

John Zheng

Rereading Ezra Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter"

Since the publication of *Cathay*, "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" has received much criticism, but I think it still deserves an analysis with a focus on cultural complexity. The original title of Li Po's poem is "Changgan Xing" (《长干行》, "The Song of Changgan"). Changgan, spelled as Chokan (in Japanese) in Pound's version, is a name of a street in ancient Jinling, now Nanjing, by the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, but "The Song of Changgan" was also a poetic form Li Po adopted in writing this poem. Originally, it was a form of folksongs popular by the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, mainly about the miserable life of the fishermen's wives, and in Pound's translation, about a river-merchant's wife. This poem is a dramatic monologue that presents a humble, young wife's love and loneliness. The poet leads us to see the charming image of the persona and listen to her emotional telling of love, shyness, desire, anxiety, sorrow, despair, loneliness, and longing. Thus, her reflection on marriage and her present situation of loneliness pluck a correlative chord on the reader. The original poem has thirty lines, each containing five monosyllabic characters, with a rather regulated rhyme pattern:

妾发初覆额，折花门前剧。
郎骑竹马来，绕床弄青梅。
同居长千里，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。

Here's Pound's translation:

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 Chōkan:
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
Forever and forever and forever.
Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed,
You went into far Ku-tō-yen, by the river of swirling eddies,
And you have been gone five months.
The monkeys make sorrowful noise 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.

John Zheng

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 Chō-fū-Sa.²

Pound's translation shows some variations from the original.
He eliminated allusions, alternated text and title, adopted stanzas,

² The version is quoted from *Selected Poems of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1957). However, in the second part of Pound's essay "Chinese Poetry" published in the May 1918 issue of *To-day*, his earlier version of this translation, which is composed of four stanzas and thirty lines, has variations in stanza breaks, spellings, and punctuation marks:

and re-imaged the persona. He divided the poem into five stanzas of totally 29 lines with "irregular unrhymed lines cast in informal, colloquial diction" (Hamill 311). Pound made it informal and

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Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
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At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with your dust
Forever, and forever, and forever.
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 were gone for five months.

The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.
You dragged your feet, by the gate, when you departing.
Now the moss is grown there, 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.

colloquial because he changed Li Po's title about a place to a letter addressing the wife's sorrows to her river-merchant husband, and this change made the title catchy and pertinent to the theme.

The first four lines in stanza one is the young wife's reflection on her blue-plum childhood play with her boyfriend playing bamboo-horse in front of the house. With a careful comparison of Li Po's original and Pound's translation, one can note a few variations in Pound's translation. For example, in line 1, Pound abandons the first character “妾” (pronounced as qie), which literally means concubine and which Fenollosa translated into “mistress” in his word-for-word version, but the word is used in Li Po's poem as a modest term, which shows a cultural and linguistic complexity, to indicate the wife's humbleness or inferior status. Pound abandoned the word 妾 probably because the literal translation of it into either concubine or mistress would be misleading or lose its subtlety. The literal meaning of the original line is “when the concubine's hair was covering her forehead for the first time.” Instead of using the first-person pronoun “I,” Li Po uses the third-person word 妾 (concubine) to indicate her humbleness. Fenollosa translated this line into “my hair was at first covering my brows.”³ According to Michael Reck,

3 Quoted from http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/pound/othertranslations.htm (Assessed May 20, 2010)

Pound once considered using the word "bangs" in the opening line, but his English wife declared this a "beastly Americanism" and said one used "fringes" in England. Later, Pound found a way to avoid using both words (171). The two phrases, "bamboo stilts" (which should be a bamboo stick played as a toy horse) and "blue plums" (which means green plums in the original) in lines 3 and 4, suggest another cultural complexity. Réka Mihálka assumes that Pound chose "blue" because the word "has connotations that express moodiness...." (152). His assumption might be right considering the wife's lonely feeling, but Pound in fact had no other word to choose as "blue" is the only word in Fenollosa's notes: "And going about my seat, you played with the blue plums."⁴ Also, even though moodiness lingers over part of the poem, the first stanza presents a happy memory of the wife's childhood; therefore, that "blue" has connotations to express moodiness is questionable. The word "青," pronounced as *qing*, may mean three colors: green, blue, and black in Chinese. When associated with fruit, it usually means green. Furthermore, in Chinese culture, when "bamboo horse" and "green plum" are used together as a phrase, they metaphorically mean a boy and a girl, who used to be childhood playmates, are married to each other when they grow up. "You" in line 3, "You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse," loses yet another cultural complexity and linguistic subtlety in translation. The word replaced by "you" is 郎, pronounced as *lang* (a third-person word to suggest "you") in Chinese and *ro* in Japanese. Fenollosa's notes indicate it means "second person, masculine, you, young man."⁵ Sanehide Kodama

4 Ibid

5 Ibid

explains, "In the T'ang period, lang...was used by Li Po to denote the husband with a tone of reverence" (76). Kodama is right, but Li Po used the word here mainly as an endearment used by the girl for her boyfriend she loves and admires, and this meaning is always used in classical Chinese poetry. For instance, the two lines in "The Song of Xizhou" (《西洲曲》, a folksong of the Nan dynasty) recite: "Missing lang and lang is not coming, I look up at the flying geese" (忆郎郎不至, 仰首望飞鸿) (Wang 225). Therefore, the words *qie* and *lang* in Li Po's poem denote an intimate but innocent relationship between the girl and the boy.

Also, the use of *lang* in stanza one and the use of *jun* (君/lord) in stanza two shows a slight change of the wife's status and her attitude toward the person she loves. More discussion about *jun* comes in the next paragraph. Although he had to abandon *qie* and *lang* because of their cultural complexities and linguistic subtleties, Pound gained from what he had to lose by creating an image of a lovely young wife through the tone that conveys an intense emotion, because "emotional force," as Pound states in his essay "As for Imagisme," "gives the image" (349). Another example that indicates linguistic complexity is "seat" in line 4. This word could be an acceptable rendering of the character "床" (pronounced as *chuang*) in Pound's translation, not because he knew it in Chinese, but because it was the only word in Fenollosa's transcription. Also, the translation of *chuang* into "seat" shows that Fenollosa's Japanese teachers did know that *chuang* meant "seat" though its common meaning is "bed." Some translators, who might be wavering in the meaning of the word, either chose "seat" or "bed" or simply avoided translating the word:

1. And loiter about the bench with green plums for toys.
(Shigeyoshi Obata)
2. And wreathed my bed with greengage branches o'er.
(W. J. B Fletcher)
3. We ran round and round the bed, and tossed about the
sweetmeats of green plums. (Amy Lowell)
4. And around the bed we play with green plums.
(Wai-Lim Yip)
5. Came trotting in circles and throwing green plums.
(Witter Bynner) ⁶

However, the accuracy of its meaning in Li Po's line still draws argument and discussion, for it can mean not only "seat" or "bed" but "head wall of a hand-dug well" as well. If we relate the boy's bamboo horse riding and playing around the girl sitting outside the gate, we may assume that "seat" would be a proper choice for *chuang*, but we may also assume that *chuang* means "the head wall of a well," because in ancient China a well was usually dug in the alley or in the courtyard. Thus, Li Po's two lines could be: "You came by on a bamboo horse, trotting around the well and playing with green plums."

The second stanza presents the inner state of the bashful wife married at the age of fourteen, too young to understand the married life. Line 7 in Fenollosa's version is a plain statement: "At fourteen I became your wife." Pound, however, chose the word "lord" (君 *jun*) from Fenollosa's transcription and changed the line into "At fourteen I married My Lord you." *Jun* is a respectful word that means husband in Li Po's poem. Pound's choice of "lord" is accurate and *reliable* in that it also means husband in English, thus

⁶ Ibid

keeping the wife's respectful tone to reflect the feudal ethical code in ancient China that the wife is subordinate to her husband. In line 9, "Lowering my head, I looked at the wall," Pound deleted "dark" that modifies the "wall" in Fenollosa's transcription. He might think this adjective didn't contribute to the line, according to his Imagist principles.

In the third stanza, line 13—"Forever and forever and forever"—is Pound's own adverb phrase added as a colloquial emphasis to reinforce the wife's strong desire. Here, he abandoned Fenollosa's translation, "I always had in me the faith of holding to pillars," which is a mistranslation of the original line that implies the husband's, not the wife's, faith. Pound might also think this allusion in Li Po's line would not be easily understood by English readers because of its cultural complexity. He further revised the second allusion in line 14 of the original into a general, but concise, expression: "Why should I climb the look out?" In the original, Li Po's two allusions suggest the wife's confidence in her husband's faithful love: "Since you keep the faith of holding to a pillar, / Why should I climb the expecting-husband-lookout?" The allusion to the faith of "holding to a pillar" is recorded in the *Zhuang-zi*,⁷ a collection of the texts of pre-Qin and Western Han dynasties more than two thousand years ago. It is about a man, whose name is Weisheng, going to meet his love under a bridge, but the girl never shows up. Suddenly the river starts to flood. To keep his promise, Weisheng waits there by holding to the

7 The "holding to a pillar" promise from *Selected Poems of the Tang Dynasty* (page 152): "抱柱信", 《庄子》"尾生与女子期于梁(桥)下, 女子不来, 水至不去, 抱梁柱而死。" 后人用抱柱为守信约之词。

pillar and gets drowned. The allusion of "holding to a pillar" thus indicates a man's unbroken promise and unbending love. The second allusion, the "expecting-husband-lookout," tells a legend that a woman transforms into a stone by standing year after year on the lookout to expect her husband's return. In ancient China, a man may have to be far away from home either for business or for war while his wife, without knowing when he will return or whether he is alive or dead, has to wait alone for years or even till her death. In line 14 of Li Po's poem, the wife asks a rhetorical question to imply she will not have such a misery as the woman in the legend does because she believes her husband, who has the faith of holding to a pillar, will return some day. Pound chose to abandon the first allusion and modify the second because he might want to avoid adding footnotes or to make the lines understandable for readers without encountering any cultural complexities. He might also think it was not necessary to keep the two allusions together since they were not appropriate in tone for a naive persona, not an educated one, he wanted to present. Therefore, the adaptation of lines 13 and 14 could be an example of Pound's unreliable translation. Though line 14 may still sound a little unexpected or ambiguous to English readers, Pound did not lose much of the essential meaning of the original by trying to generalize the allusion or to break away with cultural complexities. In fact, even for a reader in China today, the two allusions may also be language barriers if he is not well-read to understand the allusive suggestions.

Stanza four presents the wife's concern about her husband's safety. Lines 15 and 16 present the most dangerous part of her

husband's long journey. The original lines in Li Po's poem mean that the Yanyu Dui—a giant reef in the Qutang Gorge, one of the three Yangtze River gorges—becomes a danger in the fifth month of the lunar year when the river is in flood, and boats must sail carefully to avoid the reef. It is obvious that Pound, who might be a bit confused by Fenollosa's note of this line, mistook the Yanyu Dui (Yenyotai in Fenollosa's notes) as a place by, not in, the river, and he further combined the name of the reef and that of the gorge into "Ku-to-yen" (Qutang Yan) as a place where the husband goes. Also, he twisted the meaning of line 17 by choosing to use the five months from Fenollosa's word-for-word rendering, "five month not much touch," to suggest that the husband has been gone for a long time rather than considering Fenollosa's somewhat correct translation: "In May not to be touched." In line 18 Pound seemed to juxtapose the cry of the monkeys onto the wife's, not the husband's, emotion in order to objectify her feelings of longing and loneliness. In the original, Li Po means that while the boat sails through the narrow gorges, the sad cries of the monkeys on the cliffs along the river arouse the feeling of homesickness of the husband. However, without much knowledge about Chinese language and cultural complexities and without much more information he could get from Fenollosa's draft line ("Monkeys cry sorrowful above heaven"), there was no way for Pound to juxtapose the monkeys' cries onto the husband's emotion, no matter how skilful he was as a modern poet.

In stanza five, line 19 reflects Pound's Imagist principles when he worked on Fenollosa's draft line. Here are the two versions of this line for comparison:

1. Your footsteps, made by your reluctant departure, in front of our gate. (Fenollosa)
2. You dragged your feet when you went out. (Pound)

Pound used the action verb "drag" to show a concrete image and to suggest the meaning of "reluctant," an adjective that gives only the abstract idea. As an imagist, Pound focused on bringing out the real sense of the original and dropping what he thought did not make sense in translation. The original meaning of Li Po's lines 19 and 20 is "your reluctant footprints in front of the gate / are all covered by green mosses." But Pound adapted these two lines probably based on his imagist view of "use[ing] absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation" (Pound, *Literary Essays* 3). In addition, instead of using mosses for the covering of the footprints, he juxtaposed "different mosses" in line 20 to the wife's endless loneliness, and the word "different" suggests a double meaning of mosses. Besides, there are two versions of Li Po's line 19 in the original: "门前迟行迹" and "门前旧行迹" in which the third characters are different. Fenollosa's note shows he used the first version in which the third character "迟" means late or reluctant, but the third one in the second version means old. Some translators adopted the meaning of "old" in the second version, for instance, in Shigeyoshi Obata's translation: "Do you know your foot-marks by our gate are old." Additionally, it is interesting to note that Li Po has a similar expression in another poem of his, "Written in Behalf of My Wife" (《自代内赠》), which seems an echo to "The River-Merchant's Wife": 别来门前草，秋巷春转碧。扫尽更还生，萋萋满行迹。

Since we parted, the grass before our gate
In the autumn lane has turned green in spring.
I sweep it away but it grows back,
Densely it covers your footprints. (5-8)

Interestingly, line 25, which consists of two simple sentences with three words for each, could also be an example of Pound's "unreliable" translation. It is highly condensed from Fenollosa's notes: "The longer the absence lasts, the deeper I mourn, my early fine pink face will pass to oldness, to my great regret." Originally, Li Po's lines 25 and 26 are "Seeing this saddens my heart / and my rosy face grows old in lonely sitting," which indicate that seeing the paired butterflies fluttering over the grass in the West Garden, the speaker feels sad and old in her lonely expectation. Why does the sight of butterflies hurt her? This indicates another cultural complexity. The paired butterflies symbolize a happy and inseparable marriage in Chinese culture; but, in contrast, the wife is left alone at home to grow old in waiting. Pound compressed the two lines into one probably because his Imagist principles urged him to abandon the romantic idea of loneliness. In comparison to the image of butterflies, a similar expression is again found in Li Po's "Written in Behalf of My Wife: "The singing phoenixes were happy together; / Startled, the male and the female each flies away" ("鸣凤始相得，雄惊雌各飞。"). Furthermore, in line 26, Pound dropped "Yangtze" from Fenollosa's notes, but retained the word "Kiang." The correct pronunciation is *jiang*, which means river in Chinese, but in Pound's version, the word becomes a proper name of the river. The selection of "Kiang"

is an example indicating that either Pound did not know the meaning of the word or he wanted to play with the word for its emphatic sound.

On the whole, Pound's adaptations may show his unreliability in translation, but he did so because of his interest in using translation as training, as he says in "Chinese Poetry" (an essay published in April 1918 in *To-day*) about Li Po's role as a great compiler of classical Chinese poetry: "A compiler does not merely gather together, his chief honour consists in weeding out, and even in revising" (Nadel 298). Pound, as a compiler of Fenollosa's manuscripts, seemed not just interested in translating but also in weeding out the unnecessary words and revising or adapting what he felt necessary. Yet, we should also notice what Pound says again in his "Chinese Poetry" essay: "I can add nothing, and it would be an impertinence for me to thrust in remarks about the gracious simplicity and completeness of the poem" (Nadel 303). This seems to mean that Li Po's poem is still Li Po's, not Pound's, in translation. As a translator, he felt it was his duty to keep Li Po's style without ruining the "simplicity and completeness of the poem."

Most likely, the success of Pound's translation, exemplified by "The River-Merchant's Wife," lies in that he rendered with a creative hand a charming monologue by a deserted young wife who sounds innocent and naive. The adaptations of lines 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, and 25 give evidences, but Pound mainly avoided or dismissed cultural complexities imbued in the original. Li Po's poem contains an emotional force with cultural complexities so that the wife appears to be an educated young woman who knows

how to use the proper language to express her sorrow and is so well-versed in Chinese classics that she is able to use allusions in her monologue, but Pound's translation shows an emotional force with "gracious simplicity and completeness." And this emotional simplicity and completeness moved Ford Madox Ford so deeply to say, "The quality of great poetry is that without comment as without effort it presents you with images that stir your emotions; so you are made a better man; you are softened, rendered more supple of mind, more open to the vicissitudes and necessities of your fellow men. When you have read 'The River Merchant's Wife' you are added to. You are a better man or woman than you were before" (Homburger 221).

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