

# A Brief Analysis of Early Bucolic Poetry in Chinese and Western Traditions: Exemplified by the Book of Songs and Idylls

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## Abstract:

Bucolic poetry has always been a central theme in the history of world literature. This paper will analyze the earliest examples of pastoral poetry from China and the West—*the Book of Songs* and Theocritus' *Idylls*. *The Book of Songs* presents a diverse array of themes within its bucolic poetry, characterized by its simple yet profound language and heartfelt emotions. In the *Idylls*, the poet primarily depicts an idealized vision of rural life, enriched by numerous mythical elements. Through comparison, it becomes clear that both works hold pioneering significance in developing world literary traditions, yet also reveal notable differences stemming from the distinct geographical, cultural, and philosophical contexts of their respective civilizations. Bucolic poetry marked a groundbreaking shift, turning its gaze away from heroes and leaders, and instead, focusing on the lives and emotions of the common laboring people, which imbued a touch of realism. At the same time, the cultural differences between East and West led to divergent understandings of nature in *The Book of Songs* and the *Idylls*. *The Book of Songs* advocates for the harmonious unity and integration of humanity and nature, while in the *Idylls*, there remains a distinct boundary between the two. By examining these two works side by side, readers can delve into the contrasts between Chinese and Western cultures and gain a deeper understanding of universal human themes.

**Keywords:** Bucolic poetry, pastoral poetry, the Book of Songs, Idylls.

## 1. Introduction

Bucolic poetry, chronicling the experiences and reflections of people on rural life across cultures and epochs, occupies an indelible place in the history of literature. Its origins stretch deep into the past and remains intimately tied to humanity's relationship with nature. In China, the earliest examples of bucolic poetry can be traced back to the *Book of Songs* ( a collection of poems compiled between the 11th and 6th centuries BCE), which stands as the earliest anthology of Chinese poetry. In the Western tradition, Theocritus often hailed as the father of bucolic (or pastoral) poetry, composed his *Idylls* in the 3rd century BCE. This collection of 30 poems, which profoundly shaped Western poetic traditions, laid the foundation for later poets to explore the interaction between humans and the natural world in diverse and nuanced ways.

As foundational texts in the bucolic genre, *The Book of Songs* and *Idylls* not only share common thematic elements such as depiction of pastoral life and emotion, but also diverge in their cultural expressions of rural life, particularly in their understanding of nature. By studying these seminal pieces of bucolic poetry, one can gain deeper insights into the social backgrounds, customs, and values of ancient Chinese and Greek societies, fostering a greater understanding of the broader cultural landscapes and traditions from which these early works of bucolic poetry emerged.

## 2. Definition of Bucolic Poetry

In both early Chinese and Western literary traditions, various forms of poetry exist that depict rural and pastoral life. Although these poetic forms share similar themes and subjects, they differ subtly in their approach and expression.

Some scholars have classified poetry that describes rural life into three main categories: landscape poetry, pastoral poetry, and farmer poetry. While these three forms are closely related, they differ in their origins, styles, artistic purposes, and spiritual characteristics [1]. Landscape poetry focuses primarily on the depiction of natural scenery, emphasizing the poet's appreciation and emotional response to the beauty of the landscape. Pastoral poetry, on the other hand, highlights the pleasures of a tranquil rural life, expressing the poet's joy in escaping the hustle and bustle of city life and returning to nature. It conveys the peace of working the land, embracing simplicity, and finding contentment in a humble life. In contrast to the idyllic pleasures depicted in pastoral poetry, farmer poetry centers on the ordinary daily struggles and hardships of laboring farmers, capturing the raw essence of „earth and

sweat.“ In summary, Chinese poetry that portrays rural life can generally be categorized into three types based on the subject matter: landscape poetry, which focuses on the beauty of natural scenery; pastoral poetry, which depicts the reclusive, peaceful life of scholar-gentlemen in the countryside; and farmer poetry, which illustrates the toil and hardships of ordinary peasants.

The subject of this paper, bucolic poetry, overlaps with landscape poetry, pastoral poetry, and farmer poetry. In this context, bucolic poetry specifically refers to poetry found in the Chinese *Book of Songs* and the Western *Idylls*, which focuses on depicting rural landscapes and the lives of those who inhabit them.

## 3. Early Chinese bucolic poetry, exemplified by The Book of Songs

As the starting point of ancient Chinese poetry, *the Book of Songs* captures the social life and its transformations over five centuries during the rise and decline of the Zhou dynasty. This anthology includes hymns praising the emperors and compositions for rituals and poems depicting the lives of nobility and common folk, encompassing labor, marriage, and social customs themes. *The Book of Songs* is widely regarded as a collective work, with many of its authors remaining unknown. It is traditionally believed to have been compiled by Yin Jifu and edited by Confucius. Rich in historical and artistic value, it is prominent in Chinese literature. The bucolic poetry within the *Book of Songs* can be considered China's earliest bucolic verse, profoundly influencing later generations of bucolic poets. For example, Tao Yuanming, one of China's most renowned bucolic poets, drew heavily on the *Book of Songs* in terms of form, realistic spirit, and metaphoric imagery, inheriting and developing these aspects [2]. Overall, the bucolic poetry in the *Book of Songs* can primarily be categorized into three types based on content: rural life, agricultural activities, and bucolic sentiments.

First and foremost, many works in the *Book of Songs* depict the bucolic life of society at that time, with the most classic example being *Bin Feng: Seventh Month*. This poem, comprising eight stanzas, is the longest piece in the “Guo Feng” section of the *Book of Songs*. It can be seen as a family narrative set within the feudal system of the Western Zhou dynasty, portraying the daily lives, labor, rituals, and seasonal rhythms of men and women throughout the year. The poem offers charming rural scenes, such as “In the seventh month, the crickets are in the fields; In the eighth month, they come beneath the eaves. In the ninth month, the crickets enter the doorway; In the tenth month, they crawl under my bed.( 七月在野 , 八月在宇 ,

九月在户，十月蟋蟀入我床下)” It also captures the joy of feasting with lines like “Friends gather for drink and merriment (朋酒斯飨),” and “They raise their rhinoceros horn cups (称彼兕觥).” At the same time, it reflects the hardships of poverty and social inequality: “We block the rat holes and smoke out the rats, seal the northern window and plaster the door cracks (穹窒熏鼠，塞向墐户),” alongside “The little pig they keep for themselves, The big boar they offer to the lord. (言私其豨，献豨于公)” The poem’s true worth lies in its sincere and unpretentious emotion, which unfolds a vivid picture of life, touching the heart like a gentle stream. As Chen Jin aptly notes, „The reader senses its ancient purity and profound depth, yet finds no traces of excessive triviality. Within it are warnings, questions and answers, the sentiments of the people, and the musings of women in their chambers. The undulating emotions flow naturally like wind skimming the surface of the water“ [3].

Secondly, agricultural activities constitute another essential element in the bucolic poetry of the *Book of Songs*. These activities can be divided into two categories: individual agricultural labor and large-scale societal agricultural activities, the latter of which includes rituals involving grain offerings, land reclamation, and other significant events. Agricultural labor is one of the most common themes in bucolic poetry, encompassing activities such as plowing, harvesting, herding, and weaving. These depictions paint a serene and warm picture of rural life. For instance, *Zhou Nan: Ben Shou* portrays a lively scene of gathering work, while *Zhou Song: Liang Si* illustrates the planting and harvesting of crops. The style of these works is generally light and natural; although the hardship of laborers can be felt in the lines, the poems are imbued with the joy of work and harvest. In contrast to bucolic poems that mainly feature ordinary farmers as protagonists, those depicting societal agricultural activities often center around the upper nobility. This is closely tied to the social context of the time. During the Western Zhou period, central ritual and agricultural events were primarily presided over by the nobility and officials, while commoners rarely had opportunities to participate in such large-scale affairs. Poems describing these grand events often feature scenes of agricultural labor and abundance, though on a more majestic scale. Their themes commonly include encouraging agriculture, offering prayers, and praising the deeds of kings and ancestors. For example, the poem *Minor Odes: Fu Tian* recounts the spectacle of a bountiful harvest, rituals, and the emperor of Zhou dynasty’s inspection. Lines such as “The farmers are diligent (农夫克敏),” and “We seek a thousand granaries, and ten thousand storage barns (乃求千斯仓，乃求万斯箱)” reflect the noble protagonist’s encouragement of farmers to diligently engage in

agriculture and their vision of expanding farming efforts. This poem is a bucolic ode centered on promoting agriculture and invoking blessings.

Finally, the bucolic poetry in the *Book of Songs* reflects attention to rural life and captures the everyday emotions of laborers—their joys, sorrows, and the natural bucolic sentiments characterized by contentment, ease, and freedom. For instance, *Wei Feng: Ten Acres Between* describes a group of women returning home together after a day of mulberry picking, their mood lively and joyful. *Wei Feng: Kao Pan* features a hermit living alone by a mountain stream, expressing the delight and tranquility of a reclusive life. Whether depicting ordinary laborers walking together or hermits living in solitude in the mountains, these poems serve as songs of relaxation and relief after labor and as expressions of the simple, serene, and unrestrained joys of pastoral life. In the picturesque scenery of the countryside, humans and nature harmoniously meld in a joyful union. As Liu Xie once wrote in *Carving a Dragon at the Core of Literature* (Wenxindiaolong), “Where water flows, and mountains surround, where trees mix, and clouds converge, the eyes travel to and for, while the heart breathes in and out.” The bucolic poems born from such straightforward and serene rural landscapes bring tranquility to the hearts of many. This calm, peaceful serenity, embodying leisurely contentment, not only became the earliest foundation for later bucolic poetry but also formed a spiritual homeland for many scholars and poets [4]. Whether depicting rural life, agricultural activities, or pastoral emotions, the bucolic poems in the *Book of Songs* use simple language and genuine sentiment to paint a vivid picture of village life on the Chinese land thousands of years ago. *The Book of Songs* encompasses many styles and themes within its bucolic poetry, largely a reflection of its compilation from various regions and poets. Yet, despite this diversity in style and content, the hallmark of purity and simplicity remains a consistent thread throughout the collection. As Confucius aptly remarked, it embodies a spirit of „unadulterated thought.“ These diverse bucolic poems laid the foundation for Chinese bucolic poetry, making bucolic poetry an indispensable chapter in the history of Chinese literature.

#### 4. Early Western bucolic poetry, exemplified by Idylls

In the West, the *Idylls* of the Greek poet Theocritus are widely regarded as the origin of bucolic poetry [5]. The word „bucolic“ derives from the Greek term „boukolikos,“ meaning pastoral or rustic [6]. According to Kwong, the fundamental characteristics of bucolic poetry were estab-

lished by Theocritus' "Idylls" [7].

The defining feature of the bucolic poetry in *Idylls* is its idealization of rural life. Theocritus spent his childhood on the beautiful island of Sicily, where the bright, accessible, and joyous atmosphere deeply permeated his poetry. This idyllic rural setting was further romanticized against the backdrop of the court life he later experienced in Alexandria. As a result, the country life depicted in Theocritus' works is always portrayed in a positive light—picturesque and full of happiness, existing „in an atmosphere of ripeness and chime.“ Marinelli observes that „pastoral nostalgia propelled Theocritus into action to leave Alexandria and recover the simple delights of his boyhood“ [7]. Therefore, in many of the poems in *Idylls*, the protagonists are shepherds, immersed in leisurely emotions and material abundance, rich in feeling and thought. Though they often experience disappointment in love, such disillusionment never threatens their serene, carefree existence. Instead, it lends a touch of poetic charm to their otherwise simple lives. Rather than reflecting the emotions of those living in rural areas, Theocritus' bucolic sentiment seems more like the city dwellers' fantasy of rural life, filled with longing for the peaceful, unhurried days of the countryside. Although the majority of the poetry in *Idylls* presents nature as innocent and beautiful, there are certain pieces that highlight another facet of rural life. For instance, in *Idylls 21*, a fisherman recounts a dream in which he catches a large fish, only to awaken and find himself still entrenched in poverty. Canevaro, in his essay, notes that this poem employs a perspective rooted in dark ecology, using the fisherman's impoverished existence and his dreams to reflect the tense relationship between humanity and the environment [8]. This approach challenges the idealized depictions of nature typically found in pastoral poetry. Such narratives reveal the concerns and burdens of rural inhabitants, imbued with a realism that resonates deeply.

Following Theocritus, another great pastoral poet of the West, Virgil, further deepened the tradition of idealizing rural life. During the civil wars of ancient Rome, Virgil created a place called Arcadia in his poetry—a sanctuary far removed from bloodshed and violence. In this idyllic land, „the earth will cover all with errant ivy, cyclamen, and water lilies mingled with acanthus' laugh,“ a vision of peace and beauty [7]. Thus, early Western bucolic poetry, exemplified by *Idylls*, did not aim to depict the actual lives of most farmers but rather selected and recorded the romantic and beautiful moments of rural existence. However, Virgil's portrayal of Arcadia's picturesque landscapes and tranquil life carries an undercurrent of political ideals, expressing a desire for a world free from violence and a longing for tradition and peace. For instance, in the line „The nannies will themselves bring home their udders full

of milk, nor will the herds be afraid of lions' might,“ the poet reveals his yearning for a stable and peaceful world untouched by violence. By contrast, Theocritus' *Idylls* offer a more sincere and unadorned depiction of country life.

One of the defining characteristics of *Idylls* is its straightforward, heartfelt, and passionate expression. In *Idylls VII: The Harvest-home*, the lines „All nature smelt of the opulent summertime, smelt of the season of fruit. Pears lay at our feet, apples on either side, rolling abundantly“ and „O come ye away, ye little Loves like apples red-blushing, from Byblis' fount and Oecus' mount that is fair-haired Dion's joy“ reflect the protagonist's genuine admiration for the beauty of the countryside and his beloved, imbuing the poem with an atmosphere of warmth and vibrancy.

Another significant feature of "Idylls" is the frequent appearance of mythological figures and stories. In addition to the recurring names of gods such as „Demeter,“ „Aphrodite,“ and „Apollo,“ *Idylls XI* recounts the Cyclops' love for Galatea, the daughter of a sea god, adding a rich mythological layer to the poem. In ancient Greece, mythology had a profound impact on people's lives, their work, and their beliefs. These mythological figures reflect the Greek people's understanding of nature and life, expressing their reverence for both and adhering to the tradition of incorporating myth in Greek literature, a hallmark of its era. Moreover, these figures evoke the gods of Olympus, where, in the serene countryside, humans could live in harmony with nature and the divine. This further enhances the idealized vision of rural life that permeates the poetry.

## 5. A comparative analysis of early Chinese and Western bucolic poetry

### 5.1 Similarities

Both *the Book of Songs* and Theocritus' *Idylls* represent groundbreaking works within their respective cultural traditions of bucolic poetry. Prior to the emergence of this genre, poetry in ancient China and Greece predominantly focused on themes of ritual, praise, history, and mythology, with heroes or members of the ruling class often taking center stage. Bucolic poetry, however, broke away from these grand yet distant themes and towering figures, turning its gaze to the lives of ordinary laborers. Whether in *the Book of Songs*, where folk songs evolved into poetry, or in Theocritus' works, where he left the city to return to his hometown and document the local customs, these poems brim with the vibrant essence of daily life. Though tinged with a certain idealization, these poems, through their portrayal of the daily lives and emotions of the la-

boring people, reveal a hidden side of society unknown to us, imbued with a subtle yet unmistakable realism [9,10]. They allowed readers, for the first time in the vast early history of human literature, to see the lives and emotions of common people—and in doing so, see themselves reflected. While these poems still retain elements of beautification and idealization, their humanistic focus and fresh perspective mark them as truly pioneering.

## 5.2 Difference

In bucolic poetry, which centers on rural life and emotion, the understanding of nature undoubtedly shapes much of the poetic content. In this regard, there are significant differences between China and the West.

In Chinese, the word for nature, “ziran” (自然), not only refers to the natural world but also encompasses meanings such as essence, being, and origin. Ancient China was a farming-based civilization, and through generations of cultivation and dependence on nature, the Chinese developed a unique view of the natural world. China’s favorable geography and abundant natural resources provided great convenience for its people’s survival, leading to a deep respect for the exploration of natural laws and a pursuit of harmony between humans and nature. In her paper, Chinese scholar Zhao Xiaoxia suggests that the labor songs in *the Book of Songs* expand the spatial dimension of „labor“: from the tangible realm of physical work to the imagined space where the spirit finds solace. Through mutual reflection and integration, these two realms gradually construct a luminous state of oneness between humanity and nature [11]. This is vividly reflected in their literary and artistic works. For example, the metaphor and imagery in *the Book of Songs* showcase how the Chinese liked to connect nature with the self, blending personal emotions with the surrounding environment and blurring the boundaries between external objects and the inner self. Furthermore, the Chinese believed that all things in the world followed their own inherent rules, and humanity, as part of nature, must align with them. Thus, Chinese bucolic poetry has a harmonious unity between humans and nature, known as “the unity of heaven and humanity.”

In contrast, ancient Greece’s different geographic environments shaped distinct social production methods and, in turn, different philosophical ideas. Plato’s dualism divided existence into the world of senses and ideals. The sensory world, which we perceive and interact with, was merely a projection of the ideal world, ever-changing and transient, while the world of ideals was eternal, stable, and true. This philosophical foundation greatly influenced the Greek understanding of nature. As part of the sensory world, nature was separate from the ideal realm, and im-

permanence was not regarded as the ultimate or eternal reality. This positioned nature as an „other“ in contrast to the self, making it distinct rather than fully integrated. In Greek bucolic poetry, this often resulted in a vision where humans and nature did not achieve complete harmony and unity. For example, as Thalmann mentioned in his work, the author of *Idylls* creates a variety of distinct spaces, each of which is brought to life through the narrative voices of the characters who inhabit them. These voices convey the characteristics and transformations of these spaces. The experience of space within the poem is subjective, intertwined with the self-awareness of both the poet and the narrator [12]. Consequently, the relationship between humanity and nature in *Idylls* resembles that of close friends—engaging with one another intimately, yet never fully merging.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, *the Book of Songs* and *Idylls*, as the earliest examples of bucolic poetry in China and the West, are indispensable parts of their respective literary histories and hold great significance for understanding early cultural, social, and intellectual thought. These poems, which center on the lives and emotions of ordinary people, mark groundbreaking achievements within their cultural traditions. However, they also exhibit distinct differences shaped by each civilization’s unique geographic environments, cultural contexts, and philosophical perspectives—notably in their interpretations of nature. By studying and comparing these foundational collections of pastoral poetry, one can explore the contrasts between the two cultures and gain a deeper understanding of universal human themes.

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