

Modernism and the Orient

edited by Zhaoming Qian

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*R. John Williams*

Nearly ten years ago, in the introduction to his seminal study *Chinese Dreams: Pound, Brecht, T'el Quel*, Eric Hayot noted—with some skepticism—the ongoing, institutional success of East/West comparativism in literary studies. “Pound and China” had become its own cottage industry, Hayot observed, enjoying “something of a bull market” and showing “no signs of abating” (2). But he also wondered, “Is there still more to say about Pound and China”? In the pages that followed, Hayot provided his own unique contribution to the discourse, thereby insisting, at least for the moment, that there was indeed “still more to say.” But if “Pound and China” has become its own niche market, the more capacious field of transpacific modernism—what we might call the “Pound Era and the Orient”—has become even more rich and fluid. Recent contributions such as *Pacific Rim Modernisms* (edited by Mary Gillies, Helen Sword, and Steven Yao); Hayot’s own second book, *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain*; Josephine Park’s *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics*; Jonathan Stalling’s *Poetics of Emptiness: Transformations of Asian Thought in American Poetry*; and Christopher Bush’s *Ideographic Modernism: China, Writing, Media*—among many more new and interesting studies—show that Hayot’s “bull market” has only accelerated over the last ten years. For all the ups and downs of what has now become known as the “transnational turn” in literary studies, there is much to admire in the ongoing strength of its transpacific wing.

The potential danger of such a large and productive discourse, however, is that paradigms can become entrenched, sources and key terms can go unquestioned, traditional accounts can become self-evident and axiomatic—in short, scholars can begin repeating themselves, or, just as depressingly, can simply go on mopping up any last citational scrap lingering on the archival floor. It can be useful on occasion, then, to take the temperature of the discourse, and determine whether we’ve begun to come down with some of these common scholarly ailments, or whether there is still a healthy environment of scholarly debate and important

questions. The recent publication of *Modernism and the Orient*, edited by Zhaoming Qian, including, as it does, a wide selection of international scholarship reflecting the proceedings of a conference held in Hangzhou, China in 2010, offers precisely this opportunity for gauging the health of contemporary transpacific modernist studies, or at the very least a representative glimpse of these ongoing conversations.

As such, the title of Qian's edited volume is already worrisome. *Modernism and the Orient*? How many books with variations on this title can there be? One need only remember Qian's own earlier volume, *Orientalism and Modernism*, or Robert Kern's *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem*, or Gao Fen's *Modernism and Oriental Culture*, to say nothing of the slew of transpacific "and" books treating specific authors in this regard, including yet another Zhaoming Qian volume, *Ezra Pound and China*, Sanehide Kodama's *Ezra Pound and Japan*, Ming Xie's *Ezra Pound and the Appropriation of Chinese Poetry*—one could go on and on. Of course, we should perhaps be careful here not to dwell too much on the book's generic title (and even its somewhat bizarre cover art with its pink-and-teal map of the world—the *world*, mind you), since it is, after all, the published proceedings of an international conference designed to bring together a wide range of scholars operating under these umbrella topics.

What then of the various contributions to the volume? On this score, *Modernism and the Orient* can be—depending on the individual contribution—as tedious and unpersuasive as it can exciting and groundbreaking. It is perhaps, in this sense, a fair representation of the many levels of scholarship that scholars tend to bring to any given academic conference. However, for the purposes of evaluating the volume as a whole, rather than attempting to divide the essays into "successful" and "less successful" categories, it may be fairest and most appropriate to distinguish between those which seem most polished, rigorous, and grounded in solid evidence and those which seem more clearly to reflect the vagaries of the "conference" genre, wherein scholars can be more speculative, spend more time on tangents, and test out ideas that might not be as conducive to monograph-style analysis and publication.

In the latter category, for instance, there are interesting contributions by Zhong Longxi, David Albright, Tony Lopez, Qiping Yin, Ira Nadel, and Fen Gao. Longxi's essay, for example, "Elective Affinities? On Wilde's Reading of Zhuangzi" offers a reading of Oscar Wilde's essay, "A Chinese

Sage," in which Wilde's individualist socialism shows a clear debt to the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi. The observation that Wilde found "great inspiration" in Zhuangzi is helpful and does much to support the orientalist/modernist theme of the conference, but one wishes that Longxi had provided a little more analysis of Wilde's use of Zhuangzi—and perhaps a little less of the somewhat tangential diatribe against the "obscurantist and jargon-ridden" writing style of "contemporary postmodern and post-colonial critics" (28). The longest and perhaps most interesting tangential moment in the volume is Daniel Albright's lengthy tour through "flute history," in "The Flute—East/West—in Modernist Music and Poetry." Albright takes his readers all the way back to "a 35,000-year-old flute found in a cave in southern Germany" (56), and then on to the evidence of Neolithic flutes in China's Henan Province, the tradition of erotic flute music in ancient Greece, Rousseau's preference for the flute's "simplicity and vigor" (57), the pastoral flutes of Beethoven and Mozart, and finally Debussy (all amounting to a rather lengthy backdrop for a discussion of "modernism"). The final effect provides a rich and complex history of the flute—so rich, in fact, that one wonders if the references to the flutes Albright analyzes in Yeats and Pound can possibly contain so many points of contact. But Albright is both lyrical and persuasive in his argument, and one cannot help feeling that even if Pound were unaware of this deeper historical trajectory of the instrument, our readings of these poems are richer for Albright's having taken us there. The same thing might be said of Tony Lopez's charming essay on "The Orient in Later Modernist English Poetry," which offers less scholarly research than it does poetic readings of Lee Harwood and Harry Guest. Lopez, his essay makes evident, is as much a poet as the poets he is studying.

The essays by Qiping Yin, Ira Nadel, and Fen Gao draw parallels between the orientalist discourse and modernist aesthetics of Robert Frost, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf respectively. Yin and Nadel are to be commended for taking on a more difficult task, since (unlike those studying, say, Pound, Moore, and Williams) the archive offers fewer direct points of contact between Frost, Joyce, and Chinese philosophy. Unfortunately, their findings are sometimes less persuasive for that difficulty. Yin, for instance, acknowledges that there is "no solid evidence" (111) that would link Robert Frost and ancient Chinese philosophy, and so he is left with the vague conviction that "one way or another" there must be a connection. His evidence thus intimates comparisons between "themes" and

“details” in Frost and Daoism: “Frost’s poems abound in details that are redolent of those in Taoist works such as *Tao Tê Ching*” (112). These “redolent” similarities, Yin insists (more than once), are “striking” (112, 118). As striking as these parallels might be, however, one is unsure of what to do with such a comparison without any historical or documentary evidence to link the two sets of works together. Ira Nadel’s contribution promises an even more fascinating parallel between James Joyce’s literary innovations and the “Graphic Design of Chinese Writing,” but the connections between Joyce and China are far from precise. Joyce, Nadel explains, had an education grounded in the “obedience, authority, and scholasticism” of the Irish Jesuits; the Chinese too had an education system with those cultural values and practices; and Joyce’s Jesuit education “likely included discussion of the Jesuit’s early explorations of China” (129). But such parallels and likelihoods are far from hard evidence, and when it comes to Nadel’s main argument, the evidence is similarly thin. There are “parallel” textual practices, Nadel argues, between Chinese writing (Nadel means *all* Chinese writing) and Joyce’s “linguistic experiments,” even if Joyce constructed these parallels “unwittingly” (137). By contrast, the connections between China and Virginia Woolf, as Patricia Lawrence’s *Lily Briscoe’s Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism, and China* has shown, are more direct and complex. Fen Gao’s comparative study, however, ignores Lawrence’s research in favor of drawing comparisons between Woolf’s notions of truth and those of “Chinese poetics,” which Gao insists can be gathered entirely within the combinatory notion of *Zhenhuan*, or “the truth of life . . . and the illusion of art” (17). Again, however, Gao’s comparison only goes as far as phrases like, “similar insights” (151), “similar opinions can be found” (154), and “similar to the gist of” (155), and is unfortunately weak on more direct zones of discursive contact.

The most compelling accounts of transpacific discourse in *Modernism and the Orient* offer more direct evidence of East/West influence and explore the cultural consequences of that interaction. Christian Kloeckner’s essay “Re-Orienting Impersonality: T. S. Eliot and the Self of the Far East,” for instance, makes a major contribution to both Eliot studies and the study of American orientalism by identifying a specific discursive trajectory from Percival Lowell’s racist theory of “impersonality” in *The Soul of the Far East* (1888) to Eliot’s authorial practice of the same name. Rather than simply drawing comparisons between Eastern and Western notions of individuality, Kloeckner finds a generational development

*within* orientalist discourse between Lowell and Eliot, thereby allowing him to explore, in provocative new ways, “the ethical dimensions of Eliot’s impersonal poetics” (167). In the process Kloeckner further elucidates passages in *The Waste Land* that have already been identified as showing a clear debt to Sanskrit texts and Buddhist mythology. Richard Parker’s “Louis Zukofsky’s American Zen” offers a similarly complicated and well-documented account of Zukofsky’s interest in Asian aesthetics both by way and in spite of Ezra Pound, while Christine Froula’s “Proust’s China” draws out a very specific notion of China’s “high craft” (and Asian “*techne*”) that found its way into *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* through the orientalist visual culture of Johannes Vermeer, and made important contributions to Proust’s notion of temporality and writerly technique.

Two contributions to the volume provide interesting new archival discoveries. Zhaoming Qian and Ronald Bush each further our understanding of, respectively, Ezra Pound’s heretofore little-known flirtation with the “Kuanon” figure of Fenollosian Buddhism and Mai-mai Sze’s direct friendship with Marianne Moore. Bush’s contribution is perhaps even more startling for how it modifies a thesis he developed over thirty years ago in *The Genesis of the Cantos of Ezra*. In that book, Bush argued that there was actually very little “Fenollosa” in the final Poundian notion of the ideogrammatic method. In this essay, by contrast, he reads the unpublished wartime Italian drafts of Pound’s *Pisan Cantos* and discovers several references to the Kuanon (Buddhist) deity that Fenollosa had discussed in his posthumously published *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*. Whether these references actually constitute a return to Fenollosa, however, is not exactly a settled issue (as Bush clearly knows) since anything Pound might have written regarding the potential “axis” between Confucius and Buddha in 1945 is heavily tinged with that other “axis” in Pound’s mind, to say nothing of the fact that the poet excised many of these references before having them published. Zhaoming Qian’s essay on Mai-mai Sze and Marianne Moore, meanwhile, details the discovery and implications of a previously unpublished transcript of what was thought to be a “lost” lecture by Moore titled “Tedium and Integrity.” Having located an audio recording of Moore’s lecture in Mills College’s F.W. Olin Library Special Collections, Qian proceeds to analyze some of the lecture’s key passages, all of which underscore Qian’s own previous thesis about Moore in his *The Modernist Response to Chinese Art*—namely, that Moore drew inspiration from Daoism, most particularly the version

expounded by Chinese American artist and writer Mai-mai Sze, who carried on a long correspondence with Moore during the 1950s and 1960s. Qian suggests that Sze “filled the void in Moore’s career” (229) that had been occupied previously by Moore’s own mother. The implication then (not surprisingly, given Qian’s ongoing effort to place the Orient at the center of Anglo American modernism), is that just as “Sze’s *The Tao of Painting* literally excited [Moore] into new creativity,” so China itself became a “mother” of sorts to Anglo American modernism.

One of the most provocative moments in *Modernism and the Orient* appears in Sabine Sielke’s essay, “‘Orientalizing’ Emily Dickinson and Marianne Moore—Complicating Modernism?” I end this review with Sielke’s essay not because I think her argument is necessarily more groundbreaking or rigorous than some of those discussed above; indeed, hers is a mainly interrogative account of recent scholarship on Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, and modernism, paying particular attention to the gendered dynamics of East/West stereotypes that occur in the two poets’ work. But Sielke’s piece does ask the most startling questions of the volume—questions that, I would argue, are not ever really thoroughly addressed in *Modernism and the Orient*. Sielke writes:

What, however, is the goal of remapping modernist terrain by way of the Orient? What motivates our interest in how Orient and Orientalisms figure in [these several authors]? . . . In what ways do they transform our sense of what modernism was? What do we remember of modernism as we “orientalize” its cultural practices? And what do we forget about modernism in the process of resituating its poetic practices in the cultural politics of global geo-political and economic processes? (39)

Sielke rather quickly concedes, “I fear, I am not going to answer all these questions,” and, indeed, it would not be fair to expect her to do so all by herself. But perhaps the fact that these questions still remain up for grabs, in all their complex iterations and cross-cultural points of contact, is one indication that the field of transpacific studies still has a great deal of work ahead of it.

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