On Dickinson’s Poems from the Perspective of Taoism

Ji SHI
Southwest Jiaotong University

Emily Dickinson (1830－1886) is one of the most important American poets. For more than 100 years, she is gradually regarded as a classic poet of the world. In Dickinson’s 1775 poems, we can feel the aesthetic sense which involves Christian culture, American transcendentalism, the influence of many Western great writers, etc. Greatly influenced by American transcendentalism, many of Dickinson’s poems express the truth both in nature and human soul. This has aroused the interest of the Chinese audience to appreciate Dickinson’s poems.

Under the differences between the different contexts of American culture and Chinese culture, the Chinese audience will appreciate and study Dickinson’s poems from both American and Chinese perspectives. It is important for the Chinese to interpret Dickinson from her background, her religious ideas, and American transcendentalism. Simultaneously it is inevitable to assimilate Chinese aesthetic concepts, especially for the common human spirit. In Chinese cultural context, the
aesthetic ideas are rooted from the philosophies of Taoism of Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, the ideas of Confucius, and many other ancient philosophers and poets, among which Zhuang Zi is one of the most influential philosophers. In Zhuang Zi’s prose, some ideas seem coincidental in Dickinson’s poems. From the aspect of comparative literature, the interpretation of Dickinson’s poems in Chinese cultural context, consciously or unconsciously involves the Chinese native sense.

I. A Sense of Nativeness in Interpretations of Dickinson’s Poems

Dickinson lived reclusively in Amherst and persistently writing poems all her life, like traditional Chinese fragrant Irises and orchids in the deep and secluded valley without being appreciated by anyone. Many scholars regard Dickinson as a classic poet and a philosopher of life. In The Western Cannon, Harold Bloom said, “Except for Shakespeare, Dickinson manifests more cognitive originality than any other Western poet since Dante.”[2] The reason why Dickinson’s poems have impressed the audience is that she shows her originality in exploring the truth in both nature and spirit. Although Dickinson did not write any philosophical work, her 1775 poems connote many philosophical ideas about truth, beauty, and life.

Since the publications of Dickinson’s poems after her death, researches on Dickinson have experienced for more than one hundred years. Western scholars have extended researches on Dickinson into the fields of her biography, the 19th American society, religion, culture, language, poetry, philosophy, feminism, etc.. They have paid much attention to Emerson’s transcendentalism embodied in her poems to explore the realization of human beings and the world.[3] Since the 1980s, some researches have achieved valuable results and brought new insights to Dickinson. For example, David Porter considers the value of her thought and art form: “Dickinson’s radical modernism thus is not a theme but a way of knowing, a way of art: it is an idiom of irrepressible consciousness and inescapable derangement come together.”[4] This comment implies that comprehension of Dickinson’s poems should be from the perspectives of philosophy and art, which can be regarded as the core of Dickinson’s poems. The opinions of the Western researches pave the way for the Chinese scholars in their studies.

Since the 1980s in China, researches on Dickinson mainly follow the trends of the Western critical theories, which have laid emphasis on psychological criticism, feminist criticism, new criticism, formalism, structuralism, literary semiology.[5] Undoubtedly, the achievements of the Western scholars have laid the foundation of
Dickinson studies in China. In the beginning of the 21st century, books and articles on Dickinson are only in a small number, and the depth and scope of the researches are unsatisfactory. So it is still at the beginning stage for Dickinson studies. In spite of this, more and more Chinese scholars are attracted by Dickinson. The art of Dickinson even greatly influence some Chinese poets in their poem writing. However, we have to acknowledge honestly, that the Western achievements can not completely express the opinions of the Chinese. In other words, different cultural contexts may decide different interpretations, though to some degree, different interpretations are overlapped and melted into each other. This is because “when reading and studying foreign literature, one will consciously or unconsciously use the characteristics of his native culture as a reference, or take them as a means of accepting the influence of foreign literature.” Therefore, Dickinson studies are liable to be involved in the sense of Chinese nativeness.

Because of the different cultural contexts, the trend of comprehension is various. For example, in Christian society, the “Last Judgment” and the disobedient behavior of God will bring great spiritual sufferings to the Christians. Many of Dickinson’s poems on this topic will impress Western audience greatly, while the Chinese may not experience the fear from God and inner religious contradictions. Meanwhile, for the Chinese, the influence of Taoism is rooted in the mind, and the comprehension of Dickinson’s poems can not be isolated from Taoist ideas. Some Chinese scholars have already begun to unscramble Dickinson with the ideas of Taoism. Kang Yanbin analyses the development and gradual formation of the Chinese native ideas on Dickinson, such as Taoist “discarding all desires and worries from the mind”, “indifferent to names and fortune”, “the tranquil and empty mind”, “content with life”, etc. This research method is also reflected in versions of translation criticism on Dickinson’s poems. In fact, to study Dickinson through Taoism will meet the aesthetic taste of the most Chinese audience, which provides a cognitive approach to Dickinson studies in Chinese cultural context.

II. Open Space in Dickinson’s Poems for Different Interpretations
Emily Dickinson lived in Amherst, a small town with the dense atmosphere of Puritanism. Her 1775 poems seem to search every corner of the soul. Her extraordinary imagination makes her poems mysterious, from which many philosophical truths are highly generalized. Most of her poems are so ambiguous to understand that every one seems to face a risk when interpreting. To a great extent,
one probably interprets her poems from his individual experience, such as his native religion, sense of his native culture, values, life experience, etc. This shows Dickinson’s poems are too profound to be expounded only by one interpretation. In this aspect, Dickinson’s poems provide open space for various potential interpretations. Her poem 754[10] “My life had stood—a Loaded Gun—” is a typical example endowed with more than 75 interpretations.[11]

My life had stood—a loaded Gun—
In Corners—till a Day
The Owner passed—identified—
And carried Me away—

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods—
And now We hunt the Doe
And every time I speak for Him—
The Mountains straight reply

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow—
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through—

And when at Night—Our good Day done—
I guard My Master’s Head—
’Tis better than the Eider—Duck’s
Deep Pillow—to have shared—

To foe of His—I’m deadly foe—
None stir the second time—
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—
Or an emphatic Thumb

Thou I than He—may longer live
He longer must—than I—
For I have but the power to kill,
Without—the power to die— (Poem 754)

This poem is one of the most difficult to interpret and ambiguous to conclude a concrete and absolute idea. The characteristics of Dickinson’s poetic style are clearly displayed in the poem, such as simple words, capitalization, omission of verbs, dashes, inversion, paradox, ambiguity, transferred epithet, etc. The most puzzling
idea to unfold is the paradox in the last stanza, although “I” may live longer than “He”, for “I have the power to kill, without—the power to die—”; “He” must live longer than “I”.

The first step is to clarify the implied meaning of “I” and “He” in the poem’s context. From the first stanza, it is obvious that “I” refers to the “gun”, while “He” refers to the gun owner. If we connect the first stanza with the last, it can be concluded that “I” is a lifeless weapon (gun with power to kill but without power to die) so “I” can live longer. The general meaning of “gun” seems to symbolize the longer life. But the paradox is “He” (man) must live longer than the “I” (gun). This is the interpretation from the superficial words, and the paradox still leaves more space for various interpretations.

In Dickinson’s poems, many truths and philosophies are always expressed in paradoxes, which represent Dickinson’s contradictory feelings. Paradox is a statement or expression so uprisingly self-contradictory as to provoke us to seeking another sense or context in which it would be true (although some paradoxes cannot be resolved by truths, remaining flatly self-contradictory). In other words, paradoxes superficially reflect man’s self-contradiction, but in the opposite thinking, the philosophical truth will suddenly come to realization. However, different interpretations are probably given from different cultural perspectives. Dickinson’s paradoxes sharply challenge the audience with different cultural backgrounds and their habitual ways of thinking. Everyone would probably have a risk in interpreting Dickinson, for it is open for different audience to interpret.

From the perspective of language and philosophy, the truth implied can be interpreted like: although “I” (gun) has killing power, it is controlled by “He” (man). That is why “He” must live longer than “I”. “He (man)” in the poem finally proves that “He (man) can finally conquered the lifeless and powerful weapons, power of God, or the threat of death, or any other disasters, from which only life in nature is immortal. For the mankind, weapons, religious punishments, and death are the threats in nature, but they can not extinguish human life in the world. This paradox shows the dialectical truth that some destructive weapons made by man will finally be controlled by man, so power of man can conquer all other forms of man-made powers. Thus, the truth of the tricky paradox in the last stanza is revealed obviously. However, the truth deduced from the language and philosophy will be interpreted differently in the Christian society.

From the cultural context of Christianity, the American scholar Cynthia Griffin
Wolff interprets the poem, “To an Amherst audience, even as late as Emily Dickinson’s day, the answers would probably have been patent: death and Christ. Death “may” live longer than Christ, for Christ died on the cross; yet Christ “must” live longer than death, for the righteous cannot be raised from their graves unless Christ first vanquishes death”[14]. Under the background of Christianity, Wolff interprets “I” as death, “He” as the incarnation of Christ. In other words, death has the power to kill and put Christ into the grave, but the righteous beliefs that Christ embodies can live longer. In the Christian society, from the point of the relationship between man and God, Wolff’s interpretation is convincing. According to the Christian philosophy, God is above everything, with infinite power.

However, in the cultural context of Chinese Taoism, a different interpretation will be concluded: “I” (gun) is a man-made weapon that seems live longer with the power to kill; “He” (the owner of the gun) refers to Tao(道), resembling the invisible law in nature. Compared Tao with the man-made weapon, “He” (Tao) undoubtedly has a longer life than the “I” (gun, man-made weapon). From the perspective of Taoism, “Tao never does; yet through it all things are done”[15]. This Taoist idea implies that Tao in the universe can live longer than any man-made things. Generally speaking, Taoism opposes that man uses man-made things or his actions to ruin life in nature. Nothing should violate the natural law. In this sense, Tao will live longer than any man-made things. Compare the interpretation with Wolff’s, this interpretation conveys a universal philosophy to lift Tao to the apex.

In the case of Poem 754, the different interpretations show that whether an interpretation is reasonable or not depends on the cultural context. In Christian context, we can accept Wolff’s interpretation. While based on Taoism, the third interpretation would probably be more impressive for the Chinese audience than the second. For the general audience, the first interpretation can be accepted because it reflects the natural truth, which can be concluded from the point of language and philosophy. Because Taoist ideas are closely related with nature, so we feel the ideas in the first and second interpretations, to some extent, seem similar and overlapped.

From the analysis above, many of Dickinson’s poems seem to be riddles to the audience all over the world. Because of her ambiguous language and her flexible poetic style, themes can not be clearly explained. Pu Long said, “most Dickinson’s poems are endowed with connotations in different aspects, which can be interpreted from different perspectives.”[16] Based on the characteristics of Dickinson’s poems, open space is left to be interpreted in the different cultural contexts. Poem 754 is just
one of the examples. For the open space of various interpretations, on the one hand, different cultures might find their own interpretations in their given cultural context; on the other hand, connotations in Dickinson’s poems are accessible to some common spirit in the open reading, from which some similar aesthetic ideas can be unscrambled by different cultures.

III. Aesthetic Ideas in Zhuang Zi’s Prose

Since Dickinson’s poems are obscure to be understood and open to read, it is liable for the Chinese audience to read Dickinson from the Chinese cultural context. What Dickinson impresses the Chinese audience most are the poems that meet the Chinese aesthetic ideas. Chinese translator Wang Jinhua said, “She (Dickinson) has a similar aspect with the ideas of Zhuang Zi, i.e. being indifferent to fame and fortune, taking life and death lightly, being willing to keep in a tranquil and peaceful state of mind, and preferring to a pure life without worldly wishes. So her poems are terse, simple but elegant.”[17] Some of Dickinson’s poems reflect Zhuang Zi’s aesthetic ideas, though no proof shows that the ideas of Taoism had influenced Dickinson. To some extent, it is the philosophical ideas of Emerson’s transcendentalism that make Dickinson’s poems coincide with Zhuang Zi’s aesthetic ideas.

Zhuang Zi was greatly influenced by Lao Zi. The most important thing for Taoists is to experience and practice Tao in nature. In the worldly society, one often has his desires for fame and fortune that cannot be satisfied, and no one can avoid the contradiction between individuality and the community. In this aspect, Zhuang Zi deeply realized the greedy nature of man. Being tired of the human’s vulgar desires, Zhuang Zi was secluded into nature, refusing to take high position in the Court. For the spiritual freedom, he preferred poverty in life to being rich as a high official. In this way he resolved the contradiction between spirit and materials, to reach the tranquil and empty mind, and enjoyed himself in nature. What Zhuang Zi pursued is the absolute spiritual freedom for the purpose to shake off the bandage of the external things. The basic aesthetic ideas of Zhuang Zi are involved in truth, beauty, and man in nature.

In the aesthetics of Taoism, the first principle is to respect the truth. Lao Zi observes the world in a macroscopic view, from which one should try to find the truth and follow the natural laws. Zhuang Zi wrote in his prose, “The natural disposition means the apex of absolute sincerity. Without absolute sincerity, you will never be able to elicit the emotions and passions of others.”[18] Zhuang Zi despised
fame and wealth in the worldly society, instead he often threw himself in deep thinking about the whole universe, wandering among the mountains and rivers, as the saying that a man of wisdom always follows his natural instinct and is free of worldly restraints. In Taoism, anything that accords with its nature will accords with Tao. This is the truth and beauty. So in his prose, Zhuang Zi repeatedly stressed that natural things should exist with their own nature, and that beauty and virtues lie in the truth.

On the contrary, a man of stupidity often goes against his natural instinct and worries about worldly affairs. A man like this is foolish enough not to value his natural disposition and engages himself in the conformity to changes. Therefore, he never feels satisfied. Zhuang Zi’s attitudes towards truth in nature help to form the core of his aesthetic ideas, which makes him unyielding to the vulgar society, and maintains all his life in freedom. The stories in Zhuang Zi’s prose are allegories, telling us that if one could be free from external things and follows the truth, he would gain the absolute freedom.

Another aesthetic idea in Taoism is the great and tranquil beauty in nature. The main Taoist ideas of Lao Zi are that “Great music has the faintest notes, the Great Form is without shape”. Zhuang Zi also wrote, “The heaven and the earth have the highest virtue, but they do not speak a single word. The four seasons occur in regular circles, but they do not raise a single argument. All things in the world grow in a fixed pattern, but they do not give a single explanation. The sage probes into the virtue of heaven and earth so that he can have a good mastery of laws of all things. Thus, the perfect man follows nature and does not take any action, and the supreme man does nothing at all. This is called “modeling after the heaven and the earth”. The concept of beauty of Zhuang Zi’s view is that beauty and virtues lie in the nature of things. The outlook of Zhuang Zi is the tranquility and harmony all over the nature, though all the things are silent. This embodies the basic idea of Taoism that doing nothing does not mean nothing done at all. That is why Zhuang Zi thinks that great beauty lies between the heaven and earth without speaking a single word.

In addition to the above ideas, the aesthetic idea about man in nature is that man is an integral part of nature. The famous lines are that “The heaven and earth and I came into existence at the same time; all things in the world and I are one uniformity”. This emphasizes the harmonious and natural relationship between man and nature. What Zhuang Zi advocates is “self-forgetting” and “invisible of self”. Only when one reaches this realm, can he overpass the vulgar ideas and enter
the realm of freedom. From this, we can see that Zhuang Zi talks about nature, but also discusses life of man. He puts man in nature as part, and makes man harmonious with everything. In Zhuang Zi’s prose, there is a famous story. When his wife died, his friend Hui Zi came to express his condolence. When he came, he saw Zhuang Zi squatting on the ground, singing and beating time on a basin. Hui Zi was puzzled why Zhuang Zi was so pitiless without shedding a tear. Zhuang Zi said:

[...] When my wife died, how could I refrain from sorrow? But if we trace her beginning, she did not have life before she was born. Neither did she have life, nor had she physical form at all. Neither did she have physical form, nor had she had vital energy at all. Amid what was opaque and obscure, transformation took place and she obtained her vital energy. Another transformation took place with her vital energy and she obtained her physical form. Yet another transformation took place with her physical form and she obtained life. Now that one more transformation has taken place and she returned to death, this is like the succession of spring, summer, autumn and winter. My deceased wife is now lying peacefully between the heaven and the earth. If I were to weep over her death, I think, this would mean that I am ignorant of fate. That is why I stopped weeping.

This story reflects the Taoist idea that man is an integral part of nature, which exceeds the fear and sorrow of death. It is also one of the main ideas about death in Dickinson’s poems. In Chinese cultural context, these philosophical ideas of Taoism are also regarded as the aesthetic ideas. Because of the sense of nativeness, the Chinese audience will lay more emphasis on Dickinson’s wisdom, imagination, beautiful images, and the similar aesthetic ideas of Taoism. Especially for the audience who read Chinese versions of Dickinson’s poems.

IV. Coincidence of Aesthetic Ideas in Dickinson's Poems

Compared with Zhuang Zi, Dickinson was seriously surrounded by the Calvinist atmosphere in her small town. She had to endure the pressure from Calvinism and the worldly society. In her daily life, she faced the contradiction between Calvinism and her individual belief. In Poem 303 “The Soul Select Her Own Society”, Dickinson expresses her determination of seclusion from the worldly society. For the spiritual independence, she refused to be a Christian and go to church, and refused to publish her poems for fame. In Poem 709, she wrote that “Publication is the Auction / of the Mind of Man”. In her mind, poems are the thoughts that belong to the thinker, not as the commodity to sell. Greatly influenced by Emerson’s transcendentalism, she tried to shake off the bandage of the Calvinism and of the
society. We can conclude that the coincidence between Zhuang Zi and Dickinson mostly exists in their pursuit of absolute spiritual freedom, of truth and beauty, and of life and death. This shows the common human trend towards nature and life.

1. Truth is the Origin of Aesthetic Ideas of Zhuang Zi and Dickinson

The origin of aesthetic ideas of Zhuang Zi and Dickinson lies in the pursuit and worship of truth. One basic idea of Zhuang Zi is that a man of wisdom always follows his natural instinct and is free of worldly restraints. This idea accords with the similar idea of American transcendentalism. Emerson also advocates that man is part of nature and man should know the nature with his instinct. He wrote, “The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty, is solved by the redemption of the soul, [...] When a faithful thinker resolute to detach every object from personal relations, and see it in the light of thought, shall, at the same time, kindle the science with the fire of the holiest affections.”[25] Emerson further emphasized, “I suppose no man can violate his nature. All sallies of his will are rounded in by the law of his being.”[26] The idea of knowing truth is that the original truth exists in nature and the way for man to know it is through his instinct.

The natural disposition that Zhuang Zi emphasizes is the true and sincere instinct of one’s being. He wrote in his prose: “A forced wail only appears to be sorrowful; a forced rage only appears to be severe and forced warmth only appears to be friendly. A true sorrow is the silent grief without wailing; a true rage is the severity without showing the fit of anger; and true warmth is the friendliness with out showing smile. The natural disposition resides within and expression is shown without. That is why the natural disposition is given priority.”[27] It is a universal idea that truth and beauty are always closely related and truth can not be disguised in any way.

Under the influence of Emerson’s transcendentalism, truth and beauty are deeply rooted in Dickinson’s mind. Her poems are the proofs that truth is the origin of beauty. She expresses her holly affections of nature in her 1775 poems. She expresses that she will make a sacrifice of life to seek truth and beauty. In Poem 449, she wrote:

I died for Beauty—but was scarce
Adjusted in the Tomb
When one who died for Truth, was lain
In an adjoining Room—

He questioned softly “Why I failed”?

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"For Beauty", I replied——
"And I—for Truth—Themselves are One——
We Brethren, are", He said——

And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night——
We talked between the rooms——
Until the Moss had reached our lips——
And covered up—our names

This poem is a classic poem, which shows Dickinson’s resolution to guard “truth” and “beauty”. In fact, people in different times and cultural contexts always share the similar life philosophy. In her 1775 poems, truth as the origin of aesthetic ideas penetrates all the themes in her poems. In Zhuang Zi’s prose, we learn the truth in life and nature from his allegories, while in Dickinson’s poems, we will learn her affections, complex feelings and philosophy of life through various metaphors, images, paradoxes, etc.. Although in many aspects the themes and poetic style of Dickinson are different from that of Zhuang Zi, the coincidence of the aesthetic ideas between them is the truth worship. Truth as the origin of aesthetic ideas is the key to comprehend Dickinson’s poems.

2. Great Beauty between the Heaven and Earth

One of the Taoist ideas is that man is part of nature, and the relationship between man and natural things is harmonious. Zhuang Zi lays more emphasis on the idea that human beings should obey and accord with Tao, i.e., doing nothing does not mean nothing has been done. Although the things in nature do not speak, the tranquility and harmony is everywhere. This embodies the Taoist aesthetic idea that the beauty in tranquility is the great beauty between the heaven and earth without speaking a single word. So does the beauty of nature and virtue of man.

From the point of American transcendentalism, nature is the high and divine beauty that is found in combination with the human will. Emerson said, “A leaf, a sun-beam, a landscape, and the ocean, make an analogous impression on the mind. What is common to them all, that perfectness and harmony, is beauty. The standard of beauty is the entire circuit of natural forms, the totality of nature; [...] Nothing is quite beautiful alone: nothing but is beautiful in the whole. A single object is only so far beautiful as it suggests this universal grace.”[28] Dickinson tries to find the quiet beautiful things around her. She endows her poems with full of connotations of beauty. In Poem 333, Dickinson wrote:
The Grass so little has to do—
A Sphere of simple Green—
With only Butterflies to brood
And Bees to entertain—

And stir all day to pretty Tunes
The Breezes fetch along—
And hold the Sunshine in its lap
And bow to everything—

And thread the Dews, all night, like Pearls—
And make itself so fine
A Duchess were too common
For such a noticing—

And even when it dies to pass
In Odors so divine—
Like Lowly spices, lain to sleep—
Or Spikenards, perishing—

And then, in Sovereign Barns to dwell—
And dream the Days away,
The Grass so little has to do
I wish I were a Hay—

This poem poetically describes the beauty, the purity, and the simplicity of grasses. The grasses add green to nature, and welcome bees to play on them; grasses sing silently in the breeze and bow modestly to all things in nature; the pure dew like pearls naturally and beautifully decorate themselves, surpassing the duchess bedecked with jewels. Then, life of grasses will disappear in nature. They will change into perfumes buried into the earth, sleep in their dream, and live quietly in the earth for the new life. In these beautiful images, Dickinson directly expresses the beautiful and harmonious life of all things in nature. She personifies grasses to show the virtues of human beings such as selflessness, happiness, modesty, and dedication. In this poem, Dickinson, like Zhuang Zi, discusses both nature and human life, and lift all this to the level of way (道) in nature.

In Poem 1510, Dickinson also endows small stones with life and feelings:
How happy is the little Stone
That rambles in the road alone,
And doesn’t care about Careers
And Exigencies never fears—
Whose coat of elemental Brown
A passing Universe put on,
And independent at the Sun
Associates or glow alone,
Fulfilling absolute Decree
In casual simplicity— (Poem 1510)

From the philosophy of Taoism, we can interpret this poem in the following way: in nature, small stones exist in a state of self-forgetting, invisible for self, and serving others by doing nothing (no-action). Although the stones are not valued in the world, they happily live and exist in the grand universe. The beauty of lifeless stones in the poem is a case, in which it coincides with Zhuang Zi’s idea “The great beauty between the heaven and earth will not express itself”. This shows that Zhuang Zi’s prose and Dickinson’s poems share the poetic philosophy in common.

In poems, Dickinson connects small things in nature with the horizon of the infinite universe. The most important point in the poem is to emphasize the beauty of the whole and harmonious nature, from which we can find the coincident aesthetic idea in Zhuang Zi’s prose and Dickinson’s poems.

3. The Harmony between Man and Nature
The harmony between man and nature is one of Zhuang Zi’s main aesthetic ideas. Zhuang Zi believes that “Life is the succession to death and death is the beginning of life. No one knows exactly the regular patterns for both. The birth of a man is the convergence of the vital energy, which in turn forms life. The breaking-up of the vital energy causes death. If life and death are closely related to each other, why then should I worry about death?” For Zhuang Zi, life and death are the forms of transformation of life, just like the cycle of day and night, and the cycle of ice and water. All the things in the universe are in the same cycle in movement, which is the same case as life and death.

In Calvinist context, life and death are controlled by God which brought great torture to the mind of Christians. Dickinson once lingered between the Hell and Heaven, and doubted the belief in God. For the idea of death, Dickinson was
independent from Emerson. She retained the opinion that man would die and become part of nature for the eternal life. After reflecting on death, Dickinson realized the inevitability of death and life cycle, just like a saying in the Bible, “You were from the dust and will return to the earth when you die” (Genesis 3:19). In Poem 1212, Dickinson wrote:

A word is dead  
When it is said,  
Some say.  

I say it just  
Begins to live  
That day. (Poem 1212)

This poem expresses Dickinson’s objective attitude towards life and death, i.e. death is the end of life, and predicts the beginning of another life. For the idea of life and death, Dickinson exceeds the Christian belief that one will go to heaven after death. She regards death as a natural event. In Poem 712, Dickinson wrote:

Because I could not stop for the Death—  
He kindly stopped for me—  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—  
And Immortality.

We slowly drove—He knew no haste  
And I had put away  
My labor and my leisure too,  
For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove  
At Recess—in the Ring—  
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—  
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—he passed Us—  
The Dews drew quivering and chill—  
For only Gossamer, my Gown—  
My Tippet:—only Tulle—

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—’tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were toward Eternity—  (Poem 712)

This poem describes the process of death on its journey to nature: the “death” comes to me, “I” put away my labor, follow the death across to the eternity; on the journey “I” experience the school childhood, middle-age, and the old age like sun sinking; although the earth feels cold, “I” see the “House” (grave) in nature. At the end of life, Dickinson names a grave as “House”, like a place of one’s daily life. Here Dickinson melts life with death. Although we feel her Christian complex, but when she describes the transformation from life to death, the harmony between life and death is fully embodied. As a poet, Dickinson keeps an eye on the every phenomenon based on the harmony between man and nature.

Dickinson dares to exceed death, and expresses the idea that man is an integral part of nature and returns to earth at the end of life. Although Zhuang Zi did not directly influence Dickinson, their universal appreciations of life and death make a remarkable coincidence in the philosophy of life and death.

Conclusion
Dickinson studies in the West have paved the way for the Chinese Dickinson studies. In the Chinese cultural context, on the one hand, Chinese scholars follow the Western scholars; on the other, they melt Chinese aesthetic interests into Dickinson studies. From the perspective of Chinese Taoism, we will naturally find the coincidence of the origin of aesthetic ideas between Zhuang Zi’s prose and Dickinson’s poems.

In this paper, Zhuang Zi’s aesthetic ideas are applied to interpret Dickinson’s poems in three aspects, truth in nature, the natural and tranquil beauty, and the harmony between man and nature. From Taoist perspectives, to interpret Dickinson’s poems would probably accord with Chinese readers’ aesthetic trend, for it is inevitable for Chinese audience to melt Chinese nativeness in reading Dickinson’s poems. The interpretations, to some extent, expound the great beauty and common human spirit, which is universal to most cultures in the world, because they all
embody the universal natural laws in the universe.

Zhuang Zi was a great influential philosopher and a man of letters in ancient China, whose ideas and influence have been spread overseas, while Dickinson was a great American poet in the 19th century, whose poems have also spread to the whole world. In different countries and different times, the spiritual freedom is equally reflected. Therefore, in Chinese cultural context, applying the Taoist aesthetic ideas to study Dickinson can be regarded as an approach.

Notes:
[1] Some Parts of this article have been discussed in the possible detail with Ping Lan, professor of Literature and Applied Linguistics, at School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Jiaotong University. The author acknowledges her joint efforts for the publication.
[2] Harold Bloom. The Western Canon. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994. p. 291.
[3] 刘晓明: 《百年艾米丽·狄金森研究管窥》，《国外文学》，2007 年第 1 期，第 28-36 页。
[4] Quoted from Wendy Martin, The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2008. p. 128.
[5] 刘保安: 《近五年来国内的狄金森研究综述》，《外国文学研究》，2004 年第 5 期，第 154-158 页。
[6] 刘守兰: 《狄金森研究》，上海外语教育出版社，2006 年，第 367 页。
[7] 康燕彬: 《狄金森在中国的译介与本土化形象建构》，《中国比较文学》，2010 年第 4 期，第 49-58 页。
[8] 区 : 《外国文学与本土意识》，《当代文坛报》，1988 年第 1 期，第 9-11 页。
[9] See Note [6].
[10] Emily Dickinson, The Complete Poetry, Thomas H. Johnson, ed.. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1955. The poems discussed in this paper are all selected from The Complete Poetry.
[11] 朱刚: 《新编美国文学史》（第 2 卷），上海外语教学出版社，2002 年，第 206 页。
[12] C. Baldick, Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2000, pp.159-160.
[13] Shi Ji,& Lan Ping, “Context and Philosophy of Dickinson's Poem 754”, Journal of Southwest Jiaotong University (Social Sciences), 11,3 (2010): 5-10.
[14] C. G. Wolff, Emily Dickinson. Radcliffe: Perseus Books, 1988, p. 443.
[15] Lao Zi. Tao Te Ching (《道德经》), Arthur Waley, trans.. Beijing: Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1998, Chapter 37, p. 77. The orginal Chinese “Tao never does [...]” reads “道常无为而无不为”.
[16] 陈棹, 译: 《狄金森诗选》，上海译文出版社，2010 年, “译序” XIV。
[17] 王晋华，译：《狄更生诗歌精选》，北岳文艺出版社，2010 年，第 1 页。
[18] See Note [15]. The original Chinese version of “The natural disposition [...] passions of others” is “真者，精诚之至也，不精不诚，不能动人” (in Chapter 31, The Fisherman, p 557).
[19] Lao Zi. Tao Te Ching (《道德经》), Arthur Waley, trans.. Beijing: Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1998. The original Chinese version of “A man of wisdom
[...] free of worldly restraints” is “故圣人法天贵真，不拘于俗” (in Chapter 31, The Fisherman. p.559).

[20] Ibid. The original Chinese version of “On the contrary, [...] never feels satisfied” reads “愚者反之，不能法天而恤于人，不知贵真，禄禄而受于俗，故不足” (Chapter 31, The Fisherman p.559).

[21] See Note [14]. The original Chinese version of “Great music [...] without shape” is “大音希声，大象无形” (Tao Te Ching, Chapter 41, p.89).

[22] See Note 15. The original Chinese version of “The heaven [...] the earth.” is that “天地有大美而不言，四时有明法而不议，万物有成理而不说。圣人者，原天地之美而达万物之理，是故圣人无为，大圣不作，观于天地之谓也” (Chapter 22, Knowledge Travels North, p. 365).

[23] See Note [15]. The original Chinese version of “The heaven [...] one uniformity” is that “天地与我并生，万物与我为一” (Chapter 2, On the Uniformity of All Things, p. 29).

[24] See Note [15]. Chapter 18, “Perfect Happiness” (《至乐第十八》, p.289).

[25] Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature”, in Nina Baym, ed., The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Vol. B, American Literature 1820–1865, 6th edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003. p.1133.

[26] Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance” in Nina Baym, ed., The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Vol. B, American Literature 1820–1865, 6th edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003. p.1165.

[27] Lao Zi. Tao Te Ching (《道德經》), Arthur Waley, trans.. Beijing: Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1998. See Note [18]. The original Chinese version of “A forced wail only appears [...] the natural disposition is given priority” is “故强哭者……是所以贵真也”. (Chapter 31, “The Fisherman”, p. 557).

[28] See Note [25], p. 1114.

[29] See Note [15]. The original Chinese version of “Life [...] about death?” is that “生为死之徒，死也生之始，孰知其纪！人之生，气之聚也。聚则为生，散则为死。若死生为徒，吾又何患！” (Chapter 22, “Knowledge Travels North”, p. 363).

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Ji SHI, Professor of American Literature at School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Jiaotong University, China. Her teaching load includes American Literature and English Poetry as well as teaching international students who major in Chinese. Her major academic interest is Dickinson studies. Her recent articles include “Emily Dickinson: A Great Poet of Writing Soul’s Journey to Nature”, “On the Reason and the Religious Complex of Dickinson’s Depictions of God”, “Context and Philosophy of Dickinson’s Poem 754”. She is also the author/compiler of textbook series, including Graded Chinese Readers 1, 2, and 3 (2007-2009); Panorama of Chinese Culture, Book 1 and Book 2 (2009) and Sparkling Chinese Idioms and Sayings (2011).