

# The Influence of Chinese Boudoir Poem on American Modernist Poet Williams' *The Widow's Lament in Springtime*

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Chinese poetry has exerted a great influence on American modernist poets, especially on William Carlos Williams (1883-1963). William Carlos Williams' *The Widow's Lament in Springtime* shares some connections with Chinese Boudoir poems in theme, image, and technique. This paper tends to discuss the influence of Chinese Boudoir poems on William Carlos Williams based on his creating of *The Widow's Lament in Springtime*, which provides a new perspective for studying the communication of Chinese and American poetry.

**Keywords:** Chinese Boudoir poem, influence, William Carlos Williams, *The Widow's Lament in Springtime*

## Briefing on Chinese Boudoir Poem

Boudoir poem, the English translation of Chinese Gui-yuan poetry, is an important branch of Chinese classical poetry. Chinese Gui-yuan poetry has many English translation versions. Some scholars have translated it as Chinese Poems of Grievance with an emphasis on emotion. Other scholars have translated it as Chinese Boudoir Poems with emphasis on the boudoir scenario, which is the version chosen and discussed in this paper. Gui in Chinese means the inner chamber, which is the bedroom of ancient Chinese maidens. In Chinese Gui-yuan poetry, Gui metaphorically refers to ancient Chinese women's sex segregation (Li, 2010). Yuan in Chinese means the emotion of grievance, which indicates the poetic tone of this poetry. Together with Frontier poetry, Pastoral poetry, Shanshui poetry, etc., Boudoir poetry became indispensable in Chinese classical poetry. Historically, Boudoir poetry first appeared in *The Book of Songs* and gained the prosperity in Tang Dynasty. The first Boudoir poem in China is “卫风 伯兮” and “王风 君子于役” etc.. In ancient China, men could travel around doing business or joining the army, while women, especially married women, due to the feudal system and the feudal morals, had to stay at home suffering grievance and pain brought by the absence of their husbands. They are very prone to be ignored and abandoned by their husbands. Therefore, Boudoir poems appeared, whose subjects are the loneliness or the grievance of these young married women. According to the poets' gender, Boudoir poems can be classified into two categories. One is written by male poets, represented by Wang Changling, Li Yi, and Li Po, etc. The other is written by female poets, among which Li Qingzhao and Yu Xuanji are the well-known representatives. “闺怨” written by Wang Changling, “玉阶怨” written by Li Po, “春怨” written by Jin Changxu, “秋闺” written by Zhang Zhongsu, and “赠邻女” written by Yu Xuanji are the famous examples of Boudoir poems. For example, “长干行”, a well-known representative of Boudoir poems, was

written by Li Po during Tang Dynasty. The poem depicts the different aspects of the river-merchant's wife and delivers her true love and deep thoughts for her husband who has gone out far away for business. Another example is “闺怨”, which was written by Wang Changling in Tang Dynasty. The poem describes the psychological changes of an upper-class lady while enjoying the spring scenery. Admiring the beautiful spring scenery, she suddenly misses her husband who fights for the country in the border areas.

There are abundant domestic studies on Chinese Boudoir poem, with more than 100 articles included in CNKI, but most of them focus on Chinese Boudoir poems themselves. As for the influence of Chinese Boudoir poem on American poets, relatively few domestic scholars have studied. Some scholars placed it in a more macro context and studied the influence of Boudoir poetry on American poets when analyzing the influence of Chinese classical poetry on American poetry. For example, when studying the translation and acceptance of Chinese classical poetry by American modernist poets, Qin Dan analyzed the influence of Boudoir poetry. She pointed out that the influence of Chinese classical poetry on modern American poetry is mainly reflected in the poets' absorption of Chinese poetry techniques, themes and characters, and the poetry of Boudoir is exactly one of the two types of Chinese poetry themes that have been absorbed by modern American poetry (Qin, 2008). Another scholars put it in a more micro context and studied the impact of Boudoir poetry on American poets when analyzing the works of individual poets. For example, Luo Xinghua analyzed the poetry of American poet Carolyn Kizer to study the influence of Chinese Boudoir poetry. She pointed out that Kizer's poems imitated Chinese Boudoir poems and cleverly borrowed the imagery of classical poetry and Kizer also relied on her understanding of the environment of the narrator of the Boudoir poems to place the characters in an artistic conception full of Boudoir sense (Luo, 2012). Since Boudoir poetry is a category of Chinese native poetry that originated in and from China, there are very few overseas studies on Chinese Boudoir poetry, and most of them focus on the Boudoir poetry written by the American poet Carolyn Kizer. For example, a paper published in the *Journal of Cambridge Studies* studied the influence of Chinese Boudoir poetry on Cather. The article pointed out that Kizer gave voice to the female gender through boudoir poetry and expressed the melancholy of the female gender (Li, 2010). It can be seen that in studying the influence of Chinese Boudoir poetry on American modernist poets, predecessors have their own emphasis and gaps. This paper aims at William Carlos Williams and focuses on analyzing this American modernist poet's *The Widow's Lament in Springtime* to explore the influence of Chinese Boudoir poetry on him.

### **The Influence of Chinese Boudoir Poem on William Carlos Williams**

The early 20th century witnessed a profound transformation in American poetry, with poets like William Carlos Williams contributing to the emergence of modernist literature. Williams' work is often associated with his commitment to capturing the essence of American life, but his poetry is also enriched by influences from beyond the American literary tradition. One such influence, which has received less attention, is the profound impact of Chinese Boudoir poetry on Williams' oeuvre. Being greatly influenced by Chinese poem, especially the poems of Po Chu-I, Williams even wrote a poem named “To the Shade of Po Chu-I” in 1920 to express his adoration and reverence for this poet in Tang Dynasty: The work is heavy. I see/ bare branches laden with snow./ I try to comfort myself/ with thought of your old age./ A girl passes, in a red tam,/ the coat above her quick ankles/ snow smeared from running and falling—/ Of what shall I think now/ save of death the bright

dancer? After reading H.A. Giles's *A History of Chinese Literature* (1901) and Arthur Waley's *One Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* (1919), Williams was moved by Po Chu-I's poetry translated in the books and changed his style under the influence of Po Chu-I.

*The Widow's Lament in Springtime* was published in 1921. Williams depicted the image of a middle-aged widow who lost her lover using vivid metaphor and simple language. The poem expresses her pain after losing her husband and longing for her deceased lover, revealing the widow's deep resentment. This poem can be seen as a Boudoir poem. Williams created the Boudoir poem *The Widow's Lament in Springtime* under the influence of Chinese poetry in the following three aspects: theme, image, and technique.

### Theme

Firstly, the theme of this poem is very much like the Boudoir poem. *The Widow's Lament in Springtime* expresses the widow's lament and sorrow for her husband's death, which corresponds to the theme of Chinese Boudoir poems, which express the myriad melancholy of women in the boudoir. Their themes usually involve women's love and family. Most of them focus on women's longing, pain, worries and other emotions. The most typical themes are being sorry for spring and missing lovers. When the husband goes out to do business, join the army, or serve as an official, the woman who stays behind in her boudoir has to endure separation and suffer longing alone. For example, Jin Changxu, an poet in Tang Dynasty, wrote "春怨" as: "打起黄莺儿，莫教枝上啼。啼时惊妾梦，不得到辽西。" The husband of the woman in the poem went to fight in western Liaoning. After being separated for several years, she could only hope to meet him in dream. So she begged the yellow warbler to stop crowing, because if "I" was waked up, I would not even have the chance to meet my husband in dream, which shows the woman's suffering from lovesickness and sorrow.

In *The Widow's Lament in Springtime*, the flame-like blossoming becomes the objective correlative of the widow's mourning. When she sees "the new grass/ flames as it has flamed", she is invoked of the recollection of the past. Those grass, which has been witnessing her happiness with her husband, now turns "cold". The "yellow and some red" flowers, which embodies the furious spring, is not stronger than the grief in her heart. The poet uses the spelling technique to express this grievance of the widow. In "Thirty five years/ I lived with my husband", the poet omits the hyphen to separate these two words, and turns "thirty-five" into "thirty five" deliberately to create the connotation of tightly combination of this couple. For the past thirty-five years, nothing could separate them. Therefore, after the death of her husband, the widow gets sorrowful and heartbroken. The theme of this poem is the grievance of being left alone by husband and the sufferance brought by the separation with husband, which is the basic theme of Chinese Boudoir poem.

### Image

Secondly, the image of this poem conveys the emotion in the way of Boudoir poem. One of the major characteristics of Chinese Boudoir poem is to express the feeling by applying the image, and this sort of image appears in *The Widow's Lament in Springtime* a lot. In Chinese Boudoir poetry, trees, flowers, grass, mountains and flowing water, pavilions, fish, insects, and birds all express the melancholic feelings of women in the boudoir. Typical images of Boudoir poem include spring, flowers, etc. Spring is the main season for women to be sentimental and express their worries. Flowers are the main carrier for women to express their pain and sorrow. For example, Li Qingzhao likened herself to yellow flowers in "醉花阴": "莫道不销魂，帘卷西风，人比黄花

瘦。” Using the metaphor of yellow flowers, it is suggested that the poetess has suffered from long-term lovesickness. The examples of using the image of plants, such as flowers, grass, trees, to express the grief could be found everywhere in Chinese Boudoir poem. For example, “朝喜花艳春，暮悲花委尘。不悲花落早，悲妾似花身。” (杜荀鹤 “春闺怨”).

Williams employs the images such as “the new grass”, “the plumbtree”, “white flowers” to convey the sorrow and grief of the widow. The new grass symbolizes enormous vitality originally, but now the widow feels dismal facing it. Because the grass reminds her of her deceased husband. The plumbtree with masses of flowers intends to make people feel pleased and delighted, but now seeing them, the widow becomes sadder and more sorrowful. Because the plumbtree reminds her of the sweet memories with her husband in the past. The thriving and prosperous scene in spring gives a nice contrast to the pain and despair of the widow. Though the white flowers in the distant heavy woods are beautiful and attractive, the widow would like to commit suicide there. Bereft of husband and left alone at middle-age, the widow feels lonely and hopeless. Therefore, she “would like/ to go there/ and fall into those flowers/ and sink into the marsh near them”. However, different from Chinese Boudoir poem, the image of plants in English and American poems are usually used to express tranquility and sweetness. For example, “For oft when on my couch I lie/ In vacant or in pensive mood,/ They flash upon that inward eye/ Which is the bliss of solitude,/ And then my heart with pleasure fills,/ And dances with the Daffodils” (William, 1804). Therefore, we could conclude that Williams’ use of the image of plants, such as flowers, grass, trees, to express the grief and sorrow is somewhat influenced by Chinese Boudoir poem. Another image which is also heavily impacted by Chinese Boudoir poem is the “yard”. “Sorrow is my own yard” is very much like the feeling of Boudoir poem. In ancient China, women were confined to their boudoir, which is usually accompanied with a yard. Therefore, the image of “yard” appeared in many Chinese Boudoir poems. For example, “庭院深深深几许，杨柳堆烟，帘幕无重数。” (欧阳修 “蝶恋花”) In the first line of *The Widow's Lament in Springtime*, “Sorrow is my own yard” shows both the place narrated in the poem and the mood of the widow. “Yard” here does not only mean the physical environment, but also refers to the widow’s inner spirit world. The huge similarity with Chinese Boudoir poems and the obvious difference with traditional English and American poems in image show definitely that *The Widow's Lament in Springtime* has influenced by Chinese Boudoir poems.

### Technique

Thirdly, the male poet narrates the poem as a female narrator, which also could find a counterpart in Chinese Boudoir poems. Boudoir poem expresses the loneliness and grievance of women through the tone of a female narrator, however, there are a number of Boudoir poems created by male poets, such as Wang Changling, Li Yi, and Li Po, etc. *The Widow's Lament in Springtime* is a poem also written by a male poet but narrated through the tone of a woman. It is really common in China that male poets wrote Boudoir poems in a woman tone. However, their main purpose was not just to express the sorrow and grievance of women, but to convey their own pain through the tone of women. In ancient China, influenced by Confucian philosophy, men were supposed to be positive to earn an official position. But not all men’s dreams would be realized, therefore, some of them felt disappointed and frustrated. In ancient China, men were supposed to be strong and masculine, without the freedom to express their frustration and pain clearly and directly. They had to find an alternative to release their resentment and grievance. Therefore, it is

understandable why there were numerous Boudoir poems written by male poets. While it is really rare in English and American poetry that male poets express their feelings through a tone of woman.

Moreover, in this poem, the poet cuts the long sentences into the short phrase, which makes the reader as if hearing the widow mourning and sobbing when reading the poem aloud. As has been argued before, Williams likes Chinese poet Po Chu-I very much and has been influenced by him greatly. This influence is embodied in the technique Williams employs in the poem *The Widow's Lament in Springtime*. In this poem, the words are quite simple and colloquial, and the sentences are easy to understand. This way of producing poetry is quite similar to the way of Po Chu-I. It is said that every time Po Chu-I wrote a poem, he would read it to the old illiterate people. Once they could not understand, he would revise it until his poem could be understood by all of them. Therefore, being easy to understand is one of Po Chu-I's main characteristics, which is embodied in *The Widow's Lament in Springtime*. So, we could say that Williams' creation of *The Widow's Lament in Springtime* in a woman's tone is influenced by Chinese Boudoir poetry.

From the above, Williams created *The Widow's Lament in Springtime* under the influence of Chinese Boudoir poetry in theme, image, and narrator. After the American New Poetry Movement, Williams got in touch with Chinese poetry and wrote the American native Boudoir poem *The Widow's Lament in Springtime*. The image of widow in this poem corresponds to the woman in the Chinese Boudoir poem as being painful, lonely, and sorrowful.

### Conclusion

Chinese classical poetry has had a great influence on American modernist poetry. As the famous contemporary American poet William Stanley Merwin said: "Today, it is unimaginable to American poetry without considering the influence of Chinese poetry. This influence has become part of the tradition of American poetry" (Zhao, 1985, p. 1). Boudoir poem is a typical example of the great influence of Chinese poetry on American modernist poetry. Through the analysis and study of William Carlos Williams' *The Widow's Lament in Springtime*, we can see that this American modernist poet was greatly influenced by Chinese Boudoir poetry, which is also the important role Chinese classical poetry played in the modernization of American poetry. It is a highlight in the history of cultural exchanges between China and the United States. The unique charm and aesthetic value of Chinese literature can be blended with Western modernist poetry to create richer and more diverse poetic forms and expressions.

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