

Ezra Pound's The River Merchant's Wife: Representations of a Decontextualized "Chineseness"

Jun Tang

Volume 56, numéro 3, Septembre 2011

URI : id.erudit.org/iderudit/1008331ar

DOI : [10.7202/1008331ar](https://doi.org/10.7202/1008331ar)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN 0026-0452 (imprimé)
1492-1421 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Jun Tang "Ezra Pound's The River Merchant's Wife: Representations of a Decontextualized "Chineseness"." *Meta* 563 (2011): 526–537. DOI : [10.7202/1008331ar](https://doi.org/10.7202/1008331ar)

Résumé de l'article

Le présent article fait état d'une comparaison approfondie de plusieurs interprétations de *The River Merchant's Wife : A Letter* réalisées par des chercheurs occidentaux, avec celle qui fait autorité dans le domaine des études chinoises classiques et qui fait référence au texte source chinois, Changgan Xing. L'analyse des écarts entre les deux textes, effectuée sous un angle interculturel mène à la conclusion que *The River Merchant's Wife* présente une idée de la Chine décontextualisée, en raison de l'usage de romanisations teintées d'influence japonaise, de manipulations de détails culturels, et de modifications du message original. Par conséquent, la réécriture et la manipulation par Ezra Pound ont introduit des erreurs à l'égard de la compréhension du texte chinois original et ont renforcé les préjugés stéréotypés sur le genre et le mariage de la Chine ancienne.

Tous droits réservés © Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2011

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne. [<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>]

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche. www.erudit.org

Ezra Pound's *The River Merchant's Wife*: Representations of a Decontextualized "Chineseness"

JUN TANG

Southeast University, Nanjing, China
j_tangshh@hotmail.com

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article fait état d'une comparaison approfondie de plusieurs interprétations de *The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter* réalisées par des chercheurs occidentaux, avec celle qui fait autorité dans le domaine des études chinoises classiques et qui fait référence au texte source chinois, *Changgan Xing*. L'analyse des écarts entre les deux textes, effectuée sous un angle interculturel mène à la conclusion que *The River Merchant's Wife* présente une idée de la Chine décontextualisée, en raison de l'usage de romanisations teintées d'influence japonaise, de manipulations de détails culturels, et de modifications du message original. Par conséquent, la réécriture et la manipulation par Ezra Pound ont introduit des erreurs à l'égard de la compréhension du texte chinois original et ont renforcé les préjugés stéréotypés sur le genre et le mariage de la Chine ancienne.

ABSTRACT

This article provides a detailed comparison of various interpretations of *The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter* presented by Western scholars and the widely-recognized interpretation in the field of classical Chinese studies concerning its Chinese source text *Changgan Xing*. Analyzing the discrepancies between the two texts from a cross-cultural perspective, this article argues that *The River Merchant's Wife* has produced a decontextualized "Chineseness" by using Japanized romanizations, manipulating cultural details, and changing the original messages. Consequently, Ezra Pound's rewriting and manipulation have induced misunderstandings regarding the Chinese source text and have reinforced stereotypical preconceptions of gender image and married life in ancient China.

MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

Ezra Pound, réécriture, hypothèse réductionniste, traits culturels chinois, décontextualisation
Ezra Pound, rewriting, reductionist assumption, Chineseness, decontextualization

1. Introduction

In 1915, Ezra Pound published his poetic collection *Cathay* as an anthology of translations for some classical Chinese poems, in which, *The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter* (Appendix 1) was included. The subtitle of this collection reads as follows: "For the Most Part from the Chinese of Rihaku,¹ from the notes of the late Ernest Fenollosa,² and the Decipherings of the Professors Mori and Ariga." Naturally, the foregrounding of the collection's debt to Fenollosa's notes and the two Japanese professors' decipherings may arouse suspicions about Pound's proficiency in Chinese.

On the one hand, many Western scholars engaged in the study of modern American poetry have recognized the poetic quality and imagistic strength of

Pound's creation as an autonomous English poem because they have insufficient knowledge of Chinese culture and the Chinese language and cannot make cross-cultural comparisons. On the other hand, scholars in China or of Chinese origin have divided opinions about this poem – some contend that it is an outstanding representation of Chinese culture and society and others believe that it is a misleading rendition which leads itself to misinterpretations of the Chinese original and reinforces stereotypical beliefs. Consequently, scholars in the field of literary and translation studies are confronted with two questions of significance: Is *The River Merchant's Wife* a fair representation of the original or a creative work having an autonomous existence? Does it convey cultural messages of the original or does it tend to reinforce stereotypical beliefs about Chinese culture?

Based on a cross-cultural comparison of various interpretations of *The River Merchant's Wife* presented by Western scholars and the widely-recognized interpretation in the field of classical Chinese studies concerning *Changgan Xing* (i.e., the Chinese original, see Appendix 2), this article aims to answer the above questions by analyzing Pound's rewriting or manipulation of cultural significance and pinpointing the reductionist assumption about the existence of a culturally homogeneous *Chineseness* as an ahistorical or decontextualized misconception.

2. *The River Merchant's Wife* and Contextualization of *Changgan Xing*

For many Western scholars (Eliot 1928/1959; Kenner 1972; Kern 1996; Tapscott 2002), Ezra Pound's *The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter* is an autonomous English product rather than a cross-cultural representation of *Changgan Xing*. Commenting in 1928 on the collection of Pound's translations for classical Chinese poems entitled *Cathay*, T. S. Eliot proclaimed that

[a]s for *Cathay*, it must be pointed out that Pound is the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time. I suspect that every age has had, and will have, the same illusion concerning translations, an illusion which is not altogether an illusion either. When a foreign poet is successfully done into the idiom of our own language and our own time, we believe that he has been "translated"; we believe that through this translation we really at last get the original [...] His [Pound's] translations seem to be – and that is the test of excellence – translucencies: we think we are closer to the Chinese than when we read, for instance, Legge. (Eliot 1928/1959: 15)

Eliot had made it quite clear that in spite of the fact that he himself knew little about the Chinese language and Chinese poetry, he firmly believed that Pound's translations were literary creations rather than what people had expected from truthful reproductions of Chinese poetry. This is to say that *Cathay* merely reflects Pound's concept of what Chinese poetry looks like. In a similar vein, Robert Kern decided that "Pound's *Cathay* is [...] largely an event within Anglo-American literature" (Kern 1996: 4). For Eliot and Kern, the cultural significance of *Cathay* is intracultural rather than intercultural. Stephen Tapscott expounded that *The River Merchant's Wife* is "a pastiche" which "anthologizes lines, ideas, and sections" from several of Li Bai's shorter lyrics "to make a sequential lyric apparently based on the life and psyche of a single speaker" (Tapscott 2002: 7-8). He also asserted that "Pound elegantly counterfeits an Asian tradition" in his creation of *The River Merchant's Wife* by drawing on "several Asian traditions" from poems depicting "the abandoned lover," the

farewell or departing scene, and “the seasons of human time” (Tapscott 2002: 8). Tapscott’s remarks are too harsh because Ezra Pound employed most of the original images which had appeared in *Changgan Xing* and roughly followed the organization pattern of the Chinese original. The point is not that Pound had fabricated perceptions about Chinese culture or poetic tradition but that he had changed the original messages and reinforced ahistorical or decontextualized assumptions of gender image, married life, and cultural meanings in ancient Chinese poetry.

Contrary to their Western colleagues, many scholars in China or of Chinese origin regard the poems in *Cathay* as successful translations, especially those mainland Chinese scholars active in the field of Anglo-American literature (Zhao 2003; Wang 2005; Zhang 2007) and those who went abroad for research degrees in literature after 1978 and later stayed to teach at Anglophone universities (Qian 1995; Xie 1999). These scholars stressed the cultural connection between Pound’s translations and the original classical Chinese poems, which, at least in their opinion, had imposed Chinese influences on Pound’s imagist theory and practice. For them, Pound’s inadequate mastery of the Chinese language had not prevented him from developing an intuitive sense of the original author’s tone and poetic organization (Wang 2005; Yip 1969). Further, the poetic traits of Pound’s translations were attributed to his insights into Chinese language and culture (Qian 1995; Xie 1999) regardless of the fact that his resources (i.e., Fenollosa’s notes and Japanese professors’ interpretations) were inevitably Japanized and the uniqueness of the original was reduced to a representation of a culturally homogeneous Chineseness. It must be noted that, though Western scholars often render their interpretations of *The River Merchant’s Wife* in connection with the social context of its production, their Chinese peers, including the few scholars (Ou and Li 2006; Yu 1984) who have doubted the cultural appropriation in Pound’s translations, tend to ignore the social context of the production of *Changgan Xing* and fall victim to the misconception of a homogeneous Chineseness. In this consideration, a brief introduction to the social context and the motive for the creation of *Changgan Xing* can be helpful in clarifying ideas.

Li Bai is one of the most famous poets who had contributed to the transformation of classical Chinese poetry from the so-called *ancient poems* (i.e., gu shi) of folk song origin into *modern style poems* (i.e., jinti shi) with stricter rhyme patterns. His *Changgan Xing* is a piece composed according to the *ancient style*, gufeng, which implies that the poem is written in imitation of earlier folk songs and can be set to music for singing.

Changgan was located in the downtown area of Nanjing, a city in eastern China which is nearly 2500 years old. And for about 300 years from 229, Nanjing had served as the capital for six dynasties and the cultural, economic, and political center of the southern part of China lying south of the Yangtze River. But in 589, the first emperor of the Sui Dynasty, Yang Jian, had the towns and former palaces of Nanjing destroyed and turned them into agricultural lands. When Li Bai composed *Changgan Xing* more than one hundred years later, Nanjing was famous for its historical sites and cultural relics among his contemporary poets or writers. Li Bai visited Nanjing many times and even lived there for a while in his late years. He had finished about one hundred poems about Nanjing in his lifetime. *Changgan Xing* is believed to be influenced by folk songs (i.e., wuge and xiqu) which were popular among natives of Nanjing at that time.

In feudal China, businessmen were of two types: xingshang (i.e., traveling traders) and zuogu (i.e., homekeeping vendors or storekeepers). The former transported goods from one place to another for profit while the latter ran local businesses only. It had become a tradition for early Chinese poets to write about the complaints or longings of traveling merchants' wives. *Changgan Xing* is presented as the monologue of the wife of a traveling trader. What is special about this poem of Li Bai is: firstly, it is not intended to be an artistic presentation of the complaints from the lonely wife but as a proclamation of love, which has two emotional culminations – the wife's voiced willingness to be with her husband until they mingled together as dust or ashes after their death; her promise of going all the way to meet her husband at the dock in Changfengsha, a place in nearby Anhui Province and more than 200 miles away from their hometown. Secondly, it is not about an arranged marriage based on parents' orders and matchmaker's introduction but about two people who grew up together and knew each other well because people of the Tang Dynasty enjoyed a high level of freedom in choosing spouses, obtaining divorces, and getting remarried. Thirdly, it is different from the usual pattern of folk songs about love in the sense that early folk songs about love often took young farmers and village girls as their protagonists and heroines. In summary, the uniqueness of *Changgan Xing* lies in three aspects: its understanding of the downtown lifestyle of Nanjing in the 8th century; its use of vivid images describing the passage of time and seasonal scenery and the transformation from childhood love to marital love; its deviation from the traditional representations of complaining merchant wives.

3. "Chineseness" in *The River Merchant's Wife*

As to the appraisal of *The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter*, researchers have to answer a critical question: there is no doubt that it stands out as an excellent literary piece, but is it also a good translation in terms of representation and reproduction of the original messages carried by *Changgan Xing*? To put it in another way, is the *Chineseness* presented by Pound's creation, which has been highly applauded by some scholars in China or of Chinese origin, genuine or invented? To make things clear, both the poem itself and its interpretations rendered by a variety of scholars must be examined from a cross-cultural perspective.

It puzzles me why the conspicuous unChinese traces in Pound's version have been ignored by most scholars, Western and non-Western. Some scholars (Kenner 1972) have noticed that, in Pound's publication, the name of the original author was mentioned as Rihaku rather than the then well-received English transliteration for the Chinese name (i.e., Li Po), but they have failed to recognize more significant symptoms. Firstly, Pound translated the Yangtze River as *the river Kiang*³ regardless of Fenollosa's note. This decision renders the translation absurd because it makes the "Long River" in Chinese take on a weird name meaning the "River River." Secondly, Pound substituted Fenollosa's transliterations for two major Chinese place names – **Chokan** for Changgan and **Cho-fu-sa** for Changfengsha. This phonetic manipulation makes the two place names sound more like Japanese words than Chinese ones. Thirdly, Pound not only chose to neglect Fenollosa's notes on **Ku-to** (i.e., Japanese transliteration of the name of the Qutang Gorge) and **Yen-yo** (i.e., Japanese transliteration of the name of the Yanyu Reef) but also fabricated a place called **Ku-to-yen**.

Actually, these Japanese pronunciations are highly obtrusive for a knowing ear though not many people know the real reason for the audio oddity or disharmony. In this consideration, I doubt that “the paradigmatic frame of an entire culture” (Xie 1999: 236) can be fully grasped by second-hand relay race in the case of Fenollosa and Pound. Or, it may be safely said that this paradigmatic cultural frame is largely an Orientalist imagination because a given culture usually proves to be much more complicated and heterogeneous in constitution than one expects and imagines. The assumption of an ahistorical, homogeneous Chineseness is reductionist and misleading.

In fact, most controversies over the poetic quality and translational legitimacy of *The River Merchant's Wife* fail to answer two crucial questions: What are the real Chinese messages conveyed by the original poem *Changgan Xing*? Had Pound reproduced the original messages or had he relied on his own logic of meaning-making? The most direct way to answer these two questions is to examine different interpretations of the literary product in question and to find out what speculations and impressions about Chinese culture have been induced from these interpretations.

Nine scholarly interpretations⁴ can be accessed via a database entitled “Modern American Poetry Site,” which is developed and maintained by the Department of English, University of Illinois. In addition, a transcript of Professor Tapscott's 2002 spring lecture on Ezra Pound and his translations has been provided by the MIT OpenCourseWare site. Among these interpretations, those of Schweik and Hongo will not be considered because of their translational irrelevance. Of the more detailed readings, two are written by scholars of Chinese origin (Yip 1969; Xie 1999). These two readings demand special attention because they can help a scholar to recognize that full understanding of the complexity of a culture requires more than a shared cultural identity with the original author.

According to translationally relevant interpretations, general impressions of Pound's version can be summarized as follows:

The poem told about the emotional attachment between an absent merchant and his wife, who were “playmates in a small Chinese village” (Hunter 1986). Froula (1983) has decided that the young wife was not happy at the beginning yet fell in love with her husband after a year of marriage; Bush (1985) has labeled the marriage as “without much feeling” yet believed that love was kindled by the prolonged absence of the husband; Tapscott has assumed that the husband's departure with the wife's “dramatic devotion” implies that “he may be trying to escape the intensity of this intimacy” (2002: 6). Four interpretations (Froula 1983; Bush 1985; Hunter 1986; Gale 1997) have taken for granted that the marriage was an arranged one lacking strong feelings. As for the reason for the original poem to start with a brief account of the young couple's childhood friendship, different scholars interpret differently: providing facts (Hunter 1986); hinting at changed feelings from a nostalgic perspective (Froula 1983); showing emotional development (Bush 1985; Xie 1999); foregrounding disruption of a carefree childhood by “the intrusion of adult passion” (Tapscott 2002: 6). It must be noted that these scholars' general impressions of Pound's *The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter* mismatch the received interpretation of Li Bai's *Changgan Xing* among Chinese scholars in studies of classical poetry in various aspects.

In the field of classical Chinese poetry, *Changgan Xing* has been taken as a kind of “breakthrough” by the majority of Chinese literary critics because unlike other folk-song-styled verses descending from a rural folk tradition, *Changgan Xing* is

targeted at city life and built on the middle ground between the somewhat sensual trend of folk love poems and the implicative poetics appreciated by the upper class in the society of ancient China. As regards the young couple in *Changgan Xing*, the poetic lines imply that they are probably from two families who have been on friendly terms. Since Changgan refers to the commercial quarter Changganli, it is likely for the husband to be brought up in a family which owns a business. Taking over the family business is probably the reason why he leaves his young wife behind and travels to the inland province Sichuan right after the first year of marriage. In the Tang Dynasty, young people had enjoyed much greater freedom in choosing their spouses. The opening lines of *Changgan Xing* are intended as a reflection of this freedom. Li Bai not only depicted the childhood closeness between the couple but also implied that their marriage was founded on reciprocated attachments. This is absolutely different from what Pound's translation has led scholars to believe.

What must be pointed out is that the opening lines of *Changgan Xing* have contributed two idiomatic phrases to the Chinese language – *qingmei zhuma*⁵ (literally: green Chinese plum and bamboo horse) and *liang xiao wu cai* (literally: no suspicions between two little children). Both of them refer to deep attachments between a young boy and a young girl. And the two phrases often imply sustained affection moving beyond adolescence into adult life.

To some extent, *The River Merchant Wife: A Letter* serves as a decontextualized or ahistorical representation of *Changgan Xing*, which has reinforced Western stereotypical views of “the patriarchal obedience structure which has shaped and constrained the wife's voice” (Schweik 1991) and “an Orient[a]list stereotype of the passivity of Asian women” (Tapscott 2002: 6). Yip has argued that “Pound has crossed the border of textual translation into cultural translation” and that “although Pound has been sharply limited by his ignorance of Chinese and by much of Fenollosa's crippled text, he possesses a sense of rightness” (Yip 1969). In consideration of the complexity and diversity of Chinese cultural messages in ancient Chinese poems, Yip's comments are optimistically favorable rather than critically justifiable.

4. Critical Considerations of Cultural Details

Examining the cultural details reproduced by Pound in his translation, the acclaim for “Pound's ability to go beyond the ‘word-sense’ and ‘phrase-sense’” (Yip 1969) does not prove to be as well-grounded as might have been preferable.

As to the wife, Li Bai's poem employed a widely adopted first-person singular feminine pronoun, *qie*, which represents self-deprecating modesty in ancient China and lays a colloquial foundation for the poem. Perhaps herein lies the reason for Pound to use *my lord* when referring to the husband. Consequently, Pound's translation gained a submissive tone which does not belong to the original yet is accepted by Western readers.

As to the absent husband, Li Bai resorted to two pronouns – *jun* and *lang*. The former, a second-person singular masculine pronoun, is a respectful address term for friends or familiar people while the latter, a context-bound pronoun that can be either second-person or third-person singular masculine, refers to a women's husband, lover or boyfriend if it is used as a second-person singular pronoun or a certain young man if it is used as a third-person singular pronoun.

Pound chose to translate the poetic title of *Changgan Xing* (literally: A Song of Changgan) as *The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter* in spite of the fact that Fenollosa made it clear that the last Chinese character of the title meant a “narrative (should be: lyric) song.” Pound’s choice might be inspired by the first-person and second-person singulars adopted by the original. His *letter* does sound much more logical than the original *song*, but the rewriting reflects Westernized rationalization of the Chinese poetic tradition in a way. From his Western perspective, Pound took for granted that first-person and second-person pronouns were suitable either for face-to-face oral communication or for letters. Since the husband was absent, face-to-face oral communication was ruled out. But the point is that classical Chinese verses have developed a tradition for a poem to be organized as a monologue using first-person and second-person singular pronouns because Chinese language is indifferent to grammatical constituents such as tense, number, connectives, and pronouns. The poetic monologue hereby composed may be intended for an imaginary reader or listener. The idea of a *letter* proves to be more rational but much less typically Chinese. On the other hand, *river merchant* is irrational not only because there is no such expression in Chinese, but also because the husband had been doing business in Sichuan Province rather than on the Yangtze River.

Maguire has applauded the *foreign* flavor of Pound’s version and decided that

[...] we feel that “pulling” is an exact transcription of the term used in Chinese, that it’s customary for a Chinese girl to indicate her youth by having her “hair cut straight across [her] forehead,” and that this is the precise equivalent of how it would be described (Maguire 2004: 55).

But Maguire’s critical applause derives from a misunderstanding or false imagination of Chinese culture and facts about ancient China. Pound’s choice seems to come from Fenollosa, who literally translated the Chinese verb *zhe* as *break* and explained *zhe hua* as *break flowers* and *breaking flower branches*. In fact, *zhe hua* in Chinese means exactly /to pick or pluck flowers/ in English. Instead of indicating the youth of a girl (Maguire 2004) or being a fabrication (Tapscott 2002: 9), it is customary for a little Chinese girl to wear bangs at a very young age. What Li Bai’s poem intends to say is that the couple began to know each other in their early childhood.

Maguire (2004) has also mentioned her doubt as to the meaning of the *seat* in Pound’s “walked about my seat” and marveled at the color of plums which had been rendered as *blue*. Admittedly, even Chinese scholars disagree as to whether the Chinese word *chuang* in Li Bai’s poem refers to a *bed* or a *chair*. But the majority of mainland Chinese scholars in classical Chinese studies prefer to interpret it as *hu chuang*, a piece of furniture for people of the Tang Dynasty to sit on. As for the color of the fruit, a translator is faced with a double obstacle. On the one hand, the Chinese word *mei* refers to a kind of fruit which is much smaller than a plum and only grows in China. On the other hand, the Chinese word *qing* means /black/, when it is used to describe the color of a piece of cloth; /blue/, when it is used to describe the color of a mountain or a wisp of smoke; /green/, when it is used to describe the color of a kind of fruit. Therefore, the fruit is a kind of green fruit that is distinctively Chinese and not a strange-looking *blue plum*.

Also, Maguire (2004) has misinterpreted the place name Changgan (*Chokan* in Pound’s version). Instead of referring to bamboo as she has imagined, Changgan means a long and narrow piece of land between hills according to a book entitled

*Jiankang*⁶ *Shi Lu* (literally: *Facts about Jiankang*) about things and life in Nanjing in ancient China.

In most cases, major translational discrepancies may induce misunderstandings. Most women of the Tang Dynasty get married between thirteen and twenty-two and the heroine of *Changgan Xing* gets married at the age of fourteen. It is understandable that it takes her nearly a year to adjust to the transformation from the carefree life of an adolescent girl to the married life of an adult woman. In contrast to her shyness in the first year of marriage, the original verse depicts the heroine as “begin to relax the eyebrows (i.e., to smile)” after she has adapted to her family role as a wife a year later. Based on Fenollosa’s interpretation,⁷ Pound translated the original message as *stopped scowling*, which reinforces the Western stereotypical idea about unhappy arranged marriages in ancient China (Hunter 1986; Froula 1983; Bush 1985). This runs counter to the intention of the original poem.

Right after the aforementioned first emotional culmination, the Chinese original raises a rhetorical question: “I used to believe that you would be as dependable as Weisheng,⁸ but how could I foresee my [parting with you and] mounting the high terrace for wives expecting their husbands’ return?” Pound failed to see the point in Fenollosa’s watered-down explanation⁹ and simplified the sentence as “Why should I climb the look out,” the fact of which considerably impedes a logical reading of the poem.

A major misreading and mistranslation comes from Pound’s deviation from Fenollosa’s notes about the inaccessibility of the Qutang Gorge and the Yanyu Reef and the line about monkeys’ cries. Both lines in the Chinese original are intended to highlight the risky journey of the protagonist which makes the heroine worry about the safety of her husband. According to Volume 148, *Taiping Huanyu Ji*¹⁰ (literally: *Taiping Gazetteer of the World*), which was published more than one thousand years ago, the Yanyu Reef, located at the mouth of the Qutang Gorge, had a perimeter of about 70 meters. The reef was more than 34 meters high in winter and would be partially concealed by rising water in summer. The *wuyue* in Li Bai’s poem refers to the fifth month of the lunar calendar (i.e., June of the Gregorian calendar) whose flowing tides make the waterway unapproachable. It was recorded in ancient books that travelers who wanted to go through the Qutang Gorge had to travel up the river in early spring and down the river in autumn. In this sense, the heroine begins to expect her husband’s return when she sees autumn butterflies and fallen leaves. Fenollosa provided correct notes on these points. But Pound revised the original messages and rendered corresponding lines as “You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies,/ And you have been gone five months./ The monkeys make sorrowful noises overhead” so as to portray the wife’s sadness during her husband’s long absence.

Some Western scholars believe that the wife interprets monkeys’ happy chirping as sorrowful because of her own deep sorrow. But in classical Chinese poems, monkeys’ noises are usually associated with sadness. And traditionally, the hazardous Qutang Gorge is symbolized by perilous eddies and monkeys’ whining. Pound’s revision produces a different visual picture from the original one: The husband has been away for five months and the lonely wife is sensitive to the monkeys’ sorrowful noises. This is emotionally moving yet factually false. Firstly, there are no monkeys in Changgan, the commercial quarter of the downtown area of Nanjing City. Secondly, “the fifth month” is associated with the wife’s anxiety for her husband’s

safety rather than her dislike for her husband's absence. By manipulating the details, Pound had transformed the Chinese specificity of the original into an emotionally intensive fake.

Another flaw lies in Pound's rendition for the last few lines (i.e., "If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang, /Please let me know beforehand, /And I will come out to meet you /As far as Cho-fu-sa."). Some scholars have pointed out that "Please let me know beforehand" reads like a business letter while *As far as Cho-fu-sa* seems to imply that the wife is only willing to go that far and no further. An interpretation also suggests that, besides the limit set by the qualification *As far as Cho-fu-sa*, the indentation of the last line implies that the heroine "is reluctant to press her case too strongly" (Tapscott 2002: 7). In fact, the original message of *Changgan Xing* is: The wife is so eager to reunite with her husband that she is ready to go 200 hundred miles to meet him when his ship arrives at the dock in Changfengsha.

It is understandable that linguistic and cultural peculiarities presented in the name of translation will be taken as natural qualities of a foreign culture and their truthfulness rarely questioned. And, it must be admitted that an identity connected with the cultural context of the source language and culture does not necessarily guarantee a full understanding of different cultural contexts, which requires painstaking effort to find out the truth about every meticulous detail.

5. Conclusion

Lefevere had critically contended that

[...] Western cultures "translated" (and "translate") non-Western cultures into Western categories to be able to come to an understanding of them and, therefore, to come to terms with them. This brings us, of course, straight to the most important problem in all translating and in all attempts at cross-cultural understanding: can culture A ever really understand culture B on that culture's (i.e., B's) own terms (Lefevere 1999: 77)?

Lefevere may be a little pessimistic on this point, but the analysis of *Changgan Xing* and *The River Merchant's Wife* has provided a comparison between how native Chinese scholars in classical studies interpret Li Bai's original and how Pound rewrote and manipulated the original messages of the Chinese poem.

Chineseness is a complicated notion with exceptions and irregularities. In this sense, a fair representation of cultural messages must treat the details "in their full complexity, heterogeneity, and dynamism" (Hung 2003: 276). Li Bai's original poem does not intend to present a combination of stereotypical ideas about unhappy arranged marriages and female obedience in family life. But *The River Merchant's Wife* has produced a decontextualized "Chineseness" by rewriting and manipulation of the Chinese source text, the fact of which leads to misunderstandings of the original cultural messages and details and the reinforcement of Western stereotypical preconceptions of ancient China.

Since constituents of a culture involve exceptional cases, heterogeneous elements, and distinctive innovations that may fall beyond people's expectations or preconceptions, mainland Chinese scholars must try to engage themselves in dialogue with international colleagues rather than concentrating on discussions among themselves. In this consideration, a cross-cultural perspective can contribute to communication within the global intellectual community, which may help to reduce misunderstandings.

NOTES

1. **Rihaku** is the Japanese transliteration of the name of one of the most influential Chinese poet Li Bai (i.e., Li Po, 701-762). Though characters used by kanji (i.e., the Japanese writing system) are derived from Chinese characters, there is a huge difference in pronunciation. The Japanese phonetic combinations sound more obtrusive to foreign ears than Chinese ones. To give the reader an intense sense of foreignness, Ezra Pound has deliberately used Japanese romanizations in his translations included in *Cathay* such as **ko-jin** (i.e., 故人) and **Ko-kaku-ro** (i.e., 黄鹤楼) in *Separation on the River Kiang*, **Ken-nin** (i.e., 猓狻) in *Song of the Bowman of Shu*, and **shato** (i.e., 沙棠), **sennin** (i.e., 仙人), **Kutsu** (i.e., 屈平) and **So** (i.e., 楚) in *The River Song*.
2. Ernest Francisco Fenollosa (1853-1908), who had been teaching in Tokyo for many years, was a reputed promoter of Chinese and Japanese fine arts. For more details about Fenollosa's facilitating role in the creation of *Cathay*, see FANG, Achilles (1957): Fenollosa and Pound. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*. 20(1/2):213-238.
3. **Kiang** is the transliteration of the Chinese character "river" according to the Chinese Postal Map Romanization, a system of romanization for postal purposes prevailing in the first half of the 20th century.
4. For details, see *On "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter."* Visited on 5 May 2005, <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/pound/letter.htm>.
5. In ancient China, the word **zhuma** (literally: bamboo horse) refers to a bamboo stick for a young boy to sit on in imitation of horse-riding. Ezra Pound mistranslated it as *bamboo stilts*.
6. One of the former names for Nanjing in early China.
7. Fenollosa interpreted "展眉(i.e. relax the eyebrows)" as "opens her eyebrows" and "smoothes out the wrinkles between her brows."
8. Weisheng is the name of a young man who embraced the bridge column in an outburst flood to keep his promise of waiting for his sweetheart. The young man was drowned in the end. The story is mentioned in *Zhuangzi*, the second most influential text of the Daoist philosophical and religious tradition.
9. Fenollosa interpreted "常存抱柱信, 岂上望夫台?" as "I always had in me the faith of holding to pillars. And why should I think of climbing the husband looking out terrace."
10. A geographical book on Chinese places compiled by Yue Shi during the Taiping Xingguo period (between 976 and 983) of the Northern Song Dynasty.

REFERENCES

- BUSH, Ronald (1985): Pound and Li Po: What Becomes a Man. In: George BORNSTEIN, ed. *Ezra Pound among the Poets*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 35-62.
- ELIOT, Thomas Stearns (1928/1959): Introduction. In: Ezra POUND, ed. *Selected Poems by Ezra Pound*. London: Faber & Faber.
- FROULA, Christine (1983): *A Guide to Ezra Pound's Selected Poems*. New York: New Directions.
- GALE (1997): Explanation: "The River-Merchants's Wife: A Letter." In: GALE, ed. *Exploring Poetry*. CD-ROM. Detroit: Gale.
- HUNG, Ho-Fung (2003): Orientalist Knowledge and Social Theories: China and the European Conceptions of East-West Differences from 1600 to 1900. *Sociological Theory*. 21(3):255-280.
- HUNTER, J. Paul, ed. (1986): *The Norton Introduction to Poetry*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- KENNER, Hugh (1972): *The Pound Era: The Age of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis*. London: Faber & Faber.
- KERN, Robert (1996): *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LEFEVERE, André (1999): Composing the Other. In: Susan BASSNETT and Harish TRIVEDI, eds. *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*. London/New York: Routledge, 75-94.
- MAGUIRE, Sarah (2004): Translation. *Poetry Review*. 94(4):52-61.
- OU, Hong and LI, Chunchang (2006): A Study of Orientalism in Ezra Pound's *Cathay*. *Journal of Sun Yat-sen University (Social Science Edition)*. 46(3):33-38.
- QIAN, Zhaoming (1995): Orientalism and Modernism: The Legacy of China in Pound and Williams. Durham: Duke University Press.

- SCHWEIK, Susan Marie (1991): *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Poets and the Second World War*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- TAPSCOTT, Stephen (2002): In Praise of Bad Translation: Ezra Pound and the Cultural Work of Translation. Visited on 18 October 2008, <http://ocw.mit.edu/NR/rdonlyres/Literature/21L-487Spring2002/E3981018-220E-4FB5-9AC9-5B2A8A77853C/0/bad_trans1.pdf>.
- WANG, Guiming (2005): On Ezra Pound's Conception of Translation and His Creative Rendering of Classical Chinese Poems. *Chinese Translators Journal*. 26(6):20-26.
- XIE, Ming (1999): *Ezra Pound and the Appropriation of Chinese Poetry: Cathay, Translation, and Imagism*. New York/London: Garland Publishing.
- YIP, Wai-lim (1969): *Ezra Pound's Cathay*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- YU, Guangzhong (1984): Translation and Creative Writing. In: Xinzhang LUO, ed. *Essays on Translation*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 742-753.
- ZHANG, Jian (2007): Translation and Expression: On *Pound and China* Edited by Qian Zhaoming. *Foreign Literatures*. (4):59-65.
- ZHAO, Yiheng (2003): *God of Poetry Travelling Far: How Modern American Poetry had been changed by China?*. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter by Ezra Pound

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
 I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
 You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
 You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
 And we went on living in the village of Chokan:
 Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.
 At fourteen I married my Lord you.
 I never laughed, being bashful.
 Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
 Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.
 At fifteen I stopped scowling,
 I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
 For ever and for ever and for ever.
 Why should I climb the look out?
 At sixteen you departed,
 You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies,
 And you have been gone five months.
 The monkeys make sorrowful noises overhead.
 You dragged your feet when you went out.
 By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
 Too deep to clear them away!
 The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
 The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
 Over the grass in the west garden;
 They hurt me. I grow older.
 If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
 Please let me know beforehand,
 And I will come out to meet you
 As far as Cho-fu-sa.

APPENDIX 2

Li Bai' *Changgan Xing* and an interpretation

My interpretation of the Chinese poem is provided for the convenience of non-Chinese readers.

长干行

妾发初覆额，
折花门前剧。
郎骑竹马来，
绕床弄青梅。
同居长干里，
两小无嫌猜。
十四为君妇，
羞颜未尝开。
低头向暗壁，
千唤不一回。
十五始展眉，
愿同尘与灰。
常存抱柱信，
岂上望夫台？

十六君远行，
瞿塘滟滪堆。
五月不可触，
猿声天上哀。
门前迟行迹，
一一生绿苔。
苔深不能扫，
落叶秋风早。
八月蝴蝶来 (or: 黄)，
双飞西园草。
感此伤妾心，
坐愁红颜老。
早晚下三巴，
预将书报家。
相迎不道远，
直至长风沙。

A Song of Changgan

When I first wore bangs, I played
before the front gate, picking flowers.
You came straddling a bamboo stick in imitation of horse-riding,
and lounged around the bench, fiddling with green plums.
We lived at Changgan in the downtown area
as two little children without misgivings or suspicions.
At fourteen I became your wife.
Shyness prevented me from smiling.
Facing the dark wall with drooping head, I would not turn around
even if you called my name for a thousand times.
At fifteen I began to relax my eyebrows and smile.
I was willing to be with you until we turned into dust and ashes.
I used to believe that you would be as dependable as Weisheng, but
how could I foresee my mounting the high terrace for wives expecting
their husbands' return?
At sixteen you went away, somewhere
far beyond the Yanyu Reef of the Qutang Gorge.
The Reef was unapproachable in June,
and the sky resounded with monkeys' whining.
Your former footprints on the doorstep
were covered by green mosses
too thick to be swept away.
This autumn, leaves fall early in wind.
August butterflies came in twos,
dancing above the grass in the west garden.
At the sight my heart was broken
And the color of my face faded as I sat brooding.
Sooner or later, if you will come down the Yangtze River,
Please send me a letter in advance.
Regardless of the distance, I will go
all the way to Changfengsha to meet you.