

EZRA POUND AND THE APPROPRIATION OF CHINESE POETRY

CATHAY, TRANSLATION, AND IMAGISM

MING XIE

GARLAND PUBLISHING, INC.
A MEMBER OF THE TAYLOR & FRANCIS GROUP
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Cathay, Translation, and Imagism
by Ming Xie

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Jonathan Hart

IN MEMORY OF MY MOTHER
&
FOR MY FATHER

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Note on Transliteration, Typographic Markers, & Italics

The transliteration of Chinese names and titles adopted in this book is that of the Wade-Giles system, in conformity with the usage of those writers discussed in this book.

Pause-marks (/ or //) and stress- or accent-marks (') are used in certain quoted passages to mark emphases and assist analyses. They are all added, unless otherwise indicated.

Italicized emphases in all quotations are added unless otherwise indicated.

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OF CHINESE POETRY

The Age of Chinese Translation

A great age of literature is perhaps always a
great age of translations; or follows it.

—Ezra Pound

The translation and appropriation of Chinese poetry by some English and American writers in the early decades of this century form the subject of this book. I shall be concerned as much with English translation of Chinese poetry *per se* as with the relationship between this body of translation from the Chinese and the developing poetics and practices of what is usually referred to as “Imagism,” as much with the question of historical influence or ascription as with certain interpretive and critical aspects of this correlative relationship.¹ Critics and commentators have often emphasized the direct influence of Chinese poetry upon the theory and practice of Imagism, attributing to Imagist poets in general and Ezra Pound in particular the perception in Chinese poetry of the essential qualities and principles for rejuvenating English poetry in the early decades of the century. In his informative and valuable “Introduction” (1968) to his *Poems of the Late T'ang*, for example, the noted scholar A.C. Graham observes, “The art of translating Chinese poetry is a by-product of the Imagist movement, first exhibited in Ezra Pound’s *Cathay* (1915), Arthur Waley’s *One Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* (1918), and Amy Lowell’s *Fir Flower Tablets* (1921).”² Graham thus echoes T.S. Eliot’s judgment in 1928 that “Chinese poetry, as we know it to-day, is something invented by Ezra Pound.”³

In the process of poetic translation and assimilation it is possible now, retrospectively, to recognize how these Anglo-American writers had construed and appropriated certain aspects of classical Chinese poetry according to their own preconceptions and creative needs. Yet when the results of such translation or adaptation are successful English *poems* in their own right, it is often tempting to assume that they are in fact closely and directly derived from their Chinese models. In this book, such assumptions and their poetic and critical consequences will be closely examined and tested against the evidence. For creative

misreading, or "misprision," for that matter, can be very successful and influential, so that historically a corpus of translations or adaptations from the Chinese can itself become an invisible tradition and establish for the Western reader a particular mode of poetic perception and canon of composition. Writing in 1965, Donald Davie offered a salutary warning that "there is a sort of illusion (a very happy one, of course) which explains why Chinese poetry so often reads well in English dress": "The quality of Chinese poetry is exactly that quality which our poetry, in the present century, has adapted itself specifically to secure. In particular, one of the 20th-century English poetic styles, imagist *vers libre*, might have been (and in fact it partly was) devised deliberately to give the translator from the Chinese just what he wants and needs to perform intelligently."⁴ Ezra Pound, Arthur Waley, and Amy Lowell were all influential in shaping this perception, and because Pound himself influenced Waley and Lowell and was by far the more original poetic intelligence, it is upon his early development and practice that this book will concentrate. This introductory chapter, in particular, will provide a closely demonstrated chronology in order to show up the various distinct stages, which often tend to be blurred, of the Imagist movement in relation to the work of Chinese translations.

In the immediately preceding historical context of Western literary culture, Chinese poetry was first invoked by some of the French symbolist poets during the second half of the nineteenth century. Théophile Gautier, for example, composed a number of poems in which he expounded a new poetic of "hardness"—a quality he perceived to be inherent in Chinese poetry—as opposed to the prevailing didacticism in French poetry of the time. *Emaux et Camées* (1851), his poems embodying such new poetic principles, were later to be recommended by Pound as the model to emulate.⁵ His daughter, Judith Gautier, produced highly influential French adaptations and imitations of Chinese poems published as *Le Livre de Jade* (1867), but Gautier's French versions had only a tenuous relation to their supposed Chinese originals.⁶

By the end of the nineteenth century there already existed a fairly large corpus of English translations from classical Chinese poetry. These were largely done by professional sinologists, chief among whom were James Legge and Herbert Giles.⁷ Neither of these two sinologists entertained any serious literary pretensions, yet they did not translate exclusively for fellow sinologists, for they also aimed at a much larger, non-professional readership. The forms of poetic expression which

Legge and Giles adopted in their Chinese translations were invariably appropriated and transferred, often in a much diluted form, from mainstream Victorian “poetic” treatment. As such their versions were a typical product, and often a second-hand rehashing, of the reassuringly familiar and conventional “poetic” staple of the Victorian era. Thus the Chinese poems translated seemed well within normative English poeticism, with recognizably familiar features of meter, rhyme, and poetic diction, and whatever strangeness and otherness that might have existed in the original Chinese all but vanished, except in the immediately detectable exoticism in names of persons and places and in a certain kind of landscape imagery. As J.M. Cohen says, “the Victorians conferred on all works alike the brown varnish of antiquarianism.”⁸

The beginning of this century saw the first burgeoning of Anglo-American interest in classical Chinese poetry, and there followed numerous volumes of English translations from the Chinese. There appeared Helen Waddell’s *Lyrics from the Chinese* (1913), a volume of adaptations mostly based on the English versions of Legge and the Latin of Père Lacharme. Waddell remarked of certain Chinese poems adapted therein that they were “surely snatches of some Chinese ‘Rubaiyat.’” The following, for example:

The world is weary, hasting on its road;
Is it worth while to add its cares to thine?
Seek for some grassy place to pour the wine,
And find an idle hour to sing an ode.⁹

Other volumes of Chinese translations in this period include those by Charles Budd, Launcelot A. Cranmer-Byng, and W.J.B. Fletcher.¹⁰ These translations invariably continued the Victorian tradition of “poetic” treatment established by Legge and Giles, and the debased Tennysonian and Pre-Raphaelite line of archaic diction and exoticism.

But the whole situation changed radically when classical Chinese poetry began to exert considerable influence upon the development of modern English and American poetic composition in the second decade of this century: classical Chinese poetry was enlisted into the avant-garde movement of poetic innovation, specifically the program of Imagism as advocated chiefly by its central figure Ezra Pound, who published his *Cathay* translations in 1915, and to a lesser extent also by Amy Lowell, who a little later put out a volume entitled *Fir-Flower*