

## Cultural or Aesthetic?

### —An Intertextual Insight into the Relationship between Ezra Pound’s Imagist Poems and Chinese Tang Poems

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**Abstract**—To argue whether the relationship between Ezra Pound’s Imagist poems and Chinese Tang poems is cultural or aesthetic, this paper employs Julia Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality as theoretical basis and takes an intertextual insight into their intrinsic associations. Fundamentally, Pound is seen as a figure who fervently established the potential relationship. On the one hand, the relationship can be cultural because Pound, before approaching Chinese Tang poems, had experienced an intertextual recognition of European culture and managed to make it Americanized. Meanwhile, when encountering Ernest Francisco Fenollosa’s manuscripts, Pound became totally enthusiastic and hooked on Chinese culture and Chinese poetry and intentionally placed them in a highlighting position to compete with powerful European culture. On the other hand, the relationship can be aesthetic because Pound fulfilled his aesthetic experimental principles of Images based on his aesthetic ideology, and his Imagist poems are the crystallization of his aesthetic thoughts and literary beliefs. In the meantime, Pound’s Image had been concerned with defamiliarization so that readers had to catch the intricate connections between the objective descriptions and the concealed feelings or attached emotions, which made his aesthetic thoughts actualized. Briefly, it is hard to claim that the relationship between Ezra Pound’s Imagist poems and Chinese Tang poems is cultural or aesthetic. From the intertextual perspective, the relationship can be both cultural and aesthetic.

**Keywords**—intertextual; cultural; aesthetic; Imagist poems; Chinese Tang poems

#### I. INTRODUCTION

“Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.” French semiotician Julia Kristeva argues in her essay titled “Word, Dialogue and Novel”[1], from which intertextuality is increasingly known to the world till today. According to Kristeva, any text is not isolated or simply confined within a closed time or space. Instead, all texts are “mingling” and “interweaving” dynamically as they are. The texts exist in a three-dimensional space, concerning not only the literary or the historical but also the cultural, the political or the philosophical[2]. Ezra Pound’s Imagist poems and Chinese Tang poems are accordingly the indispensable parts of those

texts that Kristeva relates to. So to speak, Pound’s Imagist poems and Chinese Tang poems are, to some extent, intertextual, which seems unavoidable.

A controversial figure at a time though[3], Pound has been universally known as a noted poet in the history of American modern poetry. His poems, recognized throughout the world at present, are strikingly unique in image and prominently characteristic in style. Particularly in the early period of the 20th century, Pound’s roles both as a pioneering advocator of Imagist poems and as a persistent lover of Chinese culture characterized him with potential capabilities in poetic innovation. Fundamentally, he was not a provincial follower of European poetic traditions. Instead, he was a daring experimenter of new literary forms, who would revolutionize the conventional that had existed for years while taking in the fresh ingredients from the new era as wished. And truthfully, among the nations Pound was fascinated with, China occupied a highlighting position[4]. T. S. Eliot, a brilliant contemporary of his time, ever remarked that “Pound is the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time”[5], which confirms that Pound had developed intimate relationship between his own poetic writing and Chinese poems. Undoubtedly, Chinese poems, especially Chinese Tang poems, influenced him profoundly as we can observe transparently in his early poetic works[4,5]. In a sense, Pound’s Imagist poems are intertextually associated with Chinese Tang poems. However, is the relationship cultural or aesthetical?

#### II. CULTURAL: AMERICANIZATION AND INTEGRITY

##### A. Americanization of the European Traditions

Before approaching Chinese Tang poems, Pound had experienced an intertextual recognition of European culture and managed to make it Americanized[6]. We all know that Imagist poems, which served as a medium of fulfilling new poetic creeds of modernists, were the essential content of British and American modern literature. Like Ralph W. Emerson and Walt Whitman, Pound built up his knowledge system from self-awareness as well as the certainty of his individual speculations, a result of “American spirit” that concerned mostly with “American intellectual and cultural life”[7]. Definitely, Pound ever indulged himself in

European traditional cultures as well as American way of life when growing up. Particularly at Hamilton College and the University of Pennsylvania, Pound had cultivated his talent in French, Italian, Old English, Latin, etc., which provided him with firm foundations as well as good opportunities of digesting European traditions[8].

Virtually, Pound was not happy to be a container of European traditions though he once did admire the beauty and charm of poems by Percy B. Shelley, George G. Byron, John Keats, etc. He would like to betray the European traditions for he had realized the weaknesses of the traditional poetry afterwards. In other words, the poetic traditions, according to the Imagist beliefs of his time, were “the stale expressions through the use of poetic clichés, embroidered verbiage, and superficial sentimentality”[9]. Pound was attempting to break away from “the anxiety of the influences” and sought for a unique way of Americanism that would promise his modernist poetry a stimulating force. Besides, Americanization of the modern thoughts and the new ideology of other nations became urgent to young generations[7]. Though Pound co-worked with F. S. Flint and T. E. Hulme and outlined the rules that all Imagists were to follow to create penetrating images to revolutionize the ossified poetry, he seemed not satisfied enough with his contemporary work. The wonder he longed for did not come until he encountered Chinese culture, a unique and brilliant culture where “a new Greece” was nurtured[10].

#### B. Integrity of the Chinese Spirits

It would be a gorgeous experience for Pound to get access to Chinese poetry. “In fact, even before the start of Imagism, Pound had already showed his interest in Chinese poetry.”[9]. From his adaptations of “After Ch’u Yuan”, “Liu Ch’e” and “Fan-Piece, for Her Imperial Lord”, we can observe that Pound had already been influenced by Chinese culture that European scholars such as Marco Polo, Voltaire and Samuel Johnson ever concerned. Of course, we cannot ignore a possibility that Pound referred to Chinese culture initially for novelties and inspirations[10]. When encountering Ernest Francisco Fenollosa’s manuscripts, Pound became totally enthusiastic and hooked on Chinese culture and Chinese poetry and intentionally placed them in a highlighting position to compete with powerful European culture, which indeed turned out to be unprecedented. As we know, Fenollosa died of heart attack and his wife Mary Fenollosa met Pound as scheduled in London and agreed to let Pound sort out Fenollosa’s manuscripts because she “recognized in Pound the Chinese manuscripts would find the interpreter whom her husband would have wished,” as T. S. Eliot put it[11]. Pound found the amazing parts of Chinese poetry that properly accorded with his poetic principles. His *Cathy*, published by Elkin Mathews in 1915, is “a small collection of English renderings of classical Chinese poems”[9] that actually includes nineteen selected Chinese classical poems: one poem from *The Book of Songs*, two poems from *Ancient Folk Songs*, one poem by Guo Pu, one poem by Tao Qian, one poem by Lu Zhaolin, one poem by Wang Wei, and twelve poems by Li Po[12]. Among them, fourteen poems were written in Chinese Tang Dynasty, from

which we can see how deeply Pound was influenced by Chinese Tang poems. Pound did not take the encountering for granted and believed blindly in Chinese classical traditions. Instead, he made some integrated efforts and carried out his innovation by choosing certain corresponding imagery elements from Chinese Tang poems. Particularly in his translations of Li Po’s poems, he had more individualistic “inventions” than the dogmatic cultural transmission. Perhaps because of it, Chinese readers began to convey doubts and criticism about the quality of Pound’s translation, thinking that his translation is not an excellent one or at least not a faithful one because his translation is heavily based on his “misreading” if we consider seriously his unpolished recognition of the essence of Chinese language and the cultural connotations within Chinese language. However, his “misreading” can be refreshing and unusual to some degree. In his judgment, “a Chinese poem was like a fresh start for all poetry. It came from outside the Western system of naming no European language as to permit it to Europeans an inspection of poetry anew.”[13] Thus, as we can see, Chinese culture has been silently integrated into the demonstration of Pound’s cultural inclinations and poetic perceptions.

### III. AESTHETIC: EXPERIMENTALISM AND DEFAMILIARIZATION

#### A. Experimental Writing of Images

In Pound’s mind, “An Image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time...It is the presentation of such a ‘complex’ instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art”[7]. Pound’s understanding of Image was obviously extraordinary. Nonetheless, we have to admit that Pound knew almost nothing specific and particular about Chinese characters when Mary Fenollosa met him in London, though he had acquired some lore about Chinese culture before. Fenollosa’s manuscripts became the enlightening sources to reinforce Pound’s Imagist principles and made him equipped with oriental wisdom, especially the wisdom originated from Chinese characters[9]. Basically, Pound proved him to be an extraordinary talent in exploring Chinese poetry and then developed a sharp sense of Chinese poetic images, especially when he realized that the images in Chinese Tang poems looked different and striking. Pound consciously adopted the elements he cherished most and changed them into the ones he advocated during the Imagist Movement. However, Pound lost some innate charm of Chinese poems during his adaptations if we pointedly refer to the original texts and aesthetic meanings of the corresponding poems. Yet the dish he cooked based on Chinese menu was exotic to western people, a tasty flavor indeed, which transparently made them feel debonair and entertained. To some extent, Pound’s sensitivity of Chinese Tang poems and his innovative experimentalism about poetic images resulted in an overwhelming wave that generations of American poets began to follow his footprints and popularize his styles by taking the unusual images into account[6,10].

Nevertheless, Pound's adaptations of Chinese Tang poems seemed rather interesting: Although his understanding of Chinese poems is misleading, his translations are unexpectedly impressive. Here we take "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" as an example:

"While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead  
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.  
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,  
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.  
And we went on living in the village of Chokan:  
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

...  
And you have been gone five months.  
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.  
..."[14]

"The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" is based on the first of Li Po's "Two Letters from Chang-Kan." It is also a poem that Fenollosa "named Rihaku in Japanese". Thanks to Fenollosa's notes, Pound "used Japanese paraphrases in making the translation with the result that the proper names are their Japanese equivalents." [14] Mistaken but distinctive, Pound had brilliant alterations. "Among Pound's alterations are the substitutions of blue for green, and of the image of walking on bamboo stilts for that of riding a bamboo horse"(see lines 3-4)[14]. Besides, "In May, it was hard to distinguish the reef of Yanyu or not, because the water had risen" in Li Po's original poem was translated into "And you have been gone five months." (see line 7) "May," a particularly sentimental season, then became a being with no cultural sense, leaving the Image only. Obviously, Pound's translation of Chinese Tang poems has been part of his aesthetic principles. Thus, we may perceive that Pound's poetry is the crystallization of his aesthetic thoughts and literary beliefs. Intentionally or unintentionally, Pound's poetry has been the comprehensive demonstration of his experimental writing and aesthetic ideology.

### B. Defamiliarization of "Objects" and Objectivism

His understanding of Chinese poetry was founded on his poetic idea "best expressed by the rendering of concrete objects", which could be traced and felt in a letter he wrote to William Carlos Williams, "1. To paint the thing as I see it; 2. Beauty; 3. Freedom from didacticism..." [7] Pound here emphasized the value of presenting the objectivity of objects and the aesthetic aspects of things, i.e., "beauty", apart from displaying the "freedom" of language. As for him, Image and the presentation of Image would seem more meaningful than anything else. Pound once said, "It is better to produce one Image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works" [7]. Pound's faith in Image and his fulfillment of Image in poetic writing can be summarized in the three rules firstly announced by F. S. Flint, "1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective; 2. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation; 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase not in sequence of the metronome." [7] Pound furthered his understanding of Image in 1914, claiming that "The point of Imagisme is that it does not use images as ornaments. The image itself is the speech. The image is the

word beyond formulated language." [7,10] In other words, the Image should be objective "to avoid rhetoric and moralizing, to stick closely to the object or experience being described and hardly ever, if at all, to more from this to explicit generalization." [7] In this sense, Pound's Image had been concerned with defamiliarization so that readers had to catch the intricate connections between the objective descriptions and the concealed feelings or attached emotions. Take his well-known "In a Station of the Metro" for example. This poem only contains two lines,

"The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough." [14]

But this poem owns all Imagist poetic factors and embodies all writing principles of Imagist poetry because it paints a touching and impressive water-color picture characterized with objectivism and defamiliarization. "The crowd" serves as the silent background in which "these faces" suddenly appear. How beautiful are "these faces"? Just imagine the beauty or the charm of the "petals" on a "bough". Meanwhile, "a wet, black bough" may remind readers of the Image about the "metro" that seems "wet" and "black": "wet" implies that it is raining or has just rained while "black" shows that the "metro" has existed for years and hence looks unpleasant. "Wet" and "black" can be both the background that highlights the elegance of the "petals" and the background that protrudes the beauty of "these faces". Wonderful, isn't it? Pound was said to be inspired by Japanese Haiku to compose the poem but Chinese scholars like Zhou Yunzeng [15] and Luo Congxin [16] prefer to believe that Pound was stimulated by Bai Juyi's well-known poetic lines in "Everlasting Regret"—"Lonely expressions on her face, tearing; a pear flower with spring rain", lying in the fact that Pound's lines and Bai Juyi's lines are like twins. It is hard to conclude that Pound ever got access to Bai Juyi's "Everlasting Regret", but we firmly know that Pound obtained enlightenment and influence from Chinese Tang poems. To make it more specific, we quote Li Po's lines again to see how Pound used his aesthetic principles to translate Li Po's poems. Adapted by Pound, Li Po's "the flying sand blurs the distinction of the sea and the sun" was defamiliarized as "surprised, desert turmoil, Sea sun" while Li Po's "Like the desert, the city was deserted and empty" was rendered as "Desolate castle, the sky, the wide desert". Pound, knowingly or unknowingly, employed the techniques of defamiliarization in the poetic translation of Chinese Tang poems. Yet, amazingly, Pound's translated works sparkled with personal wits and he naturally "altered western people's aesthetic sense of language", which paved the foundation of popularizing the rhythmic patterns of modern poetry through "direct treatment of the 'thing'", using "no word that did not contribute to the presentation" and the very act of employing individualized imagination and interpretation [17]. Perhaps, it is because Pound used the defamiliarized ways of writing to translate Chinese poems and put his brilliant thought into his own unique poems that the western world began to embrace fervently Chinese Tang poems. And eventually, the Imagist Movement came out to be an influential poetic school that continually brings exotic and far-reaching influence upon American literature as well as world literature [18,19].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Sam Hamill ever extolled in his work and claimed that “Modernism itself begins with Ezra Pound and the famous notebooks of Ernest Fenollosa that provided the grist for *Cathy*, a thin volume of translations from the Chinese—mostly from Li T’ai-po...”[20] The comment implies that Pound’s Imagist poems have indisputably close relationship with Chinese Tang poems. So again, is the relationship between Pound’s Imagist poems and Chinese Tang poems cultural or aesthetic? It is still hard to give answers directly. Yet through employing Julia Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality as theoretical basis and taking an intertextual insight into their intrinsic associations, we may find that Pound, a pioneering advocator of Imagist poems and a persistent lover of Chinese culture, is the figure who fervently established the potential relationship. On the one hand, the relationship can be cultural because Pound, before approaching Chinese Tang poems, had experienced an intertextual recognition of European culture and managed to make it Americanized. Meanwhile, when encountering Fenollosa’s manuscripts, Pound became totally enthusiastic and hooked on Chinese culture and Chinese poetry and intentionally placed them in a highlighting position to compete with powerful European culture. On the other hand, the relationship can be aesthetic because Pound fulfilled his aesthetic experimental principles of Images based on his aesthetic ideology, and his Imagist poems are the crystallization of his aesthetic thoughts and literary beliefs, as Pound insisted in 1913, “Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something”[7]. In the meantime, Pound’s Image had been concerned with defamiliarization so that readers had to catch the intricate connections between the objective descriptions and the concealed feelings or attached emotions, which made his aesthetic thoughts actualized. Briefly, it is hard to claim that the relationship between Ezra Pound’s Imagist poems and Chinese Tang poems is simply cultural or aesthetic. From the intertextual perspective, the relationship can be both cultural and aesthetic.

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