

The Travelling Muse—*Cathay* and the Influence of Chinese Classical Poems on Ezra Pound's Poetics^{*}

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This paper intends to study Ezra Pound's early poetics and his modernist poetry through a close research of the Eastern elements in the shaping process of his poetics and the significance and influence of his poetic thoughts on the American New Poetry Movement. In order to clarify the essence of Pound's early poetics under the influence of Chinese classical poems, the paper starts from the discussion of the influence of *Cathay* (1915) and his translation of *Cathay*; then it provides a detailed analysis of the relationship between Chinese classical poems and Pound's creation; and finally it has given an analysis of "In a Station of the Metro". Pound absorbed different poetic concepts from all of them and transformed his poetry from the conventional Romanticism to the innovative Modernism. What Pound innovated in the poetry composition is of great importance if the new era wishes to shake off the banality and out-of-date tradition in literature. Pound changed a whole generation of poets and set a good example for those who desire to write in a new way.

Keywords: Ezra Pound, early poetics, Chinese classical poems, American New Poetry Movement

Introduction

Ezra Pound has been widely acknowledged as the founder and the most prolific and talented poet of modernist poetry. Research on Pound is conducted mainly in Western countries and most of the precious manuscripts and materials are enshrined in Western universities like Yale. Though Ezra Pound absorbed a lot Chinese ingredients in his poetic creation, it's a shame to admit that the achievements in China are relatively small and immature. This is due partly to the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of his works or his other political activities and partly to the difficulties in comprehending his works. In order to better present the history and status of Poundian studies, this paper will discuss the Eastern elements in the incubating process of Pound's early poetics and the formation of his poetic style. Those elements range from the translation of *Cathay* (1915), Chinese classical poems and Chinese culture.

The Translation of *Cathay*

Cathay is a collection of Chinese classical poems translated by Pound (1915) based on the notes of American Orientalist and art historian Ernest Fenollosa. It deserves a place of its own, as the most attractive

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single volume of Pound's poetry. Scholars irritated by the inaccuracies in *Cathay* had their doubts confirmed by the later Fenollosa essay on the Chinese written character, which put forward an etymological view. As the ideograms are pictures of things—the essay argues—the Chinese script is by its very nature more concrete and poetic than alphabetic writing: reading the character for sunset, the Chinese actually sees the descending sun tangled in a tree's branches. Sinologists point out that the English may just as easily "see" the sun actually setting when they read the English word "sunset"; that usage, in Chinese as in other languages, "dulls original metaphor and turns words into counters; that most characters are not simple pictograms but of compound, confused of forgotten etymology" (Alexander, 1979, p. 97).

In Fenollosa's¹ notes, he advocated that Chinese was concrete and he maintained that verbs should be stressed at the cost of nouns. These ideas are really in accordance with the early poetics of Pound, which he published in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse for March 1913*, and were followed by "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste". He mentioned "go in fear of abstraction" and demanded "direct treatment of the 'thing'" in his principles. However, it is not due to Fenollosa's ideas that *Cathay* had the prevalent power over his contemporaries and people of today. Actually Pound did not rely on the theories of Fenollosa, instead he only used some of Fenollosa's ideas and his glosses, though it should be admitted that Fenollosa's manuscript gave him the vividness and particularity of Chinese. The success of *Cathay* should go to Li Po and Pound.

The Influence of Chinese Culture and Classical Poems on Pound

People who are really shocked by the prevailing force of *Cathay* may wonder what the real beauty of this book is. "People of today who like Chinese poetry", Eliot (1928) sagely remarked in his introduction to his selection of Pound, "are really no more liking Chinese poetry than the people who like Willow pottery and Chinesische—Turms in Munich and Kew like Chinese Art" (p. 15). He thought *Cathay* would be called a magnificent specimen of the 20th century poetry rather than a translation. The beauty of *Cathay* is to do with Chinese style, the exotic colors, quaint customs, and refined sensation of a world that is seemingly different yet the same. Pound's own interest in China dominates some poems, notably *The River Song* and *Old Idea of Choan by Rosoriu*. But the beauty of *Cathay* is more than just a delight in wine, women and song, or in the strangeness of old China. The dominant themes of this selection are the emotions of exile and homesickness; of friendship and great joys and pleasures; of war; and of contemplation. Therefore, it would be safe to say that the real charm of *Cathay* is not merely exotic, alien, or sensuous, but the recognition of human emotion. Alexander (1979) maintained in his essay that: "The particular emotional quality of *Cathay* is regretful and plangent, and its themes meet on this note. These themes embrace departure, exile, estrangement, separation, love, war, travel, escape, pleasure, heroism, rapture, ecstasy" (p. 101).

The nostalgia is not aesthetically skin deep, but has great human depth. Though the language applied in this book is simple and concise, it indeed gives the readers certain kind of precision, freshness, and a wide space for the imagination. "This sense of a painful fullness of emotion being accepted, together with the sense of the relations of Time and Beauty, is the taste that *Cathay* leaves in the mind" (Alexander, 1979, p. 102). The

¹ After his death in London in 1908, Fenollosa's unpublished notes on Chinese poetry and Japanese Noh drama were confided by his widow to noted poet Ezra Pound who, with William Butler Yeats, used them to solidify the growing interest in Far Eastern literature among modernist writers.

immediate lines following the conclusion of “Exile’s Letter” can best illustrate the influence of China on Pound’s (2003) poems:

And if you ask how I regret that parting:
It is like the flowers falling at Spring’s end,
Confused, whirled in a tangle.
What is the use of talking, and there is no end of talking,
There is no end of things in the heart. (p. 257)

In these lines, the delicacy remains, but the directness, the lack of inhibition, is new, and sounds very innovative. Chinese poets used nature and landscape to express emotion: “It is like the flowers falling at Spring’s end”. This use of nature as a language is a permanent contribution of China to Pound. Of course, all descriptive poetry, all nature poetry, uses nature as a language, but as Alexander (1979) stated in his thesis, that “China opened Pound’s eyes to a nature he or his predecessors had never noticed before and employed the language in new ways, both subtler and simpler” (p. 102). *Cathay*’s versification, melody, use of image and directness of language are indeed very different from his early poems and the works of his contemporaries. This difference presents itself primarily as a difference in “nature”, in the actual landscape.

The significance of *Cathay* can be proven in the following scholars’ remarks. According to Hugh Kenner (1995), “In the *Cathay* poems, made from Ernest Fenollosa’s notes and cribs to the ideograms of Rihaku (Li Po), Pound is at his best both as poet and translator; he is amazingly convincing at making the Chinese poet’s world his own” (p. 13). Chinese scholars have also made affirmative comments on *Cathay*. For instance, Wang Guiming (2003) held that “Through Pound’s *Cathay*, what English readers get to know about the cultural things is just the essence of Chinese culture. *Cathay* has actively functioned for the transmission of Chinese culture in the western world, which had been testified by western scholars. It is sure that westerners can learn what the real taste of the classic styles of Tang poetry is” (p. 102).

In the early 1980s, Chinese scholar Zhao Yi-heng (1983) published a book titled *Oriental Muse’s Travel in the West*, in which he discussed the relationship between Chinese literature and culture and the development of American modern poetry. In his later work *How Chinese Culture Changed American Modern Poetry* (2003), he pointed out that Chinese classical prosody, and painting techniques provide a new artistic framework for the poets of American New Poetry Movement in the 1920s. The tremendous influence functions in many aspects of American literature and culture, ranging from non-literary media (such as “chipper ship trade”, traveling), the collections of art pieces, to poetry writing. Ezra Pound, a leading poet of the New Poetry Movement, absorbed much from Chinese literary conceptions and cultural values. He translated some Chinese classical poems of the Han and Tang dynasties and published the translations in a collection entitled *Cathay*, which has been commented on so extensively that many American modern poets modeled their poems on these translations. Pound adopted creative translation methods such as paraphrasing and imitation for his translation of *Shijing*, another important collection of Chinese classical poems; many of his translations of *Shijing* are more vivid and accurate than the Victorian translators and his contemporaries. Besides his translation of Chinese classical poems, Pound also translated many Confucian works. His translation of the Four Books exercised great influence not only on his own notions of literature and politics, but also on Western writers and politicians. No doubt, Pound is one of the great contributors who introduced Chinese literature and culture to the Western people who were

actually influenced by Pound's translations and became interested in Chinese literature and culture.

Pound was a talented person in poetry writing and translation. The development of Pound's poetry and translation are very closely related to Chinese literature and culture. Just because of this reason, Poundian studies seem more important in China than most other countries; however, China's achievements are not impressive in this field, and the main part of the existing achievements belong to those scholars who live in foreign countries, that is, they are Chinese-Americans or Chinese-British people or Chinese-Canadians, such as ZHAO Yi-heng (2003), XIE Ming (1999), and YE Wei-lian (1992), etc..

Up to date, there are a few publications on the relationship between Chinese culture and the development of American modern poetry. The circle of Chinese cultural and literary studies should pay special attention to the research on Ezra Pound, who was not only one of the great founders of Western modernist literature, but also a great contributor for Sino-western cultural communication. "In China, there should have been more great achievements in Poundian studies; it is, however, awfully less achieved in this field owing to various reasons. But anyway, China should never ignore this study" (Wang, 2003, p. 100). In recent years, of the mainland scholars, Wang Guiming has achieved a lot. He published some papers on Pound's poetry and translation. His essays "Confucian Thoughts in the Pisan Cantos" in the journal *Foreign Literatures* and "On Ezra Pound's Conception of Translation and His Creative Rendering of Classical Chinese Poems" in *Chinese Translators' Journal* and "A Cognitive Approach for Observing and Evaluating Ezra Pound's Translation and Poetics" in *Ezra Pound and Education* are influential in this field. It is urgent to remedy the situation in China. Chinese scholars can make a significant contribution in this field.

An Analysis of the Typical Imagist Poem "In a Station of the Metro"

"A Few Don'ts" is the important rule put forward by Pound for the imagist poetry and also it is the most important of Pound's poetic conception in his early modernist period. In order to demonstrate Pound's imagist principle, this part presents a detailed analysis of the classic imagist poem "In a Station of the Metro".

In a Station of the Metro
The apparition of these faces in the crowds;
Petals on a wet, black bough. (Pound, 2003, p. 287)

This poem is widely acknowledged as the masterpiece of Ezra Pound in Imagism School. It was composed around the year 1914, then Pound's main interest was in visual precision and he was working at once towards concreteness and brevity. Ever since 1909, Pound, as we know, had associated with artists who saw the possibilities in the tanka and haikai. By 1914, he had read the Japanese Noh plays and was much impressed by the fact that a whole play could consist of a single image. Later, he was to translate these plays; For the present, he was impressed with their conciseness and applied the lesson to shorter poems. "In a Station of the Metro" is as short and vivid as anything could be. But this brevity was not effortless and the story of how the poem took shape is very illuminating:

Three years ago, in Paris I got out of a "metro" train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion. And that evening...I found suddenly the expression...not in speech but in little splotches of color. It was just that—a

“pattern” or hardly a pattern if by pattern you mean something with a “repeat” in it. But it was a word, the beginning, for me, of a new language in color.

I wrote a thirty-line poem, and destroyed it, because it was what we call work of the second intensity. Six months later, I made a poem half that length; a year later, I made the following hokku like sentence. (Amdur, 1936, p. 51)

In this masterpiece of Imagism, the whole poem consists of only 14 words yet it leaves an enormous space for the imagination. In the first line, the poet describes what he saw in that metro. He was touched by the appearance of those beautiful “faces”, so he introduces the word “apparition” into his poem, which means “the spirit of a dead person moving in bodily form, or just refers to ghost” (Gray, 1992, p. 53). This word vividly describes the movement and pace of the beautiful person he met in the metro and the sudden shock of the poet. This word does not show the physical movement of those people; instead, it focuses on the lightness and quickness of them grasped in just a glance. The use of this word is very appropriate under the circumstance, because the inspiration just occurred in a second, and there were so many people in the metro that is impossible to observe certain people for a long time.

In the second line, the poet makes a metaphor by comparing those beautiful “faces” to “petals on a wet, black bough”. The second line actually is only a noun phrase with “petals” as the head and the center. “Petals” the image, favored by both Eastern and Western poets, shows a very vivid and animate picture, since poets prefer to describe a beautiful woman by saying that she is “as beautiful as flowers”. In the middle of the second line, there are two parallel adjectives “wet” and “black”. These two adjectives serve as the color of the background or the curtain on the stage. Only by darkening the color of the curtain can the poet project the image of the “petals”. This use of parallelism of images is very similar to that of the Chinese poem, which sometimes just puts together many different nouns or images to form a picture. There is not a conjunction or verb in between, readers just use their imagination and the picture is projected.

The first line of this poem is a description of the reality while the second line of it is the imagination and the feeling of the poet who was at that moment deeply touched by the scene. The whole poem is a combination of the reality and the inner world of the poet. Though it has only two lines, the content and the feeling is very wide and deep. These images: “apparition”, “faces”, “petals”, and “bough”, create a complete Chinese painting, since the idea within this two lines is very close to the images and feeling that the Chinese painting with the water, mountain, and flower as the main subjects wants to convey. The gist of reading and appreciating the imagist poem is to combine your own imagination with that of the poet and to try to feel and “taste” the poem instead of just reading mechanically.

In this short poem, Pound follows his poetic conception—his “don’ts”. For example, he uses two adjectives in the second line yet these two adjectives are not just superfluous word but are important background colors in the displaying of images. This is in accord with the first “don’t”. He uses “petals” and “bough” as the main images in this poem, because according to his second “don’t”, “natural object is always the adequate symbol” (Gray, 1992, p. 53). The composition of the poem is also under the guidance of musical rules: The last word of the first line is “crowd”, while that of the second line is “bough”; these two words share the same vowel, by which the poet can create a special effect of sound and of music within these two lines.

Conclusions

The paper has presented the Eastern cultural elements in the incubating process of Pound’s early poetics and

the formation of his early poetic style, for example, the Chinese classical poems and Japanese haiku. Pound absorbed different poetic concepts from all of them and transformed his poetry from the conventional Romanticism to the innovative Modernism. It is with such complex influences that Pound finally formed his early poetics.

In order to clarify the essence of Pound's early poetics, the paper has provided a demonstration of the basic imagist principles that Pound declared in his "A Few Don'ts" and also has given a detailed analysis of "In a Station of the Metro", which is a typical example of Pound's imagist poem. The poem is Pound's powerful example of his early poetics and his applications of his revolutionary thoughts on how poetry should be written in the new century.

A close examination of Pound's early poems has revealed an important fact that most of his early poems are based on his translations of the different cultural classics. That is to say, Pound's poetry is very closely related to his translation. In Pound's works, it is hard to distinguish his translations and poems. According to Pound, there is no clear demarcation between translation and literary creation; and translation is a stimulating agent for one's literary creation, especially for poetry writing. Pound's translation has stimulated and enforced his poetry and his poetics, and his poetry, in turn, has enhanced his translation. So Pound's poetics is basically a translation-poetics, which has great influence on the New Poetry Movement.

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