

Silences, Whispers, and the Figure of China:

Translation Anxiety in Contemporary American Poetry

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According to Rey Chow, the “inscrutable Chinese” is “the cross-ethnic stereotype par excellence.” How does this stereotype play out in modern and contemporary American poetry’s tradition of representing China and Chinese literature? For poet and Asian American studies professor Timothy Yu, whose *100 Hundred Chinese Silences* (2016) comprises parodic rewritings of poems that try to engage with the Chinese aesthetic, the representation of China in American poetry amounts to an “orientalist tradition” that “sees China as a source of unchanging aesthetic traits fixed in a remote past,” offering stereotypes of Asians as “silent, reticent, passive, yet also exotic, mysterious, objects of aesthetic contemplation.” But is Yu’s project not at the same time reinscribing a kind of Chinese inscrutability, presenting China as perennially unknowable in its critique of so many efforts to make Chinese culture known? Understanding translation through Judith Butler’s “performativity,” the article looks critically both at Yu’s poems and the texts he parodies, in particular those by Gary Snyder and Ezra Pound, in the context of works by John Ashbery, the Language poets, Jonathan Stalling, and Eliot Weinberger, to argue that Yu’s work represents a translation anxiety and pleas for more translations into English, including into American poetry.

Keywords translation, American poetry, orientalism, Ezra Pound, Timothy Yu

“What do you think of this poem?” (Yu 2016, 3). The question is here asked by the persona of Timothy Yu, poet and professor of English and Asian American studies, at the grave of his grandfather. Then,

A Chinese silence fell.

The dead old man did not reply: “His Chinese silence coiled its tail / into the shape of a long-lobed ear” and dropped “into a cardboard box full of other silences” (3). The long-lobed ear is, Yu writes, “one of the one hundred American signs / for anxious virility,” before he acknowledges:

OK, I made that last part up.

But you must admit it was a fabulous metaphor.

No? Oh, now I see

you are just as Chinese

as all the other silences—

the Silence of the Heavily Armed Gunboat,

or the Silence of the Drunken Mariner,

or my grandfather's silence, like the Liberty Bell,

only cracked right through. (3)

The poem is an excellent send-up of “Grave,” a noted poem by Billy Collins (2013, 129–30) that features “the one hundred kinds of silence according to the Chinese belief,” with differences “so faint that only a few special monks / were able to tell one from another,” though Collins later admits to being the one

who had just made up the business of the one hundred Chinese silences—

the Silence of the Night Boat,

and the Silence of the Lotus, cousin to the Silence of the Temple Bell

only deeper and softer, like petals, at its farthest edges.

When Collins gave a reading at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in April 2011, Yu was one of the roughly twelve hundred people in attendance. Hearing “Grave,” Yu was inspired, so to speak, to write one hundred poems parodying the way Chinese people and culture have been treated in modern and contemporary American poetry.

So what do I think of these poems? Unfortunately for Yu's project (but fortunately for American poetry), Collins did not write a hundred poems with laughable depictions of Chinese people and Chinese culture, so Yu had to look elsewhere in the tradition of modern American poetry and its writing of China for source texts for his remaining "Silences." His *100 Hundred Chinese Silences* (2016) takes aim not only at "official verse culture" poets (see Bernstein 1986) signifying China but at the avant-garde tradition of translations and translational representations of Chinese poetry as well. Yu's 2012 chapbook *15 Chinese Silences* includes only poems targeting Collins and hence is better. In the other eighty-five silences, the broad application dulls the sharpness of Yu's satire.

Yu (2014, 4) has explained his parody as rooted in his not being able "in good faith [to] claim a position 'outside' this tradition, as if I possessed some special knowledge of 'being Chinese.'" Such a stance, he said, would simply substitute "one essentialism for another," presenting "a more 'authentic' version of Chinese culture than that presented by orientalism."¹ Indeed. After Collins, the second most parodied poet is Ezra Pound, such as in "Chinese Silence No. 73":

The jeweled steps are nearly as white as you.

It won't help if you put on my wet gauze stockings.

You're a letdown behind your Chinese curtain

When the moon shines clear through your autumn.

NOTES: Jewel stairs glitter quietly. Silence, because there is nothing to complain of.

Gauze stockings, therefore a lady, not someone who complains. Autumn, a metaphor for

virility. Also I came early, climbed the stairs myself, and wore my best stockings. Being Chinese, she uttered no reproach. (Yu 2016, 98)

This extends to parodies of other translators and writers who have also been powerfully affected by China and Chinese, such as Gary Snyder, Eliot Weinberger, and Jonathan Stalling. In one instance Yu parodies these three at once, mocking Snyder and Stalling via a caricature of Weinberger 2011 (48). Yu (2016, 56) parodies Snyder's "Axe Handles," which draws its lineage back through to Pound:

One afternoon the second week in December

My son is throwing a hissyfit

.....

I grab him by his ass handle

And swing him back like a hatchet,

Thinking to cut him down to size

.....

So I begin to tell him about the Chinese

And their patient silence, the silence

Learned from Ezra Pound

At Rapallo:

"C'est moi

dans la poubelle"

And I say this to the kid

“Look: I’m gonna slap your handle

With my handle

And the ass it rode in on—”

And he sees. And I hear it again:

It’s in *A Draft of XVI Cantos*, 1924

A.D., Canto XIV—in the

First stanza: “Faces smeared on their rumps,

wide eye on flat buttock,

Bush hanging for beard,

Addressing crowds through their arse-holes.”

I translated that into Chinese

And taught it to Americans

And I see: Pound was an ass,

I am an ass

And my son a handle, soon

To be wielded again, silent

Tool watching me pull a culture

From what I’m sitting on.

The poem is a multilayered assertion of American poetry silencing Chinese through both Pound's silence and his voice. Pound did indeed die silent ("C'est moi dans la poubelle," muttered viewing Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, was one of the few times he spoke in the decade preceding his death in 1972 [quoted in Laughlin 1987, 29]), and his voice is as associated with critical rantings and anti-Semitic invectives as it is with Confucian wisdom ("Faces smeared on their rumps" is from "Canto XIV" [Pound 1996, 61]). "What would happen to the orientalist tradition," Yu (2014, 7–8) asks, if he restored to Pound's voice "its politics, its disgust and resentments, its racism and imperialism?" But Yu's reduction of Chinese translation to Poundian prejudice and his criticism of all representations of China imply either that all translations and representations of China and Chinese literature are unethical or that he does have "some special knowledge of 'being Chinese'" "'outside' this tradition." Either answer would, I think, substitute one essentialism for another.

Rey Chow (2001, 73) has called "the notion of inscrutable Chinese . . . the cross-ethnic stereotype par excellence." For Yu (2014, 4), the figure of China in American poetry resonates with "a whole complex of stereotypes about Asians: silent, reticent, passive, yet also exotic, mysterious, objects of aesthetic contemplation." "The orientalist tradition in modern poetry," he says, "sees China as a source of unchanging aesthetic traits fixed in a remote past" (5). It is subaltern because it cannot speak (Spivak 1988). But is *Orientalism*—Edward W. Said's (1978, 7) critique of a discourse of Western "flexible *positional* superiority" in its "relationships with the Orient"—the right notion to invoke while discussing the tradition of poetic translation from Chinese? I will work toward an answer to this question, but suffice it to say that *Chinese Silences* demonstrates what I will call translation anxiety. Parodying white poets' representations of Chinese culture to highlight the aesthetic features he finds nascent in those texts, Yu is at a very

basic level practicing translation, yet his poems criticize translations for allegedly positing an “authentic,” unchanging source culture and for discursively trafficking in stereotyped images regardless of their philological accuracy. But in such skepticism that anything can penetrate the barrier between American poetics and Asian literature, this translation anxiety ends up redeploying the trope of Chinese as inscrutable.

Chinese inscrutability reinscribed through the *doxa* (belief) of translation anxiety will form the subject of my article. In Yu’s case, I imagine that his translation anxiety is a symptom of what I have noticed as a core tension within the Asian American identity, namely, its relationship to non-American Asian culture. Asian Americans are expected to prove their allegiance to two opposing forces, the Asian and the American. On the one hand, white America’s *but where are you really from* desire for Asian Americans to be representative of Asian culture symbolizes white America’s inability to accept Asian Americans as American. On the other, Asian Americans also must feel susceptible to the received formulations leveled against Asians in Asia, as Yu indicates in his listing of the silent, passive, exotic, aesthetic stereotype. So Asian-Americans cannot simply disavow their or their parents’ cultural backgrounds—which of course feeds into charges that they do not really belong in America. David Palumbo-Liu (1999, 1) refers to the slashed “Asian/American” moniker as marking “*both* the distinction installed between ‘Asian’ and ‘American’ *and* a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement.” Certainly, every Asian American will feel and handle this tension in a different way. But to the extent that the Asian American relationship to Asian culture engenders an anxiety about translation, the irony is that the demand to prove allegiance to two entities is in fact equally the experience of translation.

Translation, as I have written elsewhere (Klein 2003), is also a servant of two masters. And like Asian America, translation constitutes a minority discourse. According to the last US census, nearly 3.8 million people identified as Chinese American, or about 1.2 percent of the US population, while the best numbers we have for translation in the United States is under 3.0 percent—3.0 percent, that is, including travel guides, children’s literature, economics blockbusters, political memoirs, and manga. The relationship between the minority and the majority against which it defines itself is what I take to be at stake in this discussion. My difference with Yu, then, hinges not so much on the question of authenticity as on the assumption of claims to authenticity made by poetic translation and translational texts. On a cultural level, there can be no definite seat of authenticity. Chinese restaurants in the West may be vociferous about their “authentic cuisine,” and Chinese food in the West is usually not the same as food in China, but food in China varies from kitchen to kitchen, never converging on a final authentic—the notion of which seems to rely on a Hegelian idealization of China as forever existing “outside the World’s History” (Hegel 1956, 134–35). But whereas Yu criticizes the “‘authentic’ version of Chinese culture . . . presented by orientalism,” I see the best readers of Chinese poetry translation understanding the *non*-authenticity at the heart of the problem. Eric Hayot (2004, 2), for instance, refuses to “identify and amend ethnocentrism or errors of translation under the assumption that my own perception is ‘authentic.’” And when Haun Saussy (2001, 65) describes the translational process through which “Chinese poetry has come to have a voice in English,” he is quick to specify, “‘A voice,’ not ‘its voice.’” My contention is not only that such scholars are aware of the nonauthenticity of translation but that the translators and, insofar as it makes sense to say so, the translations themselves are aware of this nonauthenticity as well.

Particularly as it relates to translation and the critique of translations, I see authenticity claims to be what Judith Butler (1993) calls *performative*. While these claims display, in other words, the “reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (2), translation and translational texts can be a performance that can reveal the fundamental nonauthenticity of the source text and source culture in question rather than relying on or pointing to a culturally authentic source text. By *translational* I mean those texts, particularly here poems, that encircle translation within the literary polysystem (see Even-Zohar 1990), likewise engaging in representations of other cultures and enacting a poetics that expands the perimeter of translation proper—dragging translation outward toward metatranslation. And by looking at what such translational poems do, at their role in the polysystem, we can see them as something like Butler’s (1999, xxiii) drag, which puts “the *reality* of gender . . . into crisis” to be understood “differently . . . less violently” and through which the claim of authenticity can also be put into crisis and be understood less violently.

This article, then, will read our anxieties about translation by looking at the figure of China in modern and contemporary American poetry. My starting point is Yu’s (2009, 6) position, from his monograph *Race and the Avant-Garde*, that the “Asian American artist, like the avant-gardist, puts forward a tendentious argument for cultural particularity—invents a culture—both as a means of organizing a specific artistic community and as a means of critiquing the larger culture.” I will first focus on the case of Snyder and then will move on to Pound before concluding with a more direct treatment of translation anxiety and its relationship to Asian American writing.

Chinese Whispers

“When first encountering the poetics of emptiness,” Yu (2016, 48) writes, “*one will likely draw strong connections to Gary Snyder.*” Indeed, Stalling’s monograph does include a chapter on Snyder. Stalling explains his *Poetics of Emptiness* (2010) as a correction to the translational presentation of Chinese poetry as, in one translator’s phrasing, “a meditative silence” (Barnstone 2004, 4). As such Stalling (2010, 1–2) focuses not only on what he calls the “transpacific imaginary” of “intertextual engagements with classical East Asian philosophical and poetic discourses” but on the role of sound in these engagements as well. This is not that far from Yu in *Chinese Silences* turning the volume up on the “silent, reticent, passive” creation *in* the poems and also on what the postavant would see as the “quietude” *of* the poems. The difference is that where Yu sees Snyder as embodying and employing that quietude, Snyder is for Stalling “an important and influential example of heterocultural production,” problematic for being “too closely fitted to existing Romantic values” and at the same time “the principal catalyst for an American poetics of emptiness [that] cannot be overstated, yet should not be read uncritically either” (120). Granted that Yu (2009, 4) sees the images of China in Snyder as extending from Pound at one end and leading to Collins at the other, if the poetic avant-garde constitutes a “complete community, one whose principle goals are not only aesthetic but social, psychological, and ideological,” as he argues in *Race and the Avant-Garde*, is Snyder not then sociologically different? This section will look at the ideologies behind acceptance or critique of Snyder’s translational representation of China.

I have written elsewhere (Klein 2016) about the relationship between the representation of China in Snyder’s poetry and that of, say, Bob Perelman’s (1981, 60–61) in “China”: “We live on the third world from the sun. Number three. Nobody tells us what to do.” I place them in a

tradition of poetry in English that reaches back not only to Pound but to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, which "shews," in William Hazlitt's words, "that Mr Coleridge can write better *nonsense* verses than any man in England" (quoted in Leask 1998, 1). Though Perelman's poetics would barely be possible without Pound's edition of Ernest Fenollosa's essay *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (Fenollosa and Pound [1919] 2008), his "China" also continues Coleridge's demonization of China as Unknowable Other. For Snyder, though, China can be known.

In "Axe Handles" Snyder (1983, 5–6) enters into such knowledge, fixing an axe with his son Kai:

There I begin to shape the old handle

With the hatchet, and the phrase

First learned from Ezra Pound

Rings in my ears!

"When making an axe handle

the pattern is not far off."

And I say this to Kai

.....

And he sees. And I hear it again:

It's in Lu Ji's *Wên Fu*, fourth century

A.D. "Essay on Literature"—in the

Preface: "In making the handle

Of an axe
By cutting wood with an axe
The model is indeed near at hand.”
My teacher Shih-hsiang Chen
Translated that and taught it years ago.

China here signifies and constitutes a tradition. By the end of the poem:

Pound was an axe,
Chen was an axe, I am an axe
And my son a handle, soon
To be shaping again . . . (6)

Snyder draws himself into this tradition. This is an interracial integration, weaving men of different races into an integrated lineage (white Pound, Asian Chen, white Snyder, hapa Kai), but perhaps more importantly it is an intercultural one. Considering how Snyder (1959, 9) cast himself from Western tradition in his first book *Riprap* (“What use, Milton, a silly story / Of our lost generational parents”), his presentation of himself as part of the Chinese tradition is worth noting indeed.

Does Snyder’s poem see “China as a source of unchanging aesthetic traits fixed in a remote past,” as Yu contends? The poem asserts a philological accuracy in placing the *Wenfu* 文賦 in the “fourth century / A.D.” It is a tribute to his teacher, Shih-hsiang Chen 陳世驥, who believed he finalized the date Lu Ji 陸機 (AD 261–303) composed the piece to the year AD 300 (see Chen in Lu Ji 1952, 9, xxxiii–xxxv).² But philological accuracy is not the same as

authenticity, and nothing suggests that the tradition Snyder sees in China is unchanging. Quite the contrary. The line Snyder heard first from Pound—in Chinese, “fa’ke fa’ke qize buyuan” 伐柯伐柯其則不遠—was itself from the Bronze Age *Shijing* 詩經 (*Classic of Poetry*, also known as the *Book of Songs* or *Odes*) then later the *Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸 (ascribed to Confucius’s grandson) before then being written into Lu Ji’s *Wenfu*. And of course with each reuse it gains layers of meaning. Quoting Chen’s translation alongside Pound’s, Snyder quotes the Chinese in its various successive versions, a tradition developed rather than asserted.³ Snyder makes no claim on the essence or authenticity of that into which he places himself. On the contrary, translations and poetic representations of Chinese culture such as Snyder’s here have paved the way for undermining authenticity claims. Viewing himself as part of a developing tradition, Snyder defines China not by its lack of change but by its unceasing change.

Whereas in his academic writing Yu says the avant-garde “puts forward a tendentious argument for cultural particularity—invents a culture,” in his parody poem he says Snyder pulls Chinese culture out of his ass. This description becomes possible only after an alternative tradition in the representation of China reemerges in American poetry, the Coleridge tradition resuscitated by Perelman’s “China.” Ron Silliman’s “Chinese Notebook,” written on Golden Gate Transit buses in a square blue notebook with vertical red lines in 1974, is also part of this tradition. Lines like

1. Wayward, we weigh words. Nouns reward objects for meaning. The chair in the air
is covered with hair. No part is in touch with the planet.

.....

5. Language is, first of all, a political question.

.....

8. This is not speech. I wrote it.

.....

29. Mallard, drake—if the words change, does the bird remain? (Silliman 1977, 539–41)

Though it is called “The Chinese Notebook,” mentions of China qua China are all but nonexistent:

67. By the very act of naming—The Chinese Notebook—one enters into a process as into a contract. Yet each section, such as this, needs to be invented, does not automatically follow from specific prior statements. However, that too could be the case. (543)

It has so little to do with China as such that it ends up only being *about* the poem’s incapacity to be *about* anything other than itself.

In this tradition “China” is nonreferential or can refer only to its self-referentiality. This is a result of a rift within the American poetic left in the seventies—when the Cultural Revolution was ending and Deng Xiaoping began his “reform and opening up” 改革开放 in China. In American poetry the division between these poems and the poetics for which they stand occurred as a split between the poems and poetics of Donald Allen’s 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry* and those of the newer Language writing. The old New American poetry constituted the expressivist and representational use of language in the work of Snyder and other anthologized poets, such as Allen Ginsberg and LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka). Language poetry reacted against the previous decade’s faith in linguistic expression and representation, though it has also been explained as being born with Ginsberg’s Sanskrit chanting of *Hare om namo shiva* at the Free Speech Movement protest in Berkeley in 1964. The poet Barrett Watten (2002, 156), a member of the movement, says Ginsberg’s meditations focused on “the radical *outside*, with which he identifies but which resists identification because it is entirely *other*.” Ginsberg’s questioning of “the adequacy of writing to that which it represents—not simply to the referent

but to consciousness itself”—shows language to be “the cellular connections that make the nervous system a gigantic telephone where, dialing the code of language itself, one encounters the limits of the system” (156). That, this, is Language writing.

Importantly, China also shows up as a point of contention in this turn, specifically the China as implied by *The Quotations from Chairman Mao* 毛主席语录 (the Little Red Book), which the Black Panther Party sold at a profit to fund their gun purchases. Watten calls the Little Red Book an “empty signifier” that offers no “serious blueprint for politics but was an obscurantist text of cryptic formulas that were generally dissociated from the experience of either Oakland blacks or Berkeley students. What it did provide was a ready symbol by which the *outside* of Third World liberation movements . . . could be inserted into domestic politics” (173–74). Taking Watten to task, Baraka responded angrily that Mao’s book was “not an empty signifier—it facilitated a major change in a political system; it represented the possibility of overthrowing one system and exchanging it for another. Its context is fixed” (quoted in Prevallet 2000). The question relates not only to politics but also to poetics and its treatment of language and referent. Silliman’s “Chinese Notebook” is itself “an obscurantist text of cryptic formulas that were generally dissociated from experience.” It may even present “a ready symbol by which” a certain *outside* could be inserted into a certain kind of politics.

That politics is based on a critique of the representation of China, even or especially in American poetry, and it begins before the seventies. In 1965 Snyder published six excerpts of *Mountains and Rivers without End* (1996), a long poem that would not be published in full for another three decades. The poem refers to an anonymously painted landscape scroll in the Cleveland Museum of Art, *Streams and Mountains without End* 溪山無盡圖 (c. 1100–1150), and to a similarly titled painting, *Xishan wujin tu* 谿山無盡圖, in the Freer Gallery of the

Smithsonian Institution signed by Xu Ben 徐賁 (1335–80, 1393, or 1403) but now attributed to Lu Yuan 陸遠 (active c. 1665–94). Finally published in full in 1996, Snyder’s poem begins,

Clearing the mind and sliding in
to that created space,
a web of waters steaming over rocks,
air misty but not raining,
seeing this land from a boat on a lake
or a broad slow river,
coasting by. (5)

As if in response, John Ashbery (1966, 10–12) published *Rivers and Mountains* in 1966, the title poem of which states,

Your plan was to separate the enemy into two groups
With the razor-edged mountains between.
It worked well on paper
But their camp had grown
To be the mountains and the map
Carefully peeled away and not torn.

Even as Snyder’s *Mountains and Rivers* indicates its consciousness of a stylized Asian landscape as a “created space,” past which we may coast in detachment as on “a broad slow river,” Ashbery’s “Rivers and Mountains” seems to mock and, avant la lettre, deconstruct any

civilizational division as working “well on paper” (like Marxism) until that paper, whether map or painting, itself peels away.

When China appears later in Ashbery, it does so without Snyder’s ease of reference. His 2002 *Chinese Whispers* refers to what American kids know as the game telephone (“where, dialing the code of language itself, one encounters the limits of the system”):

Camera obscuras,

too, were big that year. But why is it that with so many people

who want to know what a shout is about, nobody can find the original recipe?

All too soon, no one cares. (Ashbery 2002, 31–33)

The function of China in this poem is to refer back to the poem’s referentiality, to point to its act of pointing.

In this Ashbery and Silliman line up with a critique of Snyder and his presentation of the Other that has become especially prevalent in critical discourse (Perelman [1996, 163] later critiqued Snyder directly for his “ahistorical, antitheoretical stance” in a poem “crisply efficient in laying out the elements and ethics of the counterculture of the sixties”). Many of these criticisms frame Snyder in terms of what Said called orientalist. Robert Kern (1996, 223) says Snyder is “the premier example . . . of an orientalized verse in the modernist tradition and of English-as-Chinese.” Josephine Nock-Hee Park (2008, 66) argues that Snyder bears “the markers of Oriental difference even as he argued for an understanding that transcended such characterizations.” And of course Yu (2009, 106): “The desire to understand and even identify with the East, as epitomized in the Buddhism of poets like Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, can be understood as a critique of American national culture. Yet insofar as it becomes a regime for

the production of ‘authentic’ knowledge of Asia that can be incorporated into American discourse, it takes on an orientaling function.” Later he writes that Snyder’s Buddhism is “the flip side to American imperialism in Asia—a critical response to that imperialism that can itself become a form of appropriation” (109).

Given this critique, it makes sense that some poets would rather use *China* not to refer to China but to the signified Other that can never be known. Yet even where China seems to signify the inability of the poem to signify anything but itself, China as such is never removed from signification. Blurbing *Rivers and Mountains*, Kenneth Rexroth (in Ashbery 1966, back cover) refers to its “Chinese title, bear[ing] comparison with the wry wisdom of the classic Chinese scholar gentry.” And in 2007 Charles Bernstein wrote of the book on a ship “making its way down the Yangtze, China’s longest river. . . . I am a part of neither, mountain nor river, a foreign visitor to a foreign land.” Likewise, in a review of *Chinese Whispers* John Tranter (2002–3, 66) wonders if “the parlour game [is] called . . . ‘English Whispers’ in China?” (It is not). And as Yu (2009, 63) points out, “Silliman’s ‘Chinese’ notebook represented a ninety-degree ‘turn’ from American writing and culture . . . [which] allows the white American writer to move outside his own subject position, to a critical location outside white America.” Even in exploiting its inability to refer to China, *China* still refers to China.

This highlights the importance of critiques such as Weinberger’s ([1988] 1996, 88) that Language poetry ignored translation as integral to its poetic process: “I have always been amazed that a movement so preoccupied with language shows no interest whatsoever in specific languages.” Even when depicting a signifier removed from its signified, as in China, the signified bleeds through. Why not, then, let the foreign signified also enter the poetry, allowing both the source text’s signifier and its signified to come through in the translation language?

Weinberger expresses hope for a generation “that finds the world interesting, that sees the world as something more than a problematic text” (91). If the world is only a problematic text, the tendency would be to withdraw from it. Translation, while not denying the textuality of its object, represents the opposite reaction.

So what makes Silliman’s subject positioning outside white America better than Snyder’s? Yu (2009, 60) argues that Silliman puts into play an “ethnicization of Language writing [which] can be seen as an attempt to reclaim the moral authority extended to the writing of women and minorities—a kind of redemption of white new left discourse.” For Silliman, “‘Language poet’ is not simply an aesthetic but a social identity” (60). But reverse that hypotaxis, and “Language poet” is not simply a social but also an aesthetic identity. Yu (2009, 71–72) concludes, “The best way to understand [Silliman] is . . . as a testament to this struggle . . . a convincing but decentered map of our contemporary social landscape and an often uncomfortable exploration of white male consciousness.” This is compelling, but it is remarkably similar to Stalling’s conclusion about Snyder’s “transpacific imaginary” of “heterocultural production” that its significance “cannot be overstated, yet should not be read uncritically either.” The difference, I suppose, comes down to what one believes of the possibility and politics of China as a referent.

What makes Snyder problematic is the “orientalist” history of depicting China as an idealized portal to spiritual and ecological enlightenment known through painting and other cultural products. But China as an icon of the Unknowable Other and a trope of self-referentiality as seen in Ashbery and Silliman has a history too. As Christopher Bush (2010, xxv) points out, “The ostensibly self-effacing gesture of claiming *not* to represent is itself an essential part of the Orientalist tradition.” The English term “Chinese whispers” plays on the inaccessibility of the

original meaning through the passage of whispers, or a series of significations whose origins and original signified can never be known because they are Chinese. This is very close to the racist remark that Chinese faces are “inscrutable.” For all that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1988, 285) “Can the Subaltern Speak?” seems to underpin much of the critique of the representation of the East, the “postrepresentationalist vocabulary,” in her words, “hides an essentialist agenda.” As Zhang Longxi (1998, 20) puts it, “For the West, then, China as a land in the Far East becomes traditionally the image of the ultimate Other.” Such racially and culturally coded presentations of the Other are not dismantled, deconstructed, or challenged in these examples by Ashbery and Silliman, they are reiterated. Is it not time, as Zhang asks, that “such misconceptions were questioned and the Other was recognized as truly Other, that is, the Other in its own Otherness, which is not only non-Western but may perhaps have things in common with what the West thinks of itself—the Other that does not just serve the purpose of being a foil or contrast to the Western self” (45)? If so, how?

For Zhang, this is done in part by listening to said Other: “If it is right to remember how our language largely determines the way we can talk about the Other, it would be wrong to forget that the Other has its own voice and can assert its own truth against various misconceptions” (47). How can American poetry listen to China but by translating Chinese poetry into the American discourse? Speaking in a language American poetry can understand will change certain things about China’s message of course, but for all that translation presents a limited, conditional, circumscribed, whispering voice, American poetry can hear, if it listens closely, the Other’s assertion of its own truth against various misconceptions. This is what Snyder has done—and what Pound, Weinberger, Stalling, and others before and after have done. The “listening” to China that they have enacted is not eternal and brings with it its own problems, but

these are much smaller problems than not listening or translating at all. Too much critiquing of the American discursive construction of China's voice means not listening to China. Not listening to China relegates it to a much deeper silence.

The Inventor of Chinese Poetic Discursivity for Our Time

One of the problems of listening to China through translation is that the image of Asia with which Snyder was associated had been thoroughly commoditized by the time Silliman started publishing. It is against this marketization of China that "The Chinese Notebook" makes a stand. The uselessness of his lines takes them out of circulation. Snyder, on the contrary, sees his image of China overtaken by the capitalism to which he set it up in opposition. Parodying Pound's (1996, 58–60) "Canto XIII" ("Kung Walked"), Yu (2016, 85) writes,

And Gary said, "I would build a beat Zen temple

"On every street in California,

selling enlightenment and axe handles."

"Selling enlightenment" is anachronistic but represents a fundamental validity nonetheless. Does this all trace back to Pound, who was both a white supremacist and also an opponent of what today we would call finance capitalism?

Blogging about Yu's "Silences," the poet scholar Robert Archambeau (2015) writes that rather than parody or pastiche, Yu's project represents camp, saying that as camp's "classic queer form, drag, allows people to both participate in an identity and distance themselves from it, to have affection for that identity while also drawing attention to the artifice involved in creating the identity . . . Yu's poem can be seen as a camp take on modernist orientalism—taking part in, but also drawing attention to the artifice of, its style and discursive movements." I link this to my

earlier point about translation serving as an uncanny drag that can also allow readers to identify with and distance themselves from the authenticity of the source text. More straightforwardly, Pound's (2003, 252) "Jewel Stairs' Grievance" (1915) is also a drag where a male writer plays with tropes of femininity:

The jewelled steps are already quite white with dew,

It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,

And I let down the crystal curtain

And watch the moon through the clear autumn.

Commentators on premodern Chinese poetry take male poets' use of female voices to be a slide across the cardinal Confucian relationships 五倫, so that the woman's longing for her husband's love indicates the subject's sadness at being jettisoned by his emperor (see Rouzer 2001). The extent to which this is valid can only be judged through individual close readings and contextualizations, but it too is an authenticity claim for which Pound's translation has little use. Instead, as his footnote to the poem indicates, Pound (2003, 252) aims for a target-oriented change in aesthetics:

NOTE.—Jewel stairs, therefore a palace. Grievance, therefore there is something to complain of. Gauze stockings, therefore a court lady, not a servant who complains. Clear autumn, therefore he has no excuse on account of weather. Also she has come early, for the dew has not merely whitened the stairs, but has soaked her stockings. The poem is especially prized because she utters no direct reproach.

Pound's note teaches the English-language reader how to appreciate the poem, didactically pressing for a change in the central aesthetics of Anglophone poetry (see Hayot 2004, 23–27).

Yu, though, as quoted above, seems particularly put off by Pound's remark of "no direct reproach," mentioning it also in "Silence No. 73" and "Silence No. 63." Indeed, there is something off-putting about Pound's praise of a Chinese woman's indirectness.⁴ But Pound is not praising her silence, he is presenting her as someone whose speech—even through translation—requires extra attention so that it can be valued. Where the Chinese tradition silences women by turning poems in which they speak into metaphors for men fretting over imperial favor, Pound here bases his aesthetic on the idea that both China and women should in fact be heard. Pound's promotion of a new aesthetic through "The Jewel Stairs' Grievance" not only constitutes an invention "of Chinese poetry for our time," as T. S. Eliot (1928, xvi) famously put it, it is also an invention of a culture in Yu's avant-gardist mode of "organizing a specific artistic community and as a means of critiquing the larger culture" so that the values of a community can be heard and understood.

Yet Yu makes Pound a silencer. In a takeoff of Pound's (2003, 287) most famous poem, "In a Station of the Metro" (1913) ("The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough"), Yu (2016, 129) gives: "The apparition of these Chinese in a crowd: / Peril in a white, silk shroud." Yu's parody rhymes, as Pound's does not (should it not be "Chinese in a horde"?), and is anachronistic (frustratingly, since Yu's argument is primarily historical), since Pound wrote "In a Station of the Metro" before receiving the Fenollosa manuscripts that instigated his devotion to Chinese. More pertinently, Yu's accusation of the "Yellow Peril" trope to Pound's writing of China is striking in light of Steven G. Yao's (2010, 34, 41) point that the 1915 publication of Pound's *Cathay* "challenged discriminatory constructions of the Chinese such as the 'Yellow Peril,'" thereby initiating the "discursive possibility in English of individual affective subjectivity among the Chinese, a quality they had been consistently denied in other,

more popular discourses from the period and earlier.” In other words, Pound’s translations helped redefine Chinese culture away from the associations of Yu’s assertions.

Pound was racist. I have no reason to suspect that his racism did not extend to Asians. Whether the effect of his poetry and translations is racist or imperialist, though, is a different issue. Of the two broad ways of reading Pound vis-à-vis politics, either that his poems fulfilled his stated views or that they did not, literary theory—from Roland Barthes’s “Death of the Author” (1977) to Fredric Jameson’s “Political Unconscious” (1981)—weighs in for the latter. As Bernstein (1992, 122) has noted: “*The Cantos* is in many ways radically (radially) at odds with the tenets of his fascist ideals. . . . Pound has systematically misinterpreted the nature of his own literary production.” More directly related to Chinese translation, John Cayley and Yang Lian (2002, 782) have called Pound, “against his will,” one of the “deconstructors of centrism.” This is to say that Pound’s claims for the authenticity of his own understanding are performative as well. They are reiterative, both ultimately no more than a claim, which can itself be challenged by other readings and borne out by their histories. Those histories forked in the different means and ways Snyder and Weinberger, on the one hand, took from Pound what Perelman and Silliman, on the other, would not. But insofar as Pound’s intent in his poems is an unreliable guide to the effect of his incorporation of Chinese, his unwitting deconstruction of centrism offers a new opportunity to look into accusations of Pound’s poetic orientalism.

The relationship between orientalism as Said critiqued it and Western representations of China is a complex and fraught one.⁵ While in *Orientalism* Said (1978, 1) cautions against eliding his analysis with whatever would be “associated very differently with the Far East (China and Japan, mainly),” when Chow wants to criticize a sinologist, she simply quotes Colin MacKerras (1989, 3) that *Orientalism*’s “main points are equally applicable to the study of

China” (quoted in Chow 1993, 3). This does not satisfy everyone of course, and many scholars have noted that pinning problematic representations on colonialism falls short when the land in question, China, was not in fact colonized. Hayot (2009, 10) approaches the point from a different angle: “The *absence* of China from the field of postcolonial studies feels like the symptomatic expression of its strange relationship to contemporary scholarship on the relation between the West and its others. . . . As though the failure to belong to a model were not in and of itself an important expression of the logic of the model.” I might go further. China may never have been colonized in full but not for lack of trying. And from European spheres of influence to the Suez Canal’s opening of routes to Easts Near and Far to the way the term *ideograph* slid from describing Egyptian hieroglyphs to describing Chinese writing, there has been no shortage of Western ways to contain China within its discourses of knowledge and power. Then again, that China was only ever what Chinese revolutionaries called “semicolonial” make its formation as “knowledge” in the West all the more ideological, as in removed from material history. Yet insofar as Said (1978, 1) said that the Orient was “almost a European invention,” then too facile an application of the orientalist critique to the presentation of China would be accepting the validity of that invention in overlooking important distinctions between the Arabic-speaking, Indic-speaking, and Chinese-speaking worlds while purporting to criticize the structural politics at work in the critique’s formation as knowledge.

Rather than blanket criticisms of “orientalism,” I find more useful than Said in considering Pound’s translations and representations of Chinese the work of Michel Foucault. I take Eliot’s claim of Pound as “inventor of Chinese poetry” seriously. He was what Foucault called the founder of discursivity of Chinese poetry in English. They “are not just the authors of their own works,” Foucault (1984, 114) explains of these founders. “They have produced

something else: the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts . . . an endless possibility of discourse” (114). Not only Pound’s translations in *Cathay* but his use of Chinese source material in the *Cantos* as well founded such discursivity. Yu (2014, 4) acknowledges this when he says that the “images of Asia are foundational to the . . . modernist tradition founded by Ezra Pound.” But since “the initiation of a discursive practice does not participate in its later transformations” (Foucault 1984, 116), Pound cannot be held responsible for the development of such discourses. China in official verse culture’s Collins is removed from its avant-garde treatments in Snyder and Pound.

Behind every great fortune lies a crime, they say. But if we say that the great fortune of English-language poetry presenting Chinese descends from crimes originally committed by Pound, I find myself believing the opposite. Since the poetic avant-garde is what Yu calls a “complete community” whose “goals are not only aesthetic but social, psychological, and ideological,” the crime is less in the errors, philological or ideological, that Pound’s translations committed than in what has been done to his discourse as it has moved from avant-garde to mainstream constituted by Collins. Pound and Snyder are not beyond reproach, but their use of Chinese to critique the larger culture is not an expropriation of Chinese. It is rather the larger culture that has appropriated—and in its way silenced—their avant-garde critique.

Not Very Multicultural Multiculturalism

Weinberger’s ([1988] 1996, 81) critique of Language poetry’s lack of translation is the result of how “Reaganism has infected every particle of life in this country, not excluding the life and work of poets, no matter how much they may hold in him contempt.” Ronald Reagan’s America and the morning after also saw in the growth of identity politics.⁶ As Yu (2009, 13) writes, “Like Asian American writers of the 1970s, Language writers emerged at a moment of heightened

awareness of race.” The social politics of the Left in the United States now look more inclusive, and identity politics have given rise to the ethic of multiculturalism, but even there our vision has been circumscribed by what we oppose. As Weinberger writes (2009, 187): “The ‘dead white male’ critique of Western Civ . . . did not lead, as many of us had hoped, to a new internationalism, but rather to a new form of nationalism that emphasized hyphenated Americans. Chinese-Americans and Chicanos were now part of the intellectual universe . . . but Chinese and Mexicans were still excluded. Multiculturalism was, and is, not very multicultural at all.”

This not very multicultural multiculturalism is where I see our current *doxa* of translation anxiety. It is not just the ethic of Language poetry that cannot approach translation from an Asian language into English as anything but tainted with orientalism. As Bush (2010, xiv) writes, “For all its talk of globalization and transnationalism, contemporary modernist studies knows less and cares less about China than did many writers and thinkers in the modernist era itself.” This leads to a particular judgment about the trajectory of American poetry. “It’s stretching the point only a little to argue that modern American poetry is founded on China,” Yu (2014, 4) writes. No argument here. But when he adds “—and on Chinese silence,” though, I find that his assertion keeps us from hearing what China is saying through American poetry.

For an Asian American, especially one who does not speak her or his parents’ or grandparents’ home language or languages, anxiety about translations and the representation of Asian culture makes sense. But when John Yau (1994, 45) talks about Pound’s translations as “the aesthetic counterpart of colonialism . . . self-serving, paternalistic enterprises, which appropriate the raw materials, goods, and culture of the *Other* for themselves” or when Marilyn Chin says the “real discussion” about translating Asian writing into English is “how many

Western cultural imperialists does it take to plunder Wang Wei and who, if anyone, should have the rightful claim to an Asian woman's poetry" (Bednarik et al. 2008, 251), they essentialize their own ethnic identities at the expense of translation's expansion of discursive constructs.⁷ While throughout the intellectual history of Europe many commentators have indeed likened translation to imperialism (Robinson 1997, 46–62 collects and contextualizes many such metaphors), which Chin's provocative question critiques, to accept as Chin does the validity of this metaphor is to say that all translation (at least by white men in the age of empire) is nothing but such an imperialist act. Is something wrong with the idea that *everyone* has an equal right to an Asian woman's poetry? An Asian woman's poetry is not, after all, an Asian woman's body, and I do not think to say so is to scrawl *all lives matter* over #BlackLivesMatter. Chin calls translation "plunder," but while the importation inherent in translation certainly enriches the receiving culture, literary translation strips no resources from its lands of origin. Whereas segments of Dunhuang murals, say, end up in London or Paris and not in Northwest China, translation removes nothing. No matter how bad the translation, nothing is lost for those readers who read the works in the source languages. Nothing is plundered in translation.

Nevertheless, we have reached a point where translation is called "cultural appropriation" or "imperialism." So much of "cultural imperialism" as it is discussed professionally—in economics, sociology, anthropology—understands it as the forced exportation of the culture of the empire (see Tomlinson 1991). In literature, where we learn foreign languages poorly if at all and are overwhelmed with what there is to read and know, we turn "cultural imperialism" into something based on imports and rely on it to excuse our ignorance. Would it not be culturally imperialistic of me to translate some writer from a different culture or read your translation from some other language? This has little relation to how colonialism actually functions of course,

such as the double standard that saw the expansion of suffrage, union density, and social welfare in Great Britain between World War I and the seventies, while Hong Kong has never had an elected government, no law requires employers to negotiate with unions there, and a paltry minimum wage was instituted for the first time in history in 2011. And look what has happened to the concept of poetic “appropriation.” Ming Xie’s (1999, 3) purpose in *Ezra Pound and the Appropriation of Chinese Poetry* is to be neutral, factual, even laudatory: “to recognize how these Anglo-American writers had construed and appropriated certain aspects of classical Chinese poetry.” It is an extension of Palumbo-Liu’s (1993, 11) resuscitation in *The Poetics of Appropriation* of the reputation of the Song dynasty poet Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105), whose poetic appropriation “reflects a basic rethinking of the key issues of the classical Chinese poetic tradition and allows us to sense both the salient characteristics of classical Chinese lyric poetry and their relation to Western notions of poetry” (in which light Palumbo-Liu’s observation about the unsettled, inclusive “Asian/American” movement is particularly interesting). But when Yau writes of appropriation as “the aesthetic counterpart of colonialism” and Yu calls Snyder’s Buddhism a critical response to imperialism “that can itself become a form of appropriation,” something has changed.

That change is that identity politics has risen with an anxiety about representation that extends toward translation. But insofar as colonialism exports power without including equality, Yu’s parodies of mainstream ignorance and disavowed conjecture mixed in with parodies of translation and translational avant-garde poetics only end up translating that colonial exportation once again into the realm of American poetry. Indeed, the resistance to translation signals an imperialist mind-set. Imperialist traditions, Nick Admussen (2013) writes, “instruct Westerners to learn about Chinese people . . . as competitors.” But we can have “an alternate tradition, one in

which a Western subject encounters Chinese culture, undergoes transformation, and then returns to their original context as someone new” (Admussen 2013). The nonauthenticity of these transformations becomes the point, Admussen (2013) continues, as through their “tenuous, negotiable, and shifting” re-creations “we relinquish any expectation of being able to perform cultural or intercultural ‘truths’ on behalf of all parties involved, [and so] intercultural space can be a place of creation and discovery.” As the Japanese novelist Mizumura Minae 水村美苗 (2015, 89) points out, historically “translation was necessarily an asymmetrical endeavor” assuming “a clear hierarchy between two languages. It was not about translating English into French or German, say, but about translating Latin (the universal language) into various vernacular languages of Europe.” The less dominant languages around the world publish more translations, especially from the dominant languages, while the imperial or “universal” languages get away with translating much, much less. In the discrepancy between how little translation we publish in English and how much translation, especially from English, other languages publish is the clear historical hierarchy reasserting itself. The question is: Do we want English to be such an imperial language, or do we want it to be one language among equals, with the possibility of exchange and mutual inspiration? If we want English to be one language among equals, then we need to get over our translation anxiety and advocate simply, boldly, for more translations into English. By translators of any race. Fewer translations only consecrate our linguistic imperialism.

Coda

Certainly not all Asian American writers are afraid of or even anxious about translation. As a scholar, Karen An-hwei Lee (2013, 20) engages positively with translation, configuring it as proposing “models for power and subordination in the specific colonial moments that participate

in propagating such global circulation. . . . Translation as a site of appropriation and hybridity disrupts authority by revealing the ambivalence of colonial discourse,” not its reification. Lee’s (2010, 73) view of translation is also born out in her poetry, where it proves disruptive in a positive sense:

Dream of Ink Brush Calligraphy

In prayer:

quiet opening,

my artery is a thin

shadow on paper—

margin of long grass,

ruderal hair, sister to this

not yet part of our bodies

your lyric corpus of seed

in rough drafts of pine ash,

chaogao or grass calligraphy

in rough drafts of pine ash—

your lyric corpus of seed

not yet part of our bodies:

ruderal hair, sister to this

margin of long grass,

shadow on paper,

my artery is a thin

quiet opening

in prayer.

The mirror of the poem above and below which the other lines find themselves reflected reads “*chaogao* or grass calligraphy.” It is a double misprision. In standard Mandarin “grass” 草 would be transcribed as *cao*, not *chao*. Moreover, “grass calligraphy” or a shorthand cursive that emphasizes expressiveness would be *caoshu* 草書, whereas *caogao* 草稿 means “rough draft.” The slip between *cao* and *chao* reflects Lee’s southern pronunciation of Mandarin, but it also suggests “hype,” as in *chaozuo* 炒作, or pronounced with a different tone, the *chao* 抄 that means “to copy.” With “rough drafts” appearing above and below it, the “*chaogao*” in Lee’s poem is hyperaware of its own nonauthenticity. This awareness reflects not only the poem’s first and second halves, it also reflects Anglophone culture’s searching for something in Chinese that it cannot find. It is, after all, only a “Dream of Ink Brush Calligraphy,” not the real thing. Yet it is a dream that can speak, a dream Lee’s poem has no desire to silence, since it shows how, in its various translations, Chinese will be heard.

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¹ Thanks to Yu for providing me with the text of his talk.

² On the significance of this, see Wang 2015, 18. Thanks to Nicholas Morrow Williams for pointing this out.

³ Pound's translations actually differ: see Pound 2003, 839, 634. Snyder slightly misquotes Chen too: see Lu Ji 1952, 19.

⁴ See DuPlessis 2006, 44–45 on Pound petitioning to change the name of the *New Freewoman* out of his objection to female suffrage.

⁵ See Hayot 2004, 3–12 for a genealogy of the discussion about Said’s *Orientalism* and Pound’s Chinese.

⁶ Mark Dudzic and Adolph Reed (2015, 356) explain the rise of what they call the “identitarian left” as a consequence of “Reagan’s peremptory firing in 1981 of more than 11,300 striking members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO),” which “symbolically punctuated an orgy of union-busting and deindustrialization that fundamentally altered the left in the United States and its capacity to intervene politically.”

⁷ Both comments refer to Weinberger, though Chin’s is also about John Balaban. Both Yao’s and Chin’s comments are given full treatment, different from mine, in Wang 2014, 41–43, 93–114, 170–76, 203–4.