



## NATURE, INACTION AND ILLUSION: THE INFLUENCE OF TAOISM ON AMERICAN POETRY IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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### Abstract:

Taoism is one of the most fundamental thoughts in China, and Laozi's Taoist theory is even more brilliant, shining through the entire history of Chinese culture. Taoist culture and thoughts through translation have influenced American poetry directly or indirectly. This paper had a diachronic study of the three major cultural movements in the United States in the 20th century: the New Poetry Movement, the Beat Movement and the Deep Imagist Movement. Taking typical poems in these movements as research objects, the study illustrated the great influences of Taoism on American poetry by means of close reading and comparative analysis. It first introduced the three American movements briefly, enumerated the poets who absorbed Taoist ideas in the movements, and then explained specifically what thoughts they absorbed from Taoism that had an impact on their poetry writing. During the New Poetry Movement, the poets advocated the Taoists view of nature. During the Beat Movement, they paid close attention to the view of "inaction", while the Deep Image poets concentrated on the illusion under the view of "equality of things", which promoted the diversified development of American poetry.

**Keywords:** Taoist thought; American poetry; influence; new poetry movement; beat movement; deep imagist movement

### 1. Introduction

During the initial period of modern American poetry, namely the New Poetry Movement, the American imagist pioneer Ezra Pound (1885-1973) began the journey to learn Tang poetry through organizing Ernest Fenollosa's translation notes. American poets pay attention to the theme, image and writing skills of Tang poetry, while Taoism is rarely mentioned. After the extensive translation of Tang Poetry at home and abroad in the 1930s and 1940s, Taoism has gradually become a powerful ideological weapon for

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the Beats in the 1950s and 1960s. The influence of Taoism on American poetry has a long history. In the early 20th century, poets in the two waves of New Poetry Movement tried to write poetry with Taoism. During the Renaissance of the 1950s and 1960s, as poets' understanding of Taoist thoughts deepened, they gradually realized that Taoism was the essence of Chinese poetry. The "deep image" poets are even more discerning, expressing the illusion of poetry with Taoist thoughts.

The main representative poets in the 20th century whose poems contain Taoism are Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962), Carl Sandburg (1878-1967) and William Carlos Williams (1883-1963); Representatives of the Beat Generation are Kenneth Rexroth (1905-1982) and Gary Snyder (1930- ); Deep Imagist poets include Robert Bly (1926- ) and James Wright (1927-1980). In addition, there is also an integration of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. In this regard, Zhao Yiheng (2003:314) states: "*It is not so much that Chinese poetry gives up Confucianism but chooses Zen and Taoism, but a selective misunderstanding of modern American poets, or a selective misunderstanding of modern society, because Chinese poets are increasingly inclined to exclude Confucianism from Chinese poetics*". Whether it is selective misunderstanding or mistranslation, Taoism has entered American Poetry or life. In view of the fact that the academic circles have more discussions on the English translation of *Tao Te Ching*, the focus of this paper is the influence of Taoism on American poetry and poets after translation to prove that Taoism had a major impact on American poetry in the 20th century.

## **2. Taoist Thoughts in the American New Poetry Movement—“On the Equality of Life and Death” and “Nature View”**

Harriet Monroe founded *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* in September 1912, marking the beginning of the American New Poetry Movement (Tang, 2007:4), which is both a literary movement and a cultural movement in modern American history (Guo, 2014: 56), also known as "*American poetry renaissance*." It not only opposes "literary pursuit" of the Americans, but also tries to get rid of the poetic style of British Victorian tradition. In face of the poets who moan and groan without being ill and try to deceive by covering up one's real purpose, the poets of the New Poetry Movement felt that they should open up a fresh outlook and blaze a new trail to adapt to the development of the time. Therefore, the outstanding representatives turned their eyes to the East, such as Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell (1874-1925) and Harriet Monroe (1860-1936), who are dying to take nutrition from China, and they believe that Chinese writes are "*a treasury to which the next century may look for as great a stimulus as the renaissance had from the Greeks*" (Eliot, 1954:218). American contemporary poet WS Merwin believes that without the influence of Chinese poetry, American poetry could not be imagined, and this influence has become part of its tradition (Merwin, 1981:18). Chinese poetry promotes the creation of American poetry, and injects fresh blood into it. The components of the blood includes: poetry image, poetry theme, poetry form, word usage, poetry mood and poetry thought. Among them, Taoism has become an important source of influence on the poet's thoughts. There are

three writers who mainly absorb Taoist thoughts: Robinson Jeffers, Carl Sandburg and William Carlos Williams (Zhao, 2003:316). Their works not only quote Taoist allusions, but also absorb Taoist culture. They pursue the aesthetic concept of “*nature*”, the natural view of “*the union of heaven and human*” and the life outlook of “*returning to nature*”.

Carl Sandburg, one of the most popular American poets in the 1920s and 1930s, wrote down his famous poem “Cool Tombs”, “Grass” and “Love of Labrador”; the first two are included in the collection of poems *Corning the Corn* (Zhao, 2003:316). In “Cold Tombs”, he describes and tells the fragility of life with succinct strokes – “*When Abraham Lincoln was shoveled into the tombs, he forgot the copperheads and the assassin ... in the dust, in the cool tombs. / And Ulysses Grant lost all thoughts of con men and Wall Street, cash and collateral turned ashes ... in the dust, in the cool tombs. / Pocahontas' body, lovely as a poplar, sweet as a red haw in November or a pawpaw In May, did she wonder? does she remember? ... in the dust, in the cool tombs?*” (Sandburg, 1918) People in dust or cold tomb, regardless of the great American President Lincoln or the beauty Pocahontas, can only be turned into dust in the end. This is due to the Taoist concept “Equality of Life and Death” (Qi Sheng Si). The original Qi in Chinese is similar to “Equality” in English. Taoism regards life and death as a natural way of life. However, it is a cycle that everyone must experience. The word “Qi” is used to equalize life and death. On the issue of life and death, one should let things take their own course and conform to the Tao (Yang & Tian, 2009:88). Sandburg learns the Taoist Equality (Qi) to rethink about and reflect on life and death: whether people are great or ordinary, poor or rich, the last human being left to the world is always a body placed in a cold tomb. This is exactly what Laozi said about “*the rule of nature.*”

In the New Poetry Movement, ecological poetry advocates abandoning the cultural tradition of people-centred and encourage civilization to give way to nature, which undoubtedly echoes the Taoist concept of “*returning to nature*”. Its representative poet Robinson Jeffers once said that his poem transferred the concern on humanity to non-human beings, rejected the only self-respect of human beings and recognized the beauty of nature. As he wrote in the poem “Carmel Point”: “*How beautiful when we first beheld it / Unbroken field of poppy and lupin walled with clean cliffs / No intrusion but two or three horses pasturing, / Or a few milch cows rubbing their flanks on the outcrop rockheads -- .... We must uncenter our minds from ourselves; / We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident / As the rock and ocean that we were made from*” (Jeffers, 1959). This is in line with Laozi’s attitude towards nature---to let things go naturally. Laozi said in the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*: “*Man takes his law from the Earth; the Earth takes its law from Heaven; Heaven takes its law from the Dao. The law of the Dao is its being what it is*” (Laozi & Legge, 2016:34). It can be seen that they all advocate that nature is the root of all things, which can also be seen from another two poems, “The Silent Shepherds” and “Summer Holiday”. The following is an excerpt of the poem “Summer Holiday”.

**Table 1: "Summer Holiday" Chinese-English Comparison**

Summer Holiday When the sun shouts and people abound One thinks there were the ages of stone and the age of bronze And the iron age; iron the unstable metal; Steel made of iron, unstable as his mother; the towered-up cities Will be stains of rust on mounds of plaster. Roots will not pierce the heaps for a time, kind rains will cure them, Then nothing will remain of the iron age And all these people but a thigh-bone or so, a poem Stuck in the world's thought, splinters of glass In the rubbish dumps, a concrete dam far off in the mountain... (Jeffers, 2003)	夏日假期 当太阳高呼，人山人海 人们忆起石器时代、青铜时代和铁器时 代； 铁器不稳定的金属； 铁制的钢铁，似母亲般不稳定；高耸的 城市 会在石灰堆上留下锈迹。 树根短期进不去，仁慈的雨水会养活他 们， 那么铁器时代毫无存物 所有人，只剩一根大腿骨，一首诗 像碎玻璃，插在世界的思想中 在垃圾堆里，在山上远处的混凝土坝... translated by Zhu Lihong
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The eternal sun, the endless grassroots, and the rain of life in this poem represent the majestic nature, and the different metal ages symbolize the short and unstable civilization of Human beings. Compared with the mother of all things, human civilization seems so unstable, short-lived and perishable. The poet's views on nature and civilization are very consistent with what Laozi said in Chapter 23 of the *Tao Te Ching*---"A violent wind does not last for a whole morning; a sudden rain does not last for the whole day. To whom is it that these (two) things are owing? To Heaven and Earth. If Heaven and Earth cannot make such (spasmodic) acting last long, how much less can man (Laozi & Legge, 2016:32). Laozi compared the power of man with the nature. It seems to be an omnipotent world, but the storms cannot last forever, so the people's decrees seem to be even more subtle. The two poets have a high respect for nature from the bottom of their hearts, and feel that the civilization is poor, the society is poor, and people are poor.

As a cultural movement, the New Poetry Movement has absorbed a certain Taoist culture and challenged the traditional American native culture. As a quintessence of Chinese culture, Taoism enriches the vision of the poetry during the New Poetry Movement and promotes the diversity of American culture. However, on account of insufficiency of Sino-Western culture communication at that time, the poets' understanding of Taoism only stayed on the surface until the arrival of the "San Francisco Poetry Renaissance Night" and the rise of the "Beats". Afterwards, the American poets gradually had a more comprehensive and profound understanding of Taoism.

### 3. Taoist thoughts in "Beat Poetry" – "Matrilineal clans" and "Inaction"

In the Beat Movement, the Taoism "inaction" has become the spiritual pillar of the Beat. Kenneth Rexroth, as "Godfather" of the Beats, organized and emceed the Six Gallery reading on 13<sup>th</sup> October in 1955 in San Francisco where the recognized leader Allen Ginsberg first read "Howl", which caused a great sensation and announced the birth of the Beat Generation. The general voice of the Beats is against the traditional mainstream

culture of the United States. The word “beat” represents a value that treats gender, religion, art and the American way of life without following social customs at a rebellious attitude. The Beats have added a new look to American literature (Chang, 2008: 362). The representative poets are Irwin Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), Gary Snyder (1930- ), Philip Whalen (1923-2002) and Michael McClure (1932-2020). The typical representatives studying Taoist culture and Taoist thoughts are Rexroth and Snyder.

Rexroth absorbed the sixth chapter of *Tao Te Ching* (Chung, 2003:87). “*The valley dies not, ayes the same; The female mystery thus do we name. / Its gate, from which at first they issued forth, / Is called the root from which grew heaven and earth. / Long and unbroken does its power remain, / Used gently, and without the touch of pain*” (Laozi and Legge, 2016:11). Moreover, he absorbed the ideas that letting things take their own courses and making two poles alternating current rotation like “Existence” and “Nothingness” and Yin and Yang. The following is the first excerpt of his “Heart’s Garden Garden’s Heart” and the corresponding part of the sixth chapter of *Tao Te Ching*:

**Table 2:** Comparison of the first excerpt of “Heart’s Garden Garden’s Heart” and the sixth chapter of *Tao Te Ching*

Heart’s Garden Garden’s Heart	译文	《道德经》
The valley’s soul is deathless. It is called the dark woman. The dark woman is the gate To the root of heaven and earth. If you draw her out like floss She is inexhaustible. (Chung, 2003:88)	山谷之神是不死的。 它被称为黑女人。 黑女人就是通向 天地之根源的大门。 如果你像海绵一样拉着她 她是用不尽的。	谷神不死。 是谓玄牝。 玄牝之门 是谓天地根。 绵绵若存 用之不勤。

The sixth chapter of Laozi’s *Tao Te Ching* illustrates that it is maternal instinct that makes a way of eternal existence. The mysterious gate of maternity is the foundation of heaven and earth, guaranteeing the continuity of generations. In an excerpt of his poem, Rexroth translated “xuan (mysterious) female” (玄牝) -- the root of heaven into the dark woman, which makes his poetry present an implication of matriarchal society.

In addition, he also profoundly explained the Dao of letting things take their own courses in *Tao Te Ching*. Tao may be “inaction” and “purity” and also refers to the origin and order of the surface of matter. It may also be that he personally advocates individuality, freedom and anarchism, so he prefers the “inaction” view of Taoism to artificiality and advocating that “(Those who) possessed in the highest degree those attributes did nothing (with a purpose), and had no need to do anything” (Legge, 2016:55). Chuang Tzu holds that “Constancy implies the making of angles without a bevel, the making of straight lines without a ruler, the making of circles without a compass...” (Mair, 1994:77). Chuang Tzu advocates that regardless of the size of the matter, let it develop, regardless of the size of the affairs, it can show its ability (Qin, 2010: 52 ). He also added that “As long as we are lost / In the world of purpose / We are not free” (Kenneth, 1967: 223). In this poem, Rexroth elaborates the Taoist thoughts as “being natural” and “inaction” not for any purpose.

Another poet translating and studying Taoism is Gary Snyder who has a more comprehensive study of Chinese classical culture. When he was asked what ideology and poetry information, he obtained from Song poetry, he once frankly confessed that he was a socialist with a combination of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism (Zhao, 1989:85). In 1958, Snyder published 27 English translations of Hanshan poems on *Evergreen Review*. His translations reveal his understanding of Buddhist thoughts. In addition, he also loves and respects Taoist thoughts, and some of his poems are influenced by *Tao Te Ching*, including “Without” (*Turtle Island* 6), “High Quality Information” (*Left Out in the Rain* 130), “The Way Is not Way”, (*Regarding Waves* 51), “No Matter, Never Mind”, (*Turtle Island* 11), “The Great Mother” (*Turtle Island* 20), and “For Nothing” (*Turtle Island* 34) (Chung: 2003: 94). Take the poem “Without” as an example:

**Table 3:** Comparison of Snyder’s “Without”  
 and its Chinese version with an excerpt of *Tao Te Ching*

“Without”	《无》	《道德经》
The silence Of nature Within.  the power within the power	自然的 静 在其中有之  德在其中有之 德	“希言自然” (二十三章)  “天下万物生于有，有生于无” (四十章)  “字之曰道，强为之名曰大，大曰逝，逝曰远，远曰反” (二十五章)
without. the path is whatever passes-no end in itself	在其外无 道即所有逝去之物--本身 无终极。	
The end is, grace-ease-	终极是, 谦和恬适---	“恬淡为上” (三十一章)
healing not saving	是治疗 不是救赎。	“詹兮其若海 (二十章) ”
singing the proof	歌咏 其信实	
the proof of the power within	德之信实，其中有之。 (Chung, 2003:95)	“其精甚真，期中有信” (二十一章)

It can be clearly seen from Table 3 that Snyder employs “inaction” of *Tao Te Ching* in his poem “Without”, which has a total of seven sections. Snyder has put the contents of six chapters in *Tao Te Ching* into his seven-stanza poem “Without”. From this, a conclusion can be drawn that he tried to describe all the essence of *Tao Te Ching* and the Taoist ideology and culture have a profound influence on him. When Snyder talked about the influence of Chinese classical poetry on him, he believed that it is Chinese classical poetry that liberates him from the blind worship of the western mountains in the United States when he was young, that in the eyes of Chinese poets, nature is not wild and deserted mountains, but a place where people live, and that it is not only a place for meditation, but also a place for planting, playing and drinking (quoted in Hong, 2011:42).

The “Beat” poets influenced by Taoist thoughts are not only Rexroth and Snyder, but also Philip Whalen. There are also other works of Rexroth and Snyder influenced by Taoist thoughts, such as Rexroth’s “A Doing Nothing Poem”, “Empty Mirror”, and Snyder’s “The Way is not the Way” and “For Nothing”. In the second half of the 19th century in the United States, it was not only the Beats that discovered the essence of Taoist thoughts, but also Deep Imagism too. The study of Taoism by “Deep Imagism” in American postmodernist literary thoughts is not lagging behind the Beats at all.

#### 4. Taoist Thoughts in Deep Imagism--- Illusion of “Equality of Things”

In the post-modernist literary trends of the 20th century, American “Deep Imagism” became one of poetry schools attracting people’s attention in the early 1950s. The so-called “Deep Imagism” refers to a postmodernist creative genre represented by American poets such as Robert Bly (1926- ) and James Wright (1927-1980). Compared with the early representative Imagist Ezra Pound, they pay more attention to the deep meaning of images in poetry, and the first step to realize the deep meaning of a particular image is to dig out the unconscious or subconscious and then realize a transformation. Only by arousing the subconscious and the unconscious can people make the jump from the leap of imagination to the transformation, which can be said to be a reverse to new criticism intellectual poetry or new formalism poetry of the 1950s (Zhang, 1995:728). Bly’s “Another Doing Nothing Poem” is a typical deep Imagist poem. By digging the unconscious or the subconscious, the poem makes the imaginary jump and metaphor transformation perfectly connected. The following is the original poem “Another Doing Nothing Poem”:

**Table 4:** Comparison between Chinese and English versions of Bly’s “Another Doing Nothing Poem

Another Doing Nothing Poem	为了无
There is a bird that flies through the water. It is like a whale ten miles high! Before it went into the ocean, It was just a bit of dust from under my bed! (Bly, 2018: 114)	一只鸟越水而飞舞。 宛若十里高之鲸鱼！ 在它飞越大海之前。 仅是我床底的尘沙！ (translated by Zhu Lihong)

Because the poem mentions “bed”, and the dust turns into a giant bird, it may be a dream. This poem is supposed to show the subconscious desire for the illusion of freedom. It seems to be born out of the content of Chuang Tzu’s “Wandering in Absolute Freedom” (Xiaoyao You) (Chung, 2003:100) ---In the North Ocean there is a fish, named Kun whose size covers thousands of *li*. It metamorphoses into a bird by the name of Peng whose back measures thousands of *li* (Wang, 1990:176). Bly showed the possibility about transformation among all things in “Another Doing Nothing Poem”, which is not only a simple change from a fish to a bird, but a huge and exaggerated metamorphose. It is a tiny dust that turns into a powerful bird which is not like a conventional bird flying in

the sky, but an extraordinary bird flying into the sea, crossing the sea water; although in terms of image and change, it is different from the bird in “Wandering in Absolute Freedom”, they are similar in their brave spirit. They are not satisfied with the present situation; they strive for adjusting and changing themselves to pursue spiritual freedom through their own efforts. The poet wants to realize a perfect and natural transformation between the ontology sand and the metaphor “absolute freedom”. Since the fish in the free sea can be transformed into a bird, so the sand in “Another Doing Poem” can also be transformed into a bird in water. Compared with Pound’s Imagism, the birds can fly in the sky. Compared with Pound’s imagism, Deep Imagism has one more crucial step---imagination.

The representative poet of “Deep Imagism” Bly believes that the deep image originates from Taoist aesthetics, and American contemporary poetry should take “Tao” as the direction and oppose the colonial language at that time to balance Yin and Yang (Zhao, 1989:81). In addition, another great master Wright raised doubt about Christianity’s conception that the body dies but the soul lives forever. This doubt can be clearly seen from his “The Jewel”. An excerpt of “The Jewel” is as follows:

**Table 5:** Chinese and English versions of an excerpt of “The Jewel”

The Jewel	《宝石》
There is this cave In the air behind my body That nobody is going to touch: A cloister, a silence Closing around a blossom of fire. When I stand upright in the wind, My bones turn to dark emeralds (James Wright, 1990:122)	孤独的岩穴 立在我的身后 无人问津。 寂静的隐居地 火花四溅 当我挺直身体站在风中， 我的骨头变成了祖母绿。 (translated by Zhu Lihong)

Although this poem is short, the thinking jumps quickly. This poem well embodies Chuang Tzu’s idea “equality of things”: people are with nature. Although the caves and human bodies are different in quality, they are also forms of life. Although the cave is inanimate, it is a part of the universe. Human body will eventually disappear; when there are only bones left, it will become an inanimate existence like the stone in the cave, just as Chuang Tzu said “although heaven and earth are great, their evolution is uniform. Although the myriad things are numerous, their governance is unitary (Mair, 1994: 102). Chuang Tzu’s “equality of things” makes the metaphor jumping of this poem very natural. If one doesn’t know or understand Chuang Tzu’s “equality of things”, he may feel that the image of emerald is very awkward. The colour of emerald is green with yellow, and it looks like blue. Emerald always emits soft and strong light no matter under what kind of light. Emerald is the birthstone of the moon, symbolizing fortune, happiness and peace (Du, 2011:15). It is because of the Taoist “equality of things” that makes this kind of jump very natural.

The main purpose of “equality of things” is to make people understand the spirit of the unity of all things. Chuang Tzu believes that everything is the embodiment of Tao,

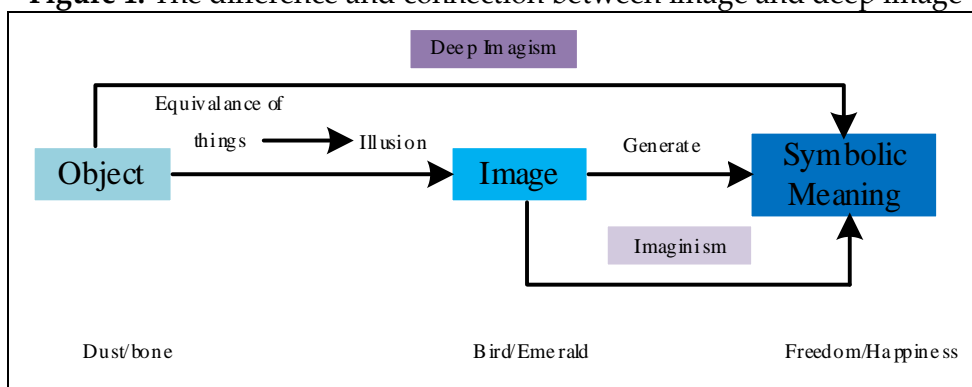


and its existence should be respected in order to achieve the peaceful realm of all things (Piao, 2019:51). Rocks are made of stones in “The Jewel”; human body is composed of a series of organs while beautiful emeralds are made of ores and minerals. Although they are of different quality, they are equal in terms of “equality of things”. At this level, they can be transformed from one to another. It is precisely because the “equality of things” lays the foundation of the poet’s imagination that the bones can metamorphose into emeralds, and the emeralds symbolize fortune, happiness and peace. Here, perhaps the poet also expresses his good wishes, and hopes that everything will be brilliant on the deep image.

Bly and Wright’s absorption of Taoist thoughts are multifaceted, but the “equality of thing” is the source of Deep Imagism. When talking about Deep Imagism, Bly holds that it makes the leap of imagination and the transformation of metaphor possible through the excavation of unconsciousness. Thus, the image will jump from the heart. It is precisely because “equality of things” provides them with a theoretical basis, and they can try to transform from one thing to another in poetry freely, even if the two things have no connection or are total different. The Deep Imagism poetry has something in common with the Imagist Poetry advocated by Pound: it emphasizes the listing of images, but the two also have different aspects: Imagist poetry tends to describe the image directly, while the Deep Imagism attaches great importance to the development of consciousness and subconscious, when the latter describes images (Zhang, 1989:89). Based on Bly’s discussion of Deep Imagism, Zhang Ziqing’s comparison of Image and Deep Image, a case study of Bly’s “Another Doing Nothing Poem” and Wright’s “Without” is conducted. The study tries to adopt the following diagram to explain the difference and connection between Image and Deep Image.

Figure 1 shows that the expression of a deep image goes through two processes: illusion and image generation. Imagism only needs the second process to produce an image. The different step of the two lies in the first process “illusion”, and it is the Taoist view of “equality of things” that indicates that everything is equal, so that transformation (illusion) can be possible. Just as Bly turns the sand into a bird, symbolizing freedom, Wright transforms the bone into an emerald, symbolizing fortune and luck.

**Figure 1:** The difference and connection between image and deep image



## 6. Summary and Outlook

This paper adopts a diachronic research method to analyze the influence of Taoist thoughts on American poetry in the 20th century. Taking as the research objects the typical three cultural movements: the New Poetry Movement, the Beat Movement and Deep Imagism that had great influences in the 20th century in the United States, and by analyzing the poets in these three major movements and their works influenced by Taoism, this study found that in different eras, American scholars have different foci and references on Taoism. Moreover, in different eras, the depth of researching the same content is also different. The poets of the New Poetry Movement advocated the Taoist view of nature. During the Beat Movement, the American poets paid close attention to the view of “inaction”, while the poets of Deep Imagism concentrated on the illusion under the view of “equality of things”.

Every nation has its own unique and colourful culture which has been part of the world civilization. When one’s own culture can’t meet its development, one needs to reflect himself and to take nutrition from a heterogeneous culture. A famous Chinese saying goes “the stone of the mountains can be used to polish one’s own jade”, just as Greek and Roman cultures nurtured European culture. Taoist culture is profound and has a long history. Its influence on American poetry is far more than the existing research. Taoist culture has accompanied American poetry through three cultural movements: the New Poetry Movement, the Beat Movement and the Deep Imagism in the 20th century. Chinese poetry accompanying American poetry has gone through storm and stress for a hundred year. Now the influence of Taoist culture in the United States continues and will span and go on in the future.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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