountains, rivers, scenery and emotions. The view “Under a small bridge near a cottage a stream flows” was much appreciated by ancient Chinese for its unique charm behind the overall tone of melancholy and loneliness. This aesthetic theme originates from poetic Ma Zhiyuan’s sanqu poem *Autumn Thoughts*, which goes like this, “Over old trees wreathed with rotten vines fly evening crows; Under a small bridge near a cottage a stream flows; On an ancient road in the west wind a lean horse goes; Westward declines the sun; Far, far from home is the heartbroken one.” Expressing emotions and feelings by depicting views applies to “designers” of vernacular landscapes, as well as sentimental men of letters.

One reason for men of letters to idealize or literalize rural idyll is the separation of poetry from real life. We can be certain that idyllic landscapes, views and scenery were originally depicted in the ballads sung by villagers, farmers and peasant women, for which there is no reason to “mistake” them for literary creation. According to French scholar Marcel Granet, “Poets often depict human feelings with the help of natural scenes, which is a familiar practice to us. Love-themed poems are generally set in natural scenery. Moreover, idyll is traditionally supposed to have been crafted with the help of vernacular landscapes. If so, did the creators of the *Book of Songs* (*Shih-Ching*) include landscape themes in their songs purely out of rhetoric consideration?” (Granet, 2005, p. 38) Granet’s question touches upon a “dividing line” that needs to be clarified: Can the songs included in the *Book of Songs* be considered the creations of men of letters? Take the “Creeping Grass”—the 20th Chapter of “Odes of Zheng” in the *Book of Songs* as an example.

Afield the creeping grass,
With crystal dew overspread.
There’s a beautiful lass,

With clear eyes and fine forehead.
When I meet the clear-eyed,
My desire's satisfied.

Afield the creeping grass,
With dewdrops overspread.
There's a beautiful lass,
With clear eyes and fine forehead.
When I meet the clear-eyed,
Aid the grass let's hide. (Wang, 2006, p. 127)

This is a love song about dating in a certain agricultural season, probably mid-spring, which can be inferred from the depiction in the *Rites of Zhou*, "In mid-spring, there is a gathering for single men and women." (Granet, 2005, pp. 25-26) The inevitable connection between rural romantic encounter and the farming season indicates this was a song of laborers. After all, men of letters did not have to accommodate their meetings to the farming season. In fact, most works included in the *Book of Songs* (particularly those in the part of "Airs of the States") were first created by ordinary laborers and were later "polished" and refined by men of letters. As for "the landscape theme being considered a calendar proverb, there is nothing to be surprised about, for this view substantially supports the moral interpretation of poetry." (Granet, 2005, pp. 39) Granet's argument is sure to trigger debates.

Historian Gu Jiegang once argued, "The initial forms of poetry were folk songs and ballads, which were equivalent to later works like *Mountain Songs (Folk Songs)* and *Wu Geng*. Or perhaps folk songs and ballads were collected by kings of ancient times on their tours of inspection across their vassal states to reflect the will of local people. The best ones selected were sung at the court and ancestral temples, or adapted to dance music and played locally. While entertaining audiences, they also sent certain exhortative messages. At all times and in all countries, people tend to find truth, beauty and goodness in literary and artistic works. They first find beauty and then goodness behind the beauty, and can then tell good from evil. In this way, literary and artistic appreciation naturally moves towards exhortations for good and against evil. Moreover, through Confucius' deletion and editing, the *Book of Songs* eventually became a Confucian classic. Since Confucius, Confucian scholars have attached great importance to sublime words with profound meanings. Thus, the 300 pieces with implied comparisons in the *Book of Songs* were in nature no different from their original forms. Excessive and forced interpretations of 'implied comparisons' would only be laughed at by their ancient creators." (Gu, 1997, p. 18) It can be inferred from Gu Jiegang's inference that "idyll" originates from "vernacular landscape" and that poetry initially thrived in the countryside. There is no need for much scholarly elaboration.

2. Nostalgic landscape

Rural idyll, be it nostalgic or allegoric, is set in a specific context. The significance and meaning of the picture "Under a small bridge near a cottage a stream flows" can change substantially with time and space. And people's view of idyll is increasingly changed by the rapid advancement of urbanization. In fact, real idyll only exists in a traditional rural society, where people lead a self-sufficient simple life and do farm work

according to the seasons. Such an idyll is based on the natural and stable environment of a “static community.” “Unlike stock farming and industry, agriculture directly takes resources from the land. Nomadic people can migrate to wherever water and grass are available and never settle down; industrial workers can choose where to live; farmers, however, cannot move as their crops are planted in local soil. Peasants’ rusticity results from a lack of population mobility” (Fei, 1998, p. 7).

In a certain sense, rural idyll is like a painting on the wall, presenting a static rural state, a formative idyll, a strong tie between farmers and the soil, and a harmonious homeland. This rural “static,” which represents tradition, is in contrast with urban “dynamic,” which represents modernity. However, modern rural society is now undergoing accelerated urbanization. Influenced by “dynamic urban area,” the once “static rural area” is forced to quicken its pace of movement. Meanwhile, traditional idyll, with its inherent rural nature and attribute, follows the step of movement. Due to urbanization, rural idyll exhibits special rural significance and value (Rapport, & Overing, 2000, p. 315). In a relatively static traditional context, rural idyll is a real-scene depiction, while against the backdrop of accelerated mobility, idyll becomes a symbol of a beautiful by-gone era. This is “nostalgia,” which turns once static idyll into a motion picture in the roar of today’s “high-speed trains.”

“Static” landscapes evoke nostalgia. Accordingly, rural idyll often reminds people of the good old days. Rural idyll is like a vernacular landscape for nostalgia, an eternal human pursuit. Nostalgia is about reminiscing over a “static view” of previous beauty. The word “nostalgia” is a learned formation of a Greek compound, consisting of *nostas* (νόστος, meaning “homecoming”) and *algia* (ἄλγος, meaning “pain” or “ache”). It describes an anxiety for home (Zhao, 2009, p. 13). Rural idyll thus corresponds to “static landscape,” namely, traditional vernacular landscapes consisting of picturesque countryside views and homelands. The so-called “dynamic landscape,” however, is indicative of the lapse of time, particularly the rapid urbanization in modern society, and it leaves idyll behind as a “view outside the train window.”

Modern “dynamic landscape” highlights mobility, a modern attribute which ruthlessly drags all previous matters, values and memories into a motion picture. This mobility primarily concerns population movement, particularly mass tourism. Through urbanization, mobility has become the norm for the exchange of information, personnel, logistics and capital and integrated traditional vernacular landscapes into the general route of social development. A large number of urban residents have swarmed into the countryside to experience a traditional idyllic life. For example, after the WWII, rural tourism emerged to be the most popular form of leisure and recreation for urban residents in the UK. In 1979, some 37 million people had at least one rural tour; as of 1994, the total number of tourists to the countryside has exceeded 1 billion. Rural tourism has become part of urban residents’ life and vernacular landscapes have become a “permanent cultural heritage landscapes” in a broader range (Rapport, & Overing, 2000, pp. 315-316). Such a trend inevitably brings many social issues and triggers debates. For example, the Western “exchange visits,” resulted from a traditional urban-rural structure and brings more farmers to cities and urban residents to the countryside at an increasingly higher frequency. Some scholars therefore hold that the notion of “city/countryside” should be replaced with “center/periphery.” (Grillo, 1980, p. 15) In fact, in Western society, the urban center-rural periphery structure has remained their paradigm for social structure. It is just that the modern context brings the two parts closer than ever before and blurs the urban-rural boundary. Again take the UK as an example. There, ruralism and urbanism no longer mean stark lifestyle differences (Rapport, & Overing, 2000, pp. 318).

Ruralism has become a new fashion of life. Yet, ruralism means embracing an idealized lifestyle which is poetic and static. As social mobility increases and urbanization “ferociously” advances, idyll will descend to a “nostalgic landscape.” Also, the rampant, uncontrolled construction of urban “imperial landscapes” (Yu, 2014, pp. 133-134) can override urban-rural harmony, enslave traditional vernacular landscapes, and eventually reduce vernacular landscapes to “landscapes of grievances.”

If rural idyll refers in particular to vernacular landscapes, what makes it different from urban or artificial landscapes is probably an overall landscape in harmony with nature. The wild flowers and grasses are distinct external features. Flowers and plants which are grown by farmers still grow in a natural environment, rather than greenhouses in cities. The word “nature” in this paper is a limited concept, and absolute “nature” refers to wilderness, namely, a “place of wild beasts” (Nash, 2012, p. ii) without any artificial interventions. The “nature” in rural society has in fact been “domesticated” by humans with “grafting” techniques. The history of agriculture can be traced back to the early period of human civilization. “Domesticated species,” a rather one-sided term—that grammar again—that leaves the erroneous impression that we are in charge. We automatically think of domestication as something we do to other species, but it makes just as much sense to think of it as something certain plants and animals have done to us, a clever evolutionary strategy for advancing their own interests.” (Pollan, 2005, p. 4) Man’s historical collaboration with flora and fauna enables “mutual-aid evolution.” And it is believed that true domestication only began when the Chinese discovered grafting.^①

3. Rural Fun

The so-called rural idyll necessarily and inevitably forms a delightful contrast with the countryside. In nature, the “untamed” and the “artificial” can historically “speak to each other,” which has three implications. First, what rural idyll represent is “the natural” (natural environment, animals and plants), as opposed to “the artificial.” Second, what rural idyll refers to specially is “the rural,” as opposed to “the urban.” Third, what rural idyll targets is “the past” (previous experiences and historical memories), as opposed to “the modern.” In general, rural idyll contains a diachronic process, with artificial modification of nature and corresponding technology being important media.

One chapter of *Natural History* by French naturalist D. Buffon is entitled “Man Discovers and Transforms Nature.” The following passage concerns China, “Scientific technology-based useful techniques and skills were retained; the growing population and density made tillage even more important...The ancient Chinese empire became the first to emerge; almost in the same period, the Atlantis Empire came into being in Africa, followed by the emergence of empires such as Egypt and Ethiopia in Asia and Africa and then the establishment of the Roman Empire as a symbol of European civilization. It has been only some 3,000 years for humans to combine their power with natural power and expand to most parts of the earth.” (Buffon, 2013, p. 201) Domesticating “wildlife” is a long process. During this process, being “wild” and being “domesticated” has become relative references. For example, today free-range chicken is relative to captive chicken. People

① Pollan, 2005, p. 26. Original text: “True domestication of apples began (around 2000 BC) when the Chinese discovered grafting (inserting a cutting from one tree into the trunk of another, so the cut piece lives on and bears the same fruit as the tree from which it was taken).”

tend to regard free-range chicken as “wild,” although they are essentially different from real “wild chicken.”

The same is also true of plants. The prehistoric era was the “childhood” of mankind; yet it accounts for 99.99% of human history. According to findings at prehistorical sites in China, there were a rich variety of wild grains, seeds and fruits for food, including water chestnuts, acorns, coix seeds, hempseeds, wild rice, gorgon fruit, pagoda tree seeds, chestnuts, Chinese plums (*prunus mume*), apricot plums, apricots, plums (*prunus salicina*), wild grapes, cherries, peaches, persimmons, Chinese-dates, wild jujubes, elm seeds, walnuts, pecans, hickory, hackberry, hazelnuts, pine nuts, pears, hawthorn berries, choerospondias axillaries, melons, soybeans and olives. Of these wild grains, seeds and fruits, those instantly edible (fruits and nuts) were preferred and were the first to be eaten by people. Of all foods remaining, which were found at the sites of the early and middle period of the New Neolithic Age, starch-rich fruits took up a large proportion, indicating the purpose of wild plant gathering then was to ease the shortage of staple food grains. In the late New Neolithic Age, food composition gradually changed (Yu, 2011, pp. 10-11). China’s existing evidential documents about food mainly go back to the agricultural age. Traditional social production modes, the political structure and the ethical order were “agriculture-based.” After all, “agricultural producers in the past relied heavily on the weather and had to pay special attention to natural factors. Man cooperated with the weather. There was a man-nature ‘symbiosis’ and coordinated relationship” (Hsu, 2006, p. 58). A more positive expression of “relying on the weather” can be “making the most of the universe.” This expression reveals the fact that people then relied on nature’s nourishment for survival and development. In this sense, rural idyll contains rural fun, with its indicative value being “extensive nourishment” from the “natural fun of nature.”

Regarding the current trend of mass tourism, rural idyll seems to have become a “freehand” interpretation from a perspective of neorealism. Rural idyll becomes one of the many “tourist motives” and a reason for a rural tour. More specifically, urban residents regard the suburb countryside to be a holiday resort for relaxing after work and for experiencing the picturesque idyllic landscape. After all, the charm of the vernacular landscape lies in its being natural. For example, rural natural plantscape is substantially different from urban artificial plantscape. Rural plantscape is the outcome of natural ecology and therefore is authentic and real. It is full of vigor and vitality and has nothing to do with dullness and gloom. Unlike mankind, plants are the most obedient to nature. Their seeds sprout and flowers bloom in due course, showing people the charm of complying with nature and warning them not to go against it.

Modern tourism’s deliberate emphasis on and return to vernacular landscapes have various explanations, such as urban residents’ emotional attachment to a home-like countryside, their boredom of “prison-like” urban life, their desire to flee, their longing for experiencing nature and the previous “slow life,” their reminiscing for their “picturesque” childhood, as well as their appetite for quality natural food. These elements are combined to form the “rural fun” of mass tourism, which is perhaps the real-world version of rural idyll.

4. Discovering the Value of “Primitive”

The purport of idyll as “poetic landscape” is different between China and the West. From a Western perspective, if a vernacular landscape necessarily contains “primitive” elements, rural idyll should be considered a rhetoric and also basic tone of “vernacular.” Yet, “primitive” is something that is indeed hard to grasp and control, as it has been under too much “artificial influence.” In Western history, the word “primitive”

refers not so much to the early period of human evolution (historical expression) as to a political division—pushing “primitive” to “otherness” (the barbarous), which is opposite to the center of Europe, namely, “selfness” (the civilized). Such ignorance of the “barbarous” restricts similar concepts at the level of political division, rather than objectively reflecting the “childhood” of human history. If “barbaric” is purely used to describe the “childhood” of human history, objective review may be entirely different. Regarding this, Buffon once commented as follows:

An authentic barbarian (such as the boy raised by bear recorded by doctor Bernard Connor, the young man growing up in the Hanoverian forest, or the little girl discovered in the French woods) may be a miracle for a philosopher. By observing such an authentic barbarian, one can correctly estimate the power of basic instinct, learn the barbarian’s true inner thoughts, and differentiate all his or her instinctive movements. Perhaps one can also find more gentleness, inner peace and indifference to fame and wealth in the barbarian than in oneself. Or perhaps one can find them more ethical than civilized people. Ugly deeds are only committed in a civilized society (Buffon, 2013, p. 96).

Through a comprehensive review of different expressions of “primitive” and “barbaric,” we discovered that the word “primitive” is endowed with various meanings. In the history of art landscape, the “primitive” style has formed a delightful contrast with the “barbaric” style and become the theme of art history reflection and retrospect particularly after the 16th century (Gombrich, 2016, p. 55). For art landscapes, such a simple and unadorned feature is an irony to those “rotten” and “extravagant” artistic purports. Meanwhile, it is also opposite to the “spirit” pursued by Christianity in the West. In the face of dignified and solemn divinity, the “primitive” sometimes evolves into an opposition between the human spirit and the body (Gombrich, 2016, p. 152). The “excessiveness” in Western humanism has directly resulted in two disguised forms. Basically, “primitive” is mostly opposite to divinity, orthodox, dignity and elegance. Having experienced a period of extravagant, hypocritical and rotten art landscapes, people would return to the simple and unadorned primitive landscape. Under such circumstances, “primitive” becomes a cure for civilization. The two disguised forms often intertwine. The idyllic vernacular landscapes are no exception. In China, in the tide of urbanization, people today prefer to live in cities. The triumphant advancement of urbanization, however, also prophesies a return to the countryside. Urban extravagance will surely evoke people’s desires for a return to the countryside because rural primitive is inherently part of human nature.

In *The preference for the primitive*, E. H. Gombrich said that it was Giambattista Vico that told us in modern terms that the loftiness of Homer’s epics is a direct representation of the primitive nature of the mind and the early period of human history (Gombrich, 2016, p. 70). The “primitive man” concluded by Vico connects inanimate objects with self-experience and belongs to a type of “primitive nature of mind.”

Farmers in Latin regions often say their field is “thirsty,” “producing fruits” and “letting grains plump.” Our villagers also say plants are “in love,” grapes “grow madly,” and trees with outflowing resin are “crying.” Countless examples like these can be found in any language. And they are all based on the generally acknowledged truth: humans ignorantly sets themselves as standards for the universe and often consider themselves to be the entire world (Gombrich, 2016, p. 71).

If this logic is tenable, the “primitive nature of the mind” and “rural soil” have initial basis for expression. In whatever dimension, poetic effect cannot exist without the “primitive”—the “homestead” for man to survive and live. People do not have a preference so much for primitive as for nature. After all, “returning to

basics” is man’s most authentic physiological and psychological need.

For much of history, “primitive” shared the same metaphorical meaning as “barbaric.” From the perspective of traditional anthropology, particularly under the influence of the early-stage “theory of evolution,” “primitive” meant “barbaric” (Peng, 2010; 2017). “Primitive” was the opposite of “civilization.” Anthropology focuses primarily on the study of “primitive culture,” which can be exemplified by a number of influential anthropological works, including *Primitive Culture* by Edward Tylor, *Primitive Art* by Franz Boas, *Are We Civilized? Human Culture in Perspective* by Robert Heinrich Lowie, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* by Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, *Primitive Mentality* by Levy-Bruhl, *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* by B. Malinowski and *The Savage Mind* by Claude Levi-Strauss. “Primitive culture” is the foundation of primitivism and is directed against “modernism.” Yet, few scholars distinguish it on a chronological basis. Instead, they mainly rely on the establishment of a “dialogical category” (Myers, 2006, p. 268). Colin Rhodes points out that “the word ‘primitive’ generally refers to someone or something less complex, or less advanced, than the person or thing to which it is being compared” (Rhodes, 1995, p. 13).

Art historians tend to conclude the multiple features presented by primitive art as “primitivism.” (Gombrich, 2016, p. 269-295) Their various attempts to elaborate the definition fail to satisfy most scholars. One reason for their failure lies in primitive art’s inability to represent the entire meaning of primitivism in an all-round way. As Clifford Geertz commented on Gombrich’s *The Preference for the Primitive*, the so-called “primitive art” is not a matter of a return to earlier, simpler “forms of mentality,” for “the primitive” is neither a rudimentary stage in universal history nor a juvenile one in individual development (Gombrich, 2016, p. x), nor is it a “law of gravity” for the primitive (Gombrich, 2016, p. 282). According to Geertz, “primitive,” as a stage of human history, is the beginning of human civilization; it is not the opposite of the “civilization” that emerged later, but has an inheritance relationship with it. In fact, there has been a paradox in this regard in the studies of Western civilization history. The paradox lies in placing primitive cultures in the “childhood” of human history while regarding it in the opposite way for Europe-centered “civilization.” Below is a representative view:

The theory of evolution endows “primitive” with a new meaning. It now refers to the beginning of human civilization. From a global perspective, the cultures that travellers are exposed to may be graded according to their control of nature to form a pyramid-like structure. From bottom to top, the first echelon is floating hunter-gathers (e.g. bushmen), followed by agricultural people and later well-organized ancient Oriental empires with technical achievements, and on top of that structure are White Europeans and North Americans in modern times (Gombrich, 2016, p. 206).

This so-called “primitive” is nothing more than “otherness.” Such a paradox is constantly seen on different occasions and in different areas. Yet, those who are reflective of it or even against it are precisely the creators of “primitivism,” i.e. Westerners. There are well-ground reasons to doubt whether European and American scholars can define real “primitivism” in an objective and impartial way, although a few of them may have spoken highly of primitive art. For example, Goethe considered primitive art to be the “only real art” in his “On German Architecture” (*Von deutscher Baukunst*). Even so, this minority group are no exception to the doubt (Gombrich, 2016, p. 86), as they remain on the stance of “selfness.” In such a historical context, rural idyll is reduced to an object of “discourse” entertainment, which should be especially guarded against.

Returning to the idyll-like vernacular landscapes in current China we can perhaps shift our focus from the poetic expressions of men of letters to the harmony between men and land, the harmony-enabled magic

seasonal transition and change, as well as the “picturesque” beauty (enchanted views and scenery) that come with seasonal changes. If so, rural idyll can be understood as a love song sung by people in their homelands. Should rural lands be lost one day, the modern concrete jungle would never be able to evoke the melody of rural idyll.

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