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# Writing the Influenced Text: Modern Chinese Symbolist Poetry

Paul Manfredi

It is surprising how prevalent the influence model remains in the analysis of twentieth-century Chinese cultural phenomena, and how frequently inadequate. Though far from untested, and often flatly rejected, this epistemological frame has continued to structure descriptions of cultural production since China met the West. The problem with the influence model is that it suffers from an oversimplification similar to the one that plagues translation, where some thing is thought to move, wholly intact, from one point (language, cultural site) to another. Not only does this discursive maneuver occlude potential query into the ontological status of the thing ferried, but also the possible motives involved in undertaking the move in the first place. As Lydia Liu points out in her wide-ranging study of translation in modern China, “one does not translate between equivalents; rather, one creates tropes of equivalence in the middle zone of interlinear translation between the host and guest languages” (Liu 1995: 40).<sup>1</sup> It is the motives for that creation, moreover, that often determine the nature or character of the result. In other words, and to the extent that we can generally posit two points of “host” and “guest” as polar terminals on a single translation (or influence) scheme, the effective study of literary influence requires emphasis on the “host” rather than the “guest” aspect of

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<sup>1</sup> Another important work is Chen Xiaomei’s *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*, specifically Chapter III, “Misunderstanding Western Modernism: the Menglong Movement.” Liu’s work is broad, and does not deal at length with poetry, while Chen’s chapter, as the title suggests, is focused primarily on the contemporary period. In any event, both demonstrate effective alternatives to accepting simplistic models of literary and cultural influence.

influence, for it is always in the middle zone, or the “very ground of change” onto which the new product of the “influenced” imagination emerges. The approach I attempt in this article is to shift emphasis from imagined fields of presence (the influencing art) to the contingent (the influenced art) as the operative agent.

I will approach the argument in two phases, the first entailing analysis of a wide variety of works composed between 1830 and 1930 in France, England and China, and the second, a focus on the Symbolist movement as it occurred in the early decades of the twentieth century in China. In the first section, my choice of works from such different contexts is designed to demonstrate that despite significant variations in the cultural, linguistic and aesthetic settings, we can find a similar need for validation growing out of each poet’s desire to effect specific changes in the status quo of their respective literary arenas. Understanding the nature of the desired changes enables us to better appreciate how that desire operates as a principal determinant of choices poets make in writing the influenced text. Furthermore, and more generally, the decision to foreground what is different (itself a matter of perception, of course) derives in part from a need to lend authority to an innovation or new orientation in a given poem. By appreciating the desired changes each poet seeks to impose upon his or her particular literary context we can also better identify what type of authority s/he relies on and to what effect. In my discussion of Symbolism, a kind of case study in the larger subject of influence, I will capitalize on the stress placed on writers and critics as they attempt to herd truly incompatible elements into a coherent whole, the existence of which is always in question.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The problem of “Symbolism” even within the European context is substantial. John Porter Houston, for instance, calls the word a “mistake of journalism and polemics,” deriving largely from the modern poet Jean Moreas’ desire to avoid the more apt but fraught “decadence” (Houston 1980: ix-x). In his review of the literature on the subject, Porter points out how the various conflicting views of the history of French Symbolism inevitably remove one prominent figure to remain intact. The only figure, according to Porter, who survives historical treatment is Mallarmé, who is also by far the least prolific of the authors involved. The casualties, meanwhile, include Verlaine, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Valéry (Porter 1990: 7-10).

I will close the discussion with a focus on Li Jinfa, the “father” of Chinese Symbolism, as a particularly unwieldy case in the Symbolist inheritance specifically and influence more broadly.

李金髮

## Influence Roundabout

Angelo Philip Bertocci, in his study *From Symbolism to Baudelaire*, identifies the sculptural and painterly effects of poetry as marking a primary characteristic of French nineteenth-century poetry. One of the primary forces in defining this aesthetic orientation, Bertocci explains, was Théophile Gautier (1811-1872). Gautier’s appearance on the French literary scene was dramatic enough to have been recorded to the particular occasion: 25 February of 1830, being the opening night of the ground-breaking play *Hernani* by Victor Hugo (1802-1885). On that evening, at the age of nineteen, Gautier entered the theatre in an over-sized hat and a bright red waistcoat expressing, in his manner and his sartorial outfit, his support for Victor Hugo’s innovative play. As Gautier himself described the scene:

That evening was to be, in my opinion, and rightly too, the greatest event of the age, since it was to inaugurate free, youthful, and new thought upon the debris of old routine; and I therefore wished to solemnize the occasion by a specially splendid dress, by an eccentric and gorgeous costume that should do honor to the Master [Hugo], the school [Romanticism], and the play. (Gautier 1900-03: 130)

From this description we glimpse an important aspect of Gautier’s overall intentions where his literary career was concerned. From an early age, Gautier set about to reform the poetry (among other arts) of his age.

Gautier’s interest in “Chinese subjects,” we find, stems from this early period. In an essay, also from 1830, the year of *Hernani* and the year Bertocci identifies as having seen the rise of poetry as “art,” Gautier gives indication of the poetic Orient he envisioned, replete with:

The glazed roofs, the porcelain walls and red trellises, the yellow mansions. . .and shops filled with bizarre characters and

fantastic animals; the entire population that looks to us so baroque in flower-petals screens, parasols and cone-shaped hats, ornamental hand bells and robes decorated with large blossoms and small, winged serpents. (Schwartz 1927: 17)

Three years later Gautier attempted to put such a world into verse, producing the following poem entitled, appropriately enough, “Chinoiserie”:

No, it is not you, madame, that I love, nor you Juliet, nor you Ophelia, nor Beatrice, nor even the fair Laura, with her large and gentle eyes.

The one I love just now is in China; she dwells with her old parents, in a tower of delicate porcelain, by the Yellow River where the cormorants are.

Her eyes are turned up towards her temples, her foot small enough to be held in the hand, her complexion brighter than the copper of the lamps, her nails long and reddened with carmine.

Through her lattice screen her head looks out, touched by the swallow as it flies, and every evening, like a poet, she sings of the willow and the flower of the peach. (trans. Rees 1990: 113-14)

Gautier’s acquaintance with “Chinese subjects” was the result of his association with Jean Pierre Abel Rémusat (1788-1832), the first professor of Chinese at the Collège de France (Schwartz 1927: 14-15). In this case, the writings of Rémusat generated, through the prism of Gautier’s imagination, a picturesque, Oriental “scene” taking as its central figure a young maiden whose charms reside in her slanted eyes, small feet, copper skin and long, red fingernails—details extolled entirely in terms of their visual exotic quality. Noticeably, and even if only for a moment (“just now. . .”), this “other” maiden is visualized as superior to the greatest ladies of the Western tradition (Dante’s, Petrarch’s, Shakespeare’s), contestants who lose out in Gautier’s beauty contest entirely because of their familiarity. In this context, we might take the Chinese term for “exotic”—*yiguo qingdiao*—as a kind of model, a style or attribute predicated

more on the *yi* (difference) than on the foreign country or land (*guo*).<sup>3</sup> The poet's "Chinoiserie" amounts to a capricious, novelty-driven desire based on specifically visual difference, part and parcel of his vision for the development of poetry itself. "China" for Gautier was thus a repertoire of detail employed to set his poetry apart from existing standards of beauty (old routine), to stake out new territory for himself in the literary field.

Gautier's other major source of knowledge about China came many years later. This was Ding Dunling, a young Chinese man who appeared at the Gautier residence in 1863 offering his services as tutor to Gautier's daughter Judith (1845-1917).<sup>4</sup> Judith, about to embark on her own literary career, agreed enthusiastically to this proposal and soon after, writing under the pen name Judith Walter, collaborated with Ding in the production of a collection of translations entitled *Le Livre de jade* [The book of jade]. The following poem is "L'Escalier de jade" [The jade steps] from that collection:

The jade staircase is sparkling with dew.  
 Slowly, in the long night, the queen ascends it,  
 letting the gauze of her stockings and the train of  
 her royal garments be dampened with brilliant drops.  
 On the threshold of the pavilion, dazzled, she stops,  
 then lowers the crystal blinds which fall like a  
 cascade beneath which one sees the sun.  
 And, while the clear tinkling dies away, sad,  
 and as if in a long dream, she gazes, through  
 the pearls, at the shining autumn moon. (trans. Bien 1985: 124)

The poem on which this is based, "Jade Stairs Complaint" (Yujie yuan) by Li Bai, is a celebrated example of a five-character, fourline poem in the *yuefu* tradition. For the sake of comparison, I include it here with a relatively "straightforward"

<sup>3</sup> Heiner Fruehauf, in his article "Urban Exoticism and Its Sino-Japanese Scenery, 1910-1923," makes a similar point. See Fruehauf (1997, esp. 127-130). An alternative rendering of "exotic" would be *yixiang qingdiao*, or "feeling of a different land."

<sup>4</sup> The biographical information about Ding is sketchy. Particularly unclear is what brought him to France in the first place. Richardson provides a few likely scenarios, including the possibility that he was brought over by Napoleon III to work at the Collège de France as a Chinese instructor (Richardson 1986: 23-26).

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玉階怨 李白  
樂府

異鄉情調

translation:

On the jade steps white dew grows  
 Late into the night moisture permeates stockings  
 Returning, she lowers the crystal curtain  
 Fascinated, she gazes still at the autumn moon.<sup>5</sup>

As is characteristic of this genre, it is a simple work—*yuefu* were believed to be folk songs collected from the people of the Chinese empire—centered on the well-established theme of a woman waiting late into the night for her husband or her lover to return home. This then was Judith’s “China,” a textual entity explicated (and presumably chosen) by her tutor Ding Dunling. Judith’s choices in translation, obviously, were made in France and demonstrate significant departures from her starting point. Notably, she has installed a queen where once there was a palace lady. Following, and apparently feeling the inadequacy of mere stockings, Walter adds a full train of “royal garments” trailing behind the queen as she proceeds up the jade staircase. This brings us to the familiar moment of a woman looking out, though this time not necessarily a young, nor even necessarily beautiful woman. The most essential departure, however, is that there is no longer any suggestion of a “complaint.” Judith has erased the desire for—or even interest in—the man who, in the original poem, is keeping the woman awake late into the night in the first place. Judith has dispensed with the far-away lover and made utterly independent the subject of the queen gazing at the moon.

My point here is not to critique Judith’s innovations, but to accentuate them. For what was most frequently rehearsed by the critics of the time was not Judith’s (much less Ding’s) judicious efforts at rendering Chinese poetry into French; they were fully focused on the translated poem as full-blown invention. Anatole France, for instance, made the following comments about Judith’s collection of translations:

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<sup>5</sup> In my translation, I am following Qiu Xieyou (1983) in interpreting *linglong* as describing the way the woman watches the moon. *Linglong* refers also to the sound of pieces of jade clinking together and thus perhaps to the sound of the crystal curtain falling. It is difficult to bring these many aspects to play in translation.

She had her own style, because she had her own world of ideas and dreams. That world was the Far East, not at all as the travelers describe it to us, even when, like Loti, they are poets, but such as it had formed in the young girl's soul, a kind of deep mine, where the diamond takes shape in the darkness. . . Judith Gautier invented a measureless East as a habitation for her dreams. And that indeed is true genius! (Richardson 1986: 58)

Similarly, Victor Hugo, to whom Judith had sent a copy of her collection with an inscription translating Hugo's name into Chinese, replies:

*Le Livre de jade* is an exquisite work, and let me say that I see France in this China, and your alabaster in this porcelain. You are the daughter of a poet and the wife of a poet, daughter of a king and wife of a king, and you are yourself a queen. More than a queen, a Muse. Your dawn smiles on my shadows. Thank you, madame, and I kiss your feet. (Richardson 1986: 57)

Judith, in translating Chinese poetry, eliminates both her collaborator, and then the original work, freeing herself to compose China in the minds of her critics. Thus, even when Judith worked with some diligence to produce a degree of fidelity to the original poems, she is mostly applauded for her invention.<sup>6</sup> Still, her literary intentions are clearly cast in the context of China, represented textually in the Chinese title *Baiyu shishu* [Jade poetry collection], the Chinese subheadings that begin each chapter—like *tanjiu zuole tishi* [Poems on wine and pleasure]—and the dedication to Ding on the inside cover, and it is in this context that her readers could most appreciate her “dreams,” her “alabaster,” and her “genius.”

As it turns out, this particular poem was to have a long career in the development of Western-language poetry. After its

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<sup>6</sup> In Judith's own words: “*Le Livre de Jade* was the result of this noble effort, but, though I had gone at it fiercely, though it was honest, I was not absolutely sure about the accuracy of the poems which made up this little book; and so I did not dare affirm that they were exact translations. . . Later on, I took up *Le Livre de Jade* again. I enlarged it a great deal and corrected it ruthlessly, and, this time, I could guarantee that it was translated from the Chinese” (Richardson 1986: 56).

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