

On the Intertextual Features of Chinese Poetry and American Poetry in the 1920s

—Taking Hu Shih and Ezra Pound's Poetic Experiences and Poetry as an Example

Yingjie Guo¹, Qing Zhao²

¹School of Foreign Languages, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an 710062, China

²School of Foreign Languages, Xi'an University of Finance and Economics, Xi'an 710100, China
guoyingjie@snnu.edu.cn, bluehaddylight@163.com

Abstract - To explore the intertextual features of Chinese poetry and American poetry in the 1920s, this paper involves Chinese Hu Shih and American Ezra Pound and their poetic experiences and poetry as an example, holding that (1) Both Chinese poetry and American poetry are ensconced in a dialogical relationship with their poets. On the one hand, Hu Shih made his dialogical relationship with his poetry through his early experiences, established knowledge and his speculations about Chinese and western cultures; On the other hand, Pound made his dialogical relationship with his poetry through his talent, the digestion of western cultures as well as the oriental cultures; (2) Both Chinese poetry and American poetry prove that tradition is no longer a shackle or chain. Hu Shih was an embodiment of Chinese traditions and he concerns both traditional Chinese poetics and philosophy while Pound is a typical American poet in the 1920s to integrate the traditional European and American poetic ideas into his modern poems. (3) Both Chinese poetry and American poetry predict that parody has become a recognized art. Hu Shih might have parodied western poetic theories, styles and language while Pound might have parodied Chinese poetic forms, images and philosophy. Briefly, intertextuality is a perspective to see the features of Chinese poetry and American poetry in the 1920s.

Index Terms – Intertextuality, Chinese poetry, American poetry

1. Introduction

"Intertextuality" comes from French word "intertextualité" which was coined in 1960s by Julia Kristeva(1941-), a great Bulgarian-French poststructuralist, indicating a communicative relationship between at least two texts[1]. Although some scholars do not think highly of Kristeva's theory and claim that "behind intertextuality", they see uncertainties and confusions, intertextuality has been hailed as an objective being in our world, which either associates the literary and historical texts in the diachronic sense or relates the cultural and humanistic texts in the synchronic sense[2]. Essentially, intertextuality shows its charm in the grand connections of all possible beings, "not only referring to the theories like Structuralism, Semiology, Post-structuralism, Western Marxism, etc, but also penetrating into the specific practice of the literary and artistic criticism in Deconstructionism, New Historism, Feminism, etc." [1] Thus it has been an important perspective in the studies of literature and culture. Intertextuality is still being interpreted among scholars today and it "has come to have almost as many meanings as users, from those faithful to Kristeva's original

vision to those who simply use it as a stylish way of talking about allusion and influence," as William Irwin puts it[2]. Based on the studies above, we predict that poetry, as a unique form of art, must share the essential qualities of "text". Meanwhile, Chinese poetry and American poetry may have intimate associations, one way or another. To illustrate the possible intertextual features of Chinese poetry and American poetry, we will approach Chinese poetry and American poetry in the 1920s as an endeavor. Besides, we will also involve a representative Chinese poet Hu Shih(1891-1962) and his poetry as well as a typical American poet Ezra Pound(1885-1972) and his poetry and take them as an example to prove that Chinese poetry and American poetry are the intertextual texts.

2. The Features of Chinese Poetry and American Poetry in the 1920s

A. Both Chinese Poetry and American Poetry Are Ensconced in a Dialogical Relationship with Their Poets

In the intertextual field, dialogism is an interactive process of "agreeing and disagreeing, affirming and denying, keeping and developing, etc"[1]. According to M. M. Bakhtin(1885-1975), dialogism exists not only among human beings but also in the textual world so dialogism is a way to examine the relationship between poetry and poets because poetry is said to be rooted in its historical realities that poets concern most[2].

Generally, we will conclude three kinds of dialogical relationship that Hu Shih had established through his poetry. First, Hu Shih made a dialogical relationship with his early experiences. Unfortunately, Hu Shih had an unhappy childhood. His father died of illness when he was 2, while his mother had to take care of all household by herself. Even so, Hu Shih's mother persisted in sending him to a private school and let him receive the nine-year old-style education in his hometown. This laid a solid foundation for his future study. Also, under his mother's protection, Hu Shih accessed a lot of ancient literary books, which trained his literary abilities. Hu Shih committed wrongdoing too, which was intertextually put into his poem titled "My Mum", "When I was small, she had tried to teach me, /You are not permitted to act wildly with those untaught children. /When I was small, I ever spoke

frivolously./She taught me a lesson behind others to save my face. Oh, my Mum! /Unluckily, I got the eye disease, and you did not care to use your tongue to lick the infected part. What a scene!”[3] Moreover, Hu Shi made a dialogical relationship with his established knowledge. Because of his excellent accumulation in Chinese classical literature, Hu Shih’s capability in classical poetry writing was remarkable. Even when studying in America between 1910 and 1917, Hu Shih seized all possible opportunities to approach American and European cultures, which established his unique world outlook and knowledge orientation. He seemed happy to put what he saw and felt into the classical poems through imitating the poets like Qu Yuan(340BC-278BC), Li Po(701-762), Su Shi(1037-1101), etc. The poems like “At the Entrance of the Tomb”, “To the Country”, “A Lyric Poem”, etc. were beautiful but traditional in essence if we consider their forms[3]. He even tried to translate George G. Byron(1788-1824)’s “The Isles of Greece” into classical Chinese. Hu Shih employed the American pragmatic way to modernize Chinese poetry as he wrote in his “Optimism” , ““The huge tree is so terrible/ that it blocks my way! /Come on!/ Help me cut it down/ And dig its root out too./Aha, well done! /...”[3] Such ideas were reflected in his experimental poems like “Dream and Poetry”, “Hope”, “Crow”, etc. Thirdly, Hu Shih made a dialogical relationship through speculating about Chinese and western cultures. When Hu Shih made a daring determination to revolutionize Chinese classical poetry, he virtually had made a reasonable reflection of the Chinese poetic traditions. In his mind, Chinese poetry, beginning with The Book of Songs, reached its golden time in Tang Dynasty. Poets in the following dynasties tended to break through but felt shameful when they found they were still in the shadow of the former poetic world. However, those who had experienced western cultures like Gong Zizhen(1792-1841) and Kang Youwei(1858-1927) were able to break fresh ground with new ideas and images...Hu Shih, on the one hand, sorted out his thoughts about Chinese classical literature, and on the other hand, thought of the advantages of western culture. He meant to find a compromising way to combine the two. Though his “To Zhu Jingnong”, “Him”, “Mid-autumn Day”, etc., are not appealing[3], Hu Shih successfully made his *Experimental Poems* the first work of Chinese vernacular poetry and met the basic needs of Chinese history at that time.

Considering Pound’s rich experiences in America and Europe, we also find at least three kinds of dialogical relationship Pound made through his poetry. First, Pound made a dialogical relationship through his conceited talent. Pound was born in a comparatively cozy family. His father, Homer L. Pound(1858-1942), was ever an assayer at the Philadelphia Mint while his mother Isabel Weston(1860-1948) was an able woman full of personality. “Pound’s early education took place in a series of so-called dame schools”[4], then from 1898 to 1900, he was sent to Cheltenham Military Academy, studying “military drilling, how to shoot and the importance of submitting to authority”[4]. In this teaching environment, Pound, a “clever, independent-minded, conceited” boy was unpopular. But he carefully accumulated

his energy for his ambitious poetry. One genius poem of this period was “a limerick about American politician William Jennings Bryan”[4], which appeared in 1896. Second, Pound made a dialogical relationship through his American and European cultural complex. Pound had his first visit to Europe at 13, and it was a fascinating trip “with his mother and Aunt Frances, who took him to England, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy.”[4] For him, European cultures should be great supplements of dull American culture. He was inspired to make more amazing achievements. He later recalled, “I resolved that at 30 I would know more about poetry than any man living, that I would know what was accounted poetry everywhere, what part of poetry was ‘indestructible’, what part could not be lost by translation and scarcely less important.”[4] He was such a genius in poetry and in the following years, he published various collections of poems like *A Lume Spento* (1908), *Personae*(1909), *Provenca*(1910), *Canzoni*(1911), *Riposte* (1912), etc. In this period, Pound acted as a negotiator between European cultures and American culture. Thirdly, Pound made a dialogical relationship through his digestion of western cultures and oriental cultures. One thing changed Pound’s focus while he pursued his dreams. When he lived in London and Paris around 1920s as foreign editor of several American literary magazines, a lady named Mary M. Fenollosa found him and decided to give her husband Ernest Fenollosa(1853-1908)’s unpublished notes to him because Pound was “someone who cared about the poetry”[4]. Pound was lucky. After obtaining Fenollosa’s notes, Pound became more inspired to practice his Imagist principles as the notes helped him access much oriental poetry, lying in the fact that Fenollosa ever taught in Japan and studied Chinese poetry there, thus these notes are the first-hand materials about Chinese and Japanese poetry. Since then, Pound became indulged in Chinese poetry and culture and successfully proved himself an authority in this field. His *Cathay* (1915) and his 120-section epic-like *The Canto* (1917-1969) are the best evidences.

B. Both Chinese Poetry and American Poetry Prove That Tradition Is No Longer a Shackle or Chain

For many people in the past, tradition is something like a shackle or chain that may barrier man to develop. However, from an intertextual perspective, we hold different judgments towards tradition. As Alexander Pope(1688-1744) ever said in his work that only if we are earnest to learn from all the ancient writers can we make the modern literary criticism advance on a promising road[1]. In this sense, we may claim that tradition and modernity are intertextual because they are the intrinsically combined texts. Likewise, classical poetry and modern poetry are intertextual as poetry is basically a unique form of the “text”[2].

Hu Shih is one of the greatest promoters of Chinese modern poetry in the 1920s. He ever announced “Launching a Revolution in Literature” in 1915. Though he made successes in advocating modern poems in China, his radical ideas about tradition are still in dispute. If we take an intertextual insight into Hu Shih’s poetic experience and his *Experimental Poems*, we will find that tradition is significant to him. At least, it is

true that he was an embodiment of Chinese traditions in his life, and he concerns not only the traditional Chinese poetics but also Chinese traditional philosophy concerning Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, etc. In his revolutionary poems, we can easily find the traditional images of the past. In his first published vernacular poem “Two Butterflies”, Hu Shih wrote, “Two yellow butterflies,/both fly to the heaven./Without any reason, one suddenly comes back,/ The other one remains, yet single and lonely...”[3] Apart from the traditional rhythms between the lines, the poem obviously employs the traditional theme of friendship that most classical Chinese poets preferred. And as for its artistic symbols, readers may refer to Zhuang Zi’s butterfly and his dream. In another poem “On the Lake”, he wrote, “Above the water is a firefly,/ While on the surface of the water is another./.../They fly closer and closer./ Gradually they become one.” From this poem, we can not only read the traditional tone that Tang Dynasty poets were good at, but also sense the familiar tune that Song Dynasty poets were fond of. Obviously, the tradition that Hu Shih wanted to modernize turns out to be an important element that can immortalize him. The same thing can be seen in other poems like “An Old Dream”, “Viewing Flowers”, “Laughter”, etc. Hence, from Hu Shih’s poetry, we see tradition and modernity are co-existed.

By contrast, Ezra Pound is a typical American poet in the 1920s to integrate traditional European and American poetic ideas into his modern poetic experiments. As an expatriate poet, Pound established his reputation through founding the noted Imagist movement, which was against the Victorian clichés and verbiage. However, if we carefully observe his experiences as an Imagist, we may find that Pound’s career of getting access to modernism in poetry is one to compromise the traditional poetic thoughts with his presumed modernism. Even those he believed original in Imagism are the results of the American and European traditions that he felt unsatisfied with. As he wrote in his “The Tree”, “I stood still and was a tree amid the wood,/knowing the truth of things unseen before...”[5] Besides, Chinese and Japanese poetic traditions also influenced him a lot. Pound’s works like *The Pisan Cantos* are the obvious evidence of his skillful digestion of Chinese poetic traditions. Additionally, if we happen to meet the traditional spellings like “cometh”, “moveth”, “lo”, etc. in his “Invern”, then we ensure that Pound sincerely chose “thy bower”, “thy arm”, “thy lips”, etc. in his “La Regina Avrillouse”; If we happen to find the traditional metaphorical lines like “I would like bathe myself in strangeness:/ These comforts heaped upon me, smother me” in his “The Plunge”, he must intentionally declare that “I am a grave poetic hen/that lays poetic eggs” in his “Statement of Being”; If we happen to read the rhythmical lines like “a-b-a-b-a-b-a-b” in his “Villonaud for this Yule”, it will be not a coincidence that Pound used the regular rhythmical devices like “a-b-a-b-c-d-e-d” all over his “The Logical Conclusion”[5]... These kinds of proofs can also be found in *Cathay* and *The Cantos*.

C. Both Chinese Poetry and American Poetry Predict that Parody Has Become a Recognized Art

In the past, parody was seen as an inferior art and this

prejudice came from Aristotle(384BC-322BC)[6]. In Chapter two of his well-known *Poetics*, Aristotle referred to Hegemon of Thasos as the inventor of a kind of parody and transformed its sublime implication into a ridiculous one. Yet, from the intertextual perspective, parody implies that the parodied text has the same significance as the original one as they are combined[1]. As Dentith adds, parody is “any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice.”[6] Hutcheon comments directly, “parody...is imitation, not always at the expense of the parodied text.”[6]. Hence, parody is no longer an inferior writing art. Instead, it will be a genius imitation, creation and transformation by referring to the original text. Here, we still quote Hu Shih and Ezra Pound as an example.

As for Hu Shih, making parodies in poetry writing, especially in the initiating stage of practicing modern poetry writing, seems very necessary. He once said, “I...would refer to the western literature history,” “I loved reading books about western literature...(and) I was much affected.”[3] Basically, there were three kinds of parody Hu Shih might have fulfilled in poetry. First, Hu Shih might have parodied western poetic theories. In 1916, Hu Shih announced his “The Attempting Discussion of Literary Reform”, suggesting his “The Eight Don’tsisms”, “1.Don’t quote from classics; 2.Don’t use cliché expressions; 3.Don’t use antithesis; 4.Don’t avoid using common sayings; 5.Don’t be ungrammatical; 6.Don’t be sentimental; 7.Don’t imitate classical writers; 8.Don’t be vague.” “His literary manifesto ‘The Eight Don’tsisms’ (1916) is surprisingly similar to the Imagist principles written by Pound and singed by Flint in 1913,” Zhang Ziqing puts it[7]. Meanwhile, Huang Weiliang declares directly that “Hu Shih’s new poetry writing and new literature ideas should be influenced by American Imagism...His ‘The Eight Don’tsisms’ has the parody traces of the Imagist manifesto”. The claim should be true[7]. Next, Hu Shih might have parodied the western poetic styles. In December, 1916, New York Times reprinted six rules of the Imagist manifesto, Hu Shih cut them off from the newspaper and pasted them into his diary of that month. He also left a note there, “what the Imagists proposed has many similarities with what I thought.” In 1917, Hu Shih published “On Constructive Literature Revolution” and advocated “the free style of poetry”. In 1919, he published “On New Poetry” to clarify his belief again, “new literature should be vernacular while new literature’s style should be free and not rhythm-confined.”[3]. Accordingly, Hu Shih wrote “Conceiving” to echo his idea, “I laugh at you, the earth that orbits the sun, as you have to travel around it for a whole day;/.../ I laugh at you, millions of the planets of ode shapes, as you cannot escape your channel lines;/ I laugh at you, the wireless that covers half a million miles per minute, as your speed never matches that of my simple conceiving...”[3] which obviously combines the art of Chinese classical poetry with the style of modern western poems. Thirdly, Hu Shih might have parodied the western poetic language. Hu Shih suggested that all poets employ the living language to write poems. In his mind, either European literature or American literature, when making revolutions, would begin with the free style of language, thus Chinese

literature will also start with the liberation of Chinese language. What's more, he has "a strong belief that dead language will not produce living literature. If we dream of a living literature, we must have living language." [3] In the early 1914 and 1915, Hu Shih wrote two representative poems, one is "On the Tenth Anniversary of the Cornell Cosmopolitan Club", the other being "To Mars". Besides, Hu Shih must have consulted Harriet Monroe's Poetry because he tried to parody Sara Teasdale's "Over the Roofs" into Chinese vernacular language, which first appeared in Poetry. In the parodied poem, he wrote, "...I packed up my heart, /As if somebody shut the door, /.../ But from the roof blows, / a gust of humid wind; /.../ Fill in my room. /.../ At that time, love becomes a bit tipsy, / Saying, "I can't be shut out..." [3]

Observing Pound and his relationship with Chinese poetry, we find at least three kinds of parody he might have used. First, Pound parodied Chinese poetic forms and artistic conceptions. Let us read Pound's recognized poem "The Jewel Stairs' Grievance", "The jeweled steps are already quite white with dew, / It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings, / And I let down the crystal curtain / And watch the moon through the clear autumn." For American readers, they may think it is a poem out of Pound's own imagination whereas for Chinese readers, they may think it is a poem from their own. Virtually, it is Pound's parodied poem from Chinese poet Li Po (701-762). Here comes Li Po's original poem, "The marble stairs are white with dew, / That soaks my stockings this late night. / And I let down the crystal curtain, / And watch through it the clear autumn moon." By comparison, we may find that Pound neither really translated it nor imitated it, Pound actually used his genius imagination to recreate a poem. Secondly, Pound parodied Chinese poetic images. Influenced by his belief in Imagist principles, Pound seemed conscious of using images in his poems. He highlighted images whenever possible. He ever extended his insight into Chinese classical poems like "After Ch'u Yuan", "Liu Ch'e", "Fan-Piece, for Her Imperial Lord", etc. to get his desired images. Apart from the parodied images "surprised desert turmoil sea sun" as well as "Desolated castle, the sky, the desert", he also parodied Li Po's "A Farewell Diner at Xietiao Taven" and created "Drawing sword, cut into water, water again flows; raise cup, quench sorrow, sorrow again sorrow"; He parodied Zhang Ruoxu's "A Moonlit Flowery Night on the Spring River" and made "Spring, River, Flower, Moon, Night"...Parodying Chinese poetic images should be one of Pound's capabilities. Meanwhile, parodying Chinese poetic contents is Pound's another ability. Besides "O Fan of white silk, / clear as frost on the grass-blade, / You also are laid aside", Pound had a clever adaptation of "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter", "While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead / Played I about the front gate, pulling flowers. / You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse, / You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums. /.../ Two small people, without dislike or suspicion..." [5] Thirdly, Pound parodied Chinese poetic philosophy. With more contact with Chinese traditions, especially through careful reading Confucian works, Pound discovered a world full of Chinese wisdom. Besides "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry", Pound

put his embodied thoughts of Chinese Confucianism into his Confucius: Ta Hio (1928), Confucius: Digest of the Analects (1937), Confucius: The Great Digest (1951), Confucius: Analects (1951), etc. Through parodying Chinese poetic traditions, Pound obtained his opportunities of parodying Chinese philosophical thoughts and finally turning them into his own. To see how wonderful he is in integrating Chinese philosophy and American philosophy into one, we quote his "Canto XIII" as an instance, "Kung walked/by the dynastic temple/and into the cedar grove, /.../ And with him Khieu Tchi/ and Tian the low speaking /.../ 'You will take up chariotearing? / Then you will become known, / Or perhaps I should take up charioterring, or archery? / Or the practice of public speaking? /.../ And Kung smiled upon all of them equally..." At the end of this piece, Pound added a note, saying "Kung is K'ung-fu-tze, i.e. Confucius" [5].

3. Summary

In Taking Hu Shih and Ezra Pound and their poetry as an example, we can conclude that (1) Both Chinese poetry and American poetry are ensconced in a dialogical relationship with their poets. On the one hand, Hu Shih made his dialogical relationship with his poetry through his experiences, knowledge and speculations about Chinese and western cultures; On the other hand, Pound made his poetic dialogue through his talent, the digestion of world cultures; (2) Tradition is no longer a shackle or chain. Hu Shih was an embodiment of Chinese traditions and he concerns both the traditional Chinese poetics and philosophy while Pound is a typical American poet in the 1920s to integrate traditional western poetic ideas into his poetic experiments. (3) Parody has become a recognized art. Hu Shih fulfilled his parodying art with western poetic theories, styles and language while Pound parodied Chinese poetic forms, images and philosophy. In brief, intertextuality is a unique perspective to examine the features of Chinese poetry and American poetry in the 1920s.

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