Zhaoming Qian (ed.): Ezra Pound and China

Hishikawa, Eiichi

(Citation)
Studies in English Literature,46:283-260

(Issue Date)
2005-03

(Resource Type)
journal article

(Version)
Version of Record

(URL)
https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14094/90000987

Zhaoming Qian (ed.): *Ezra Pound and China*

Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2003. x + 297 pp.

Reviewed by Eiichi Hishikawa, Kobe University

The volume under review is a collection of ten papers originally prepared for the Eighteenth International Ezra Pound Conference held in Beijing, China, July 16–19, 1999. It was the first occasion for an international colloquium on Pound to take place outside Europe and America. With "Ezra Pound and the Orient" as its theme, the conference gathered ninety participants from fifteen countries including Japan.

Although Pound never went to China on any of his travels, he "always wanted to see China," which greatly inspired him (266). His wish was, in a way, partially fulfilled this time: his daughter Mary de Rachewiltz set foot in China for the conference, who provides an afterword (282–289) for the book.

Entitled "Afterword: Kung Is to Pound As Is Water to Fishes," de Rachewiltz's essay nevertheless offers a good introduction for readers to understand how much Pound wanted to go to China, the birthplace of "Kung," Confucius, and how much China meant to Pound. She reveals the existence of a 1914 plan "for the Pound family to be reunited in China" (282). Both Ezra, in London, and his father Homer, in Philadelphia, were offered a job in China, but the possible family reunion did not happen probably due to the imminent European situation. She comments, "Perhaps it is just as well," because if it happened we "might not have the China Cantos, culled from de Mailla's *Histoire générale de la Chine*, or in fact the invention of Chinese poetry for the West, that is, *Cathay*, or Cantos 13 and 49, all written between the two terrible World Wars in Europe, as the poet was teaching himself Chinese with the Morrison and Mathews Chinese-English dictionaries, translating Confucius and living according to his teachings: Man standing by his words, with total candor and sincerity, making it new" (282).[1] This comment aptly summarizes what Pound was doing then with regard to China and what it meant to the West. She adds a comment worth remembering: "Pound used Dante as his guidebook [for *The Cantos*], but he did not find the road to China in Dante" (288). In other words, with Chinese matters Pound had to have recourse to other authors including Confucius, as the foremost authority, de Mailla, Ernest Fenollosa, Joseph Rock, et al., when composing his magnum opus.

In the present volume, two studies stand out as truly eye-opening for Pound scholars: Barry Ahearn's "*Cathay*: What Sort of Translation?" (31–48) which focuses on the hitherto overlooked issue of Pound's stance toward translation and Emily Mitchell Wallace's "'Why Not Spirits?' — 'The Universe Is Alive': Ezra Pound, Joseph Rock, the Na Khi, and Plotinus" (213–277) which cultivates the virtual terra incognita in Pound scholarship.

Barry Ahearn's study explores the hidden dichotomy in Pound's attitude toward translation. In certain cases, Pound pretends that translation process is simple because the Chinese originals are similar to Western literature. In others, he uses idiosyncratic idioms and images in translation because Chinese poetry is different and alien from Western ideas. Ahearn's concern is centered on Pound's intention, whether or not he consciously employed these tactics to avoid being pilloried in

[1] The "China Cantos" or the Chinese Cantos, that is, Cantos 53–61, and the theme of "Make it new" are deftly discussed in Hong Sun's "Pound's Quest for Confucian Ideals: The Chinese History Cantos" (96–119), focusing on Canto 53 as "the pivot of the whole epic" (114).

the press by the Chinese experts. Ahearn's aim is to attribute some features of *Cathay* "to Pound's intention to defuse the issue of his qualifications" as a translator, thereby ultimately assessing the question of whether and to what degree the poems in *Cathay* as "translations" may be found worthy of the name.

In the autumn of 1914, when Pound "essayed the mysterious, alluring Chinese poems in the Fenollosa papers," "there were detractors hovering in London," waiting for the young American to make another reckless venture like his *Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti* (1912), which "had drawn fire from the *Times Literary Supplement*," whose reviewer wrote: "He is sometimes clumsy, and often obscure, and has no fine tact about language" (31). Therefore Pound had to be careful this time not to draw further aspersions.

Ahearn argues that "Pound's efforts to minimize his role as translator are evident in the first edition of *Cathay* (1915)," in the form of two notes (32). His headnote (or subtitle) to the volume is well-known: "For the most part from the Chinese of Rihaku, from the notes of the late Ernest Fenollosa, and the decipherings of the professors Mori and Ariga." In this note documenting provenance Ahearn discerns Pound's alert to the readers to the fact that the words on the page "exist [only] as the latest link in a chain of transmission" with the implication that "the production represents a collaborative effort, combining the labours of Mori, Ariga, Fenollosa, and Pound" (33). In other words, Pound does not seem to bear "the sole responsibility for what has been produced" (33). Yet the interesting problem here is that "the note seems to cast doubt on the quality of the transmission" (33). As Hugh Kenner already noted, "the reference to the contributions of Mori and Ariga as 'decipherings' leaves the reader wondering about the professors' abilities," because the word "suggests the patient and attentive labor required to alter something obscure into something familiar" (33). The doubt is based upon the English usage of the word: "We decipher that which we do not know well" (33). It will be fair to point out that this can be a misunderstanding on the part of Pound, Kenner, and Ahearn, as they may not be aware of a tradition, among Chinese and Japanese sinologists, of academic disciplines such as science of *xungu* or *kunko* (elaborate exegetical studies for older texts). Yet the point stressed here is not only that Pound intends to minimize his role in the process of translation but that he "calls into question the qualifications of two of his fellow translators," thereby diverting readers' attention from the issue of his qualifications (33).

Pound's afterword to the first edition of *Cathay* is less well-known, in which Ahearn argues Pound intimates that the Chinese originals "have certain qualities that enable Pound and company to ease the poems across a linguistic divide" (33). In that sense, "the authority for the translation no longer rests with any particular translators," but "comes from the poems themselves" (33). In this afterword

Pound writes, "In another [poem] I find a perfect speech in a literality which will be to many most unacceptable.[2] The couplet is as follows: 'Drawing sword, cut into water, water again flows: / Raise cup, quench sorrow, sorrow again sorry'" (34). In other words, he "withholds the poem not because of his failed perception, but because some readers are not ready for it" (34). He seems to suggest that some poems speak for themselves while other poems remain unpublished not because he is not capable of translation but because readers will not accept them. Ahearn points out that "Pound presents himself as a defender of the Chinese poems, of which he is publishing only a fraction" (34). This fraction, consisting "only [of] those unquestionable poems," includes "The Jewel Stairs' Grievance" and the masterpiece "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter," both by Rihaku. In Ahearn's view, Pound is lowering "the bar for translators" in the afterword as he "leads his readers to believe that the original Chinese verses are of such high quality that even inexpert translators cannot greatly harm them" (34).

Besides these "two ways in which Pound minimizes his job as translator," namely sharing "the burden with Fenollosa, Mori, and Ariga" and contending "that the poems in *Cathay* have qualities [. . .] that make them amenable to translation," there is "a third strategy Pound employs to divert the reader's attention from his role as translator" (35–36). It is "to include images in the poems that will strike the reader as recognizably Chinese," such as the old acquaintances bowing "over their clasped hands" when they are parting (36). Yet it turns out that another translator, Herbert A. Giles, renders the same action differently: "To wave a last adieu we sought" (36). We thus find out that Pound deliberately depends "on the Western presumption that when meeting or parting, the Chinese would behave" that way (36). This instance shows that Pound's strategies to evade "the burden of responsibility as translator" may sometimes affect his poetic style (36).

Guy Davenport regards Emily Mitchell Wallace's groundbreaking study of Pound and Joseph Rock as the "radiant center" of the present volume, with her "magisterial and beautiful" research.

Among the "strange and beautiful" passages in Pound's final cantos, especially *Thrones de los Cantares* (Cantos 96–109) and *Drafts and Fragments* (Cantos 110–117), are elements of certain ceremonies and customs of the Na Khi (Naxi) people, one of the ethnic minority tribes among the non-Han Chinese living near the Tibetan border in the town of Lijiang in southwest China (9).

"Readers tend to think," Zhaoming Qian points out, "that the Naxi were an ethereal fiction and Lijiang a fantasy place on another planet," yet a "recent visit to

[2] On this literality or on "something" only literal translation can convey it may be worth surveying the excellent discussion of Christine Froula's "The Beauties of Mistranslation: On Pound's English after *Cathay*" (49–71).

the area, with a Naxi man as guide and a Naxi woman as driver, taught" Wallace otherwise (9). Her study, accompanied by photographs taken in Lijiang, eloquently shows that the paradisal atmosphere depicted by Pound is real: "The green spur, the white meadow" (Canto 101), "Wind over snow-slope" (Canto 104), "The purifications" which "are snow, rain, artemisia" (Canto 110), and "the pomegranate water, / in the clean air / over Li Chiang" (Canto 112) surround beautiful people living in peace.[3]

"Pound did not exaggerate," Qian states, "which means that his source, Joseph Rock, did not misrepresent the place and the people" (9). The Old Town of Lijiang was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1997, and a sign at the entrance to the Old Town "confirms the exceptional and universal value of a cultural and natural site, which requires protection for the benefit of all humanity." This "honor occurred mainly because of Joseph Rock's persistent and arduous efforts to record the world of the Naxi" (9), as Pound says: "And over Li Chiang, the snow range is turquoise / Rock's world that he saved us for memory / a thin trace in high air" (Canto 113). Reviewing the reasons why Pound admired the unparalleled genius of Rock as well as the ways Pound used the material that Rock collected and translated, Wallace makes evident, Qian lauds, "that the spirit of the Naxi religion [...] chimes with Pound's youthful interest in Plotinus, an ancient mentor he returned to in his old age because of his belief that 'the universe is alive'" (9).

Joseph Rock emphasizes the diversity of Na Khi religious literature:

> It is a composite religious edifice whose foundation rests primarily on primitive nature-worship (*vide* Mùan̲ ¹bpö), and on the ancient pre-buddhistic national religion of Tibet known as the Bön, of which it is in fact not only a part but a part which has survived among the ¹Na-²Khi in a purer form than can now be found in Tibet proper. ¹Na-²Khi religious literature has been influenced by Burmese Nat worship, Chinese Taoism, and finally Tibetan Buddhism; its core is however Bön with an admixture of aboriginal tribal shamanism. (216)[4]

Heeding Rock's emphases, Pound obtained one of the rare copies of Rock's 1948 article, "The ²Muan ¹Bpö Ceremony or the Sacrifice to Heaven as Practiced by the ¹Na-²Khi." Pound quotes from the ceremony, which is also called the "Propitiation of Heaven," in Cantos 104 and 112:

---

[3] The town, which is usually spelt Lijiang (also called Dayan) today, is spelt *Likiang* by Goullart and *Li Chiang* by Rock and Pound.

[4] Like Chinese, the ancient Na Khi language was pronounced in four pitched tones and marked thus before the words.

Without ²muan ¹bpo
no reality[5]

Pound also alludes to a shaman in one of Rock's photographs in Canto 101:

And the ²dto-¹mba's face (exorcist's)
muy simpático

Although the Na Khi ceremonies of propitiation and exorcism may seem incompatible with the elegant and aristocratic world of Confucius which Pound is known to have cherished, Pound learned of the connection between the Na Khi and Confucius when reading Peter Goullart's *Forgotten Kingdom* (1955) soon after its publication while he was in St Elizabeths, the Federal psychiatric institution in Washington, to which he had been committed since 1946, after being declared medically unfit to stand trial for treason.[6] Wallace argues that Pound, "reading Goullart in the mental hospital, may have been transported by his imagination far away from the discordant sounds he endured daily to the pavilion of the apricot trees in Qufu and music that Confucius himself may have heard," which, performed on the ancient instruments and the sacred scores the Na Khi have transmitted from father to son, was lyrically praised by Goullart as consisting of "notes of unimagined sweetness, falling like a cascade from the jade lunettes, and giving way to a golden shower of sounds from the chromatic bells," and the "chords from the great *chin* [. . .] like diamonds dropped into the golden melody, reinforced by a stopped diapason" (218).[7] Wallace points out that "Pound would have considered the Na Khi respect for the 'living fossils' of music from Confucius's time a top recommendation of their character, and so he was receptive to many other details of *Forgotten Kingdom*" (220).

When Pound saw the printed inscription in Goullart's book, "This book is dedicated to / DR. JOSEPH F. ROCK," Wallace points out, he started on "the course of collecting and studying Rock's articles and books"; thus "the theme of the Na Khi in *The Cantos* comes directly from Rock's scholarly studies" (222). Goullart's profound admiration for Rock became Pound's as well.[8]

On the affinity between Pound and Rock in their approach to culture James

[5] The cited text is that of Canto 104. In Canto 112 Pound slightly alters the spelling of the ceremony into "²Mùan ¹bpö."

[6] Pound was finally released from St Elizabeths Hospital in 1958.

[7] Wallace verifies that the music still survives. She notes, "There are now four Na Khi orchestras performing on the ancient instruments or copies of them" (218).

[8] Goullart stayed at Brunnenburg, where Pound lived with his daughter Mary de Rachewiltz, as a paying guest for over a decade starting from 1962 (269). She says that Goullart "was a 'comfort'" to Pound (269).

Wilhelm notes, "Like Frobenius, Rock was interested in *total culture*: he did not divorce geography from linguistics from botany from anthropology from art; he saw all things in a vast cultural ideogram that in turn resembled Pound's own central ideogram" (226).

Pound made an intensive study of more than two thousand pages of Rock's published writing, selecting the poetry that "could *not be lost* by translation" and incorporating it into his work (230). Yet Pound makes a curious allusion to Rock in Canto 110:

> Mr Rock still hopes to climb at Mount Kinabalu
> his fragments sunk (20 years)
> 13,455 ft. facing Jesselton, Borneo

Wallace has not found Mount Kinabalu in Rock's writing or in S. B. Sutton's 1974 biography of Rock, which caused her to "believe that Pound corresponded with Rock, and the letters had not yet been identified" (231). Though Sutton believes not, Wallace has already unearthed "the first letter from Rock to Pound, dated January 3, 1956" (231).[9] Her discovery will prove a critical landmark in the future Pound studies. In the above quote from Canto 110, Rock's "fragments" refer to the 1944 loss of "twelve years of work," which "went to the bottom of the Arabian Sea when the ship carrying [Rock's] papers and photographs was torpedoed" (228). Prior to this event his four large volumes with photographs, "waiting in Shanghai to be printed, were destroyed by the invading Japanese army" in 1941 (228). Yet Rock set himself the "maddening immensity of the task" again and again, pouring his energy into "a subject [of the Na Khi] so difficult to grasp and be precise about" (228). When Pound wrote Canto 110 around 1963, 20 years after Rock's loss, he thought about his own hardships he went through and decided to climb, like Rock, at his version of Mount Kinabalu, which the natives in Borneo venerate as the "resting place of departed spirits" and which the Chinese call "God's mountain" (231).[10] Wallace reviews how Pound adheres to "the solid

[9] In this two-page, handwritten letter from Rock in Hawaii to Pound at St Elizabeths Rock "summarizes his work for Pound [. . .] concerning Pound's interest in Rock's writing about the Na Khi" (272). It is in the Pound Archive at Yale. Wallace assumes that letters from Pound to Rock, along with letters from Goullart to Rock, might be found in the uncatalogued papers at the Arnold Arboretum, Boston, and elsewhere. She suggests that Goullart, who lived in Borneo, "may have written to Rock about Mt. Kinabalu and discussed it with Pound at Brunnenburg" (272–273).

[10] Pound's wartime hardships include confinement at the United States Army Disciplinary Training Center near Pisa, after being indicted *in absentia* for treason in Washington for his wartime broadcast over Rome Radio, and his postwar hardships include incarceration at St Elizabeths Hospital after trials for treason. Mount Kinabalu is the highest mountain in Borneo and Kinabalu Park, which is dominated by Mount Kinabalu, was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2000.

reality of Rock's careful, scholarly observation" of the Na Khi environments and to "precise quotation of Rock's Na Khi translations" (236), convincing us that Pound is willing to choose, as Rock was, the difficult ascent, "the path wide as a hair," the theme of which can be "found in Plotinus' *Enneads*, Rock's accounts of his travels and in many places in *The Cantos*," because Pound knows it is always "the way to salvation" (257) and because Pound believes there will be "none excluded" in the salvation (Canto 113).[11]

[11] "O God of all men, none excluded" (Canto 113) is "a prayer of gratitude," affirming "the essential Plotinian concept that the soul the body is inside of is the Soul of God, who is the God of everyone" (262). The details of the Na Khi landscape merge with Plotinus in Canto 102 (263).