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Relocating "China" in Contemporary American Poetry: The Case of Timothy Yu

This article examines "China" in contemporary American poetry using the example of Timothy Yu's poems, titled "Chinese Silence," which rewrite and / or parody texts from the American literary canon as well as public communication. It proposes a hall-of-mirrors reading of these poems in order to show how Yu's poems refer to, reflect on, and relocate other authors' writing of "China." It argues that Yu's poems, instead of making claims for an authentic "China," attempt to bring Chinese Americans' lived experience into the American literary tradition.

Keywords: American poetry, Timothy Yu, China, Chineseness, silence

1. Introduction

In her 1917 introduction to "The New Poetry: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Verse in English," Harriet Monroe (1860–1936) described the influence of China and Japan on American literary modernism by saying that many poets "have bowed to the winds from the East."[1] Although poets such as Vachel Lindsay (1879–1931) and Ezra Pound (1885–1972) could not read Chinese, Monroe believed that their "round-about way" of using (classical) Chinese poetry offered readers of their times – and after – "something of the rare flavor, the special exquisite perfume, of the original."[2] Looking back from the twenty-first century, we may say that Monroe's

[1] Monroe (1930: xliii).

[2] Ibid., xliv.

remarks are simultaneously naïve and complacent, representing an orientalist appreciation of the Chinoiserie trend in American mainstream culture of the early 20th century, which exoticized and abstracted China.

Yet this critique may prove insufficient to understand the writings of "China" in contemporary American poetry and literary history. The American translator and poet Tony Barnstone says: "I came to China, […] to learn how to write poetry in English."[3] These words can be applied to a century-long literary tradition from Pound to Gary Snyder (b. 1930) and Charles Wright (b. 1935). Viewed from the perspective of contemporary translation studies, these poets have created American poetic avant-gardes by appropriating (classical) Chinese poetry. Looking back at the time when Monroe wrote her introduction, Barnstone argues,

> Chinese poetry was a powerful weapon in the battle against Victorian form, and thus it was brought over into English in forms resembling the free verse that it helped to invent.[4]

Therefore, Chinese poetry was introduced for a literary purpose: to oppose the poetic forms and sensibility of the Victorian Era (1837–1901). American Modernists transformed and transferred classical Chinese poetry for this purpose. The poems, which often strictly follow meter and rhyme patterns in the Chinese original, for example, appear as free verse in the translation(s) to help modify Victorian forms, such as heroic couplets, odes, Romantic revivals of ballads, and sonnets.[5] In this way, Chinese and Japanese poetries contributed to shaping and developing the American poetic tradition.

If China and its (classical) poetry have served as cultural resources for American poetic innovations, have they lived happily ever after in American poetry? The poems by Timothy Yu, a Chinese American poet and literary scholar teaching modern and contemporary American literature at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, show that there is no easy answer. Yu's poems critically scrutinize China – or rather the "Chineseness" that it embodies – in American literature and culture. Different from Pound and Barnstone, Yu confronts the political issue of race in his poems, which interrogate how "China" in the American literary canon and in public communications has contributed to essentializing and exoticizing a Chineseness that has de-historicized and abstracted the ethnic group of Chinese Americans, and, as a result, prevented Chinese / Asian Americans from participating in forming a productive understanding of "Americanness."

[3] Barnstone (1999: 66).

[4] Ibid., 74.

[5] Bristow (2000: 89).

2. The Case of Timothy Yu

2.1 "Chinese Silences" in a Hall of Mirrors

As a scholar of literary studies, Timothy Yu is familiar with American poetry and its genealogy. In 2009, he published his critical work "Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965" with Stanford University Press. In this book, he asks: how useful or effective is the label of Asian American poetry for studying the American literary avant-garde? He argues for "a consideration of race in the work of white and Asian American poets alike."[6] As an Asian American creative writer, Yu integrates his argument into his writing practice. In the examples I discuss here, he interrogates the meanings of "China" and its "Chineseness" in American mainstream culture, including historiography, public speech, and ultimately, canonical poetry.

These examples are all titled "Chinese Silence," some of which were first published in the 2012 chapbook "15 Chinese Silences," which was later expanded into the poem collection "100 Chinese Silences" in 2016. In these poems, Yu skillfully builds his texts in such a way that they form intertextual and dialogic relations to the texts of authors ranging from United States Poet Laureate Billy Collins (b. 1941) to poet-translator Eleanor Goodman (b. 1979). I demonstrate in the following textual analysis that Yu's poems, instead of offering a truer, more authentic "China" in order to overwrite the one given in other texts, rather foreground the mutual construction of the ethnic category of "race" – in his case, Chinese American – and literature. In other words, these texts try to relocate "China" as part of the American cultural tradition. To emphasize these intertextual dynamics, I read Yu's texts not as rebukes of other authors' texts but as one side of a poetic hall of mirrors referring to and reflecting on "China." With this method of reading, I attempt to bring into view the various positions and limitations of these texts – and authors – with regard to "China," "Chineseness," and "Americanness."

2.2 Reflecting and Relocating "China" and "Chineseness": A Textual Analysis

The title "Chinese Silences," as "Chinese Silence No. 1" indicates, was inspired by Billy Collins' poem "Grave" (2009).[7] Billy Collins served as the U.S. Poet Laureate from 2001–2003 and as the New York State Poet Laureate from 2004–2006. He is one of the most bestselling living American poets. Therefore, it is reasonable to acknowledge him and his work as representative of American culture, especially literature, both symbolically and commercially. It should be noted that Collins has

[6] Yu (2009: 162).

[7] According to Lucas Klein, Timothy Yu attended Collins' reading of "Grave" at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in April 2011. See Klein (2018: 268).

reflected humorously on (classical) Chinese poetry in the American tradition, as one may see in the poem titled "Reading an Anthology of Chinese Poems of the Sung Dynasty, I Pause to Admire the Length and Clarity of their Titles" (1999).

In Collins' poem "Grave," the speaker visits his parents' joint grave, asking what they think of his new glasses. All he gets is silence. In stanzas three and four, the speaker alludes to the so-called "Chinese belief" of "one hundred kinds of silence," of which "only a few special monks" can tell the distinction. In stanzas seven and eight, he refers to other silences, those in his family – of the father and the son:

> the ear my father likes to speak into,
> but he would say nothing,
> and I could not find a silence
>
> among the one hundred Chinese silences
> that would fit the one that he created
> even though I was the one

Now, in stanzas nine and ten, the speaker admits that he invented the one hundred Chinese silences:

> 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.[8]

These last two stanzas describe the objects associated with Chinese "silence": the night boat, the lotus, and the temple bell – all typical of a scholar-poet's life in ancient China and generally perceived in the West to stand for a meditative, Zen-like aura. The metaphor of "petals," in particular, evokes Ezra Pound's Imagist classic "In a Station of the Metro" (1913):

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.[9]

It would be simplistic to regard Collins' "Grave" solely as an orientalist imagining of China. First, silence occupies a central position in the poem, but ambivalently. It is rather related to the speaker's (dead) parents. As stanzas seven and eight show, the speaker's relation to his father could be one of violence. The father failed to communicate with the son in words and the latter chose to resort to silence, as resistance or resignation. The son then invented a Zen-like picture of the "Chinese silences" as a defense mechanism to help him cope with the generational conflict. He imagined silences of meditative beauty, featuring sensitivity, fine sensibility, and sharp understanding. Secondly, this poem foregrounds the constructedness of

[8] Collins (2009).

[9] Pound (1913).

the so-called "one hundred Chinese Silences" as a product of the speaker's fantasy. He created it in order to work out his traumatized, silenced "American" experience. In this poem, Collins does something similar to Pound: he appropriates something "Chinese" – the distant – in order to deal with things at home. Their difference lies in the different levels upon which they engage "China." Pound uses it as a literary resource, while Collins uses "China" in a twofold way: first, "China" and its poetic silence serve as the (young) speaker's haven from his father in American daily life; additionally, however, the imaginary nature of "Chinese silences," highlighted by a diegetic break in the poem, shows that Collins also reflects upon their constructedness.

Therefore, Yu's poem "Chinese Silence No. 1, after Billy Collins, 'Grave'"[10] should not be viewed as simply speaking back polemically to Collins' text. Rather, Yu deals with a different sort of "silence" in American experience – that of Chinese Americans and their inability or unwillingness to speak, which leads to the forgetting and overlooking of their voice and history. Yu therefore writes about a different "China"-related silence in American life.

The poem opens up with the speaker asking his "unknown grandfather" about "this poem," which immediately accentuates the issues of poetry and the historiography of race. "A Chinese silence fell." It is because the grandfather is dead, or, as the fifth stanza says: "My grandfather said nothing." The time in which his grandfather lived is not difficult to identify: around the beginning of the 20th century, when Asian Americans suffered from racial exclusion and prejudice in the U.S.[11] This "Chinese silence," therefore, has been both imposed by others and self-willed as a result thereof. Both led to the marginalization of an ethnic group whose members are not recognized as individuals:

> It would have been hard for a stranger
> to tell one of us from the other.
>
> We both looked like monks or scholars
> Or like piles of drowned bones
> laid softly on the loamy earth.

By alluding to the "monks or scholars" evoked in Collins' poem, Yu highlights the anachronism of these "Chinese" images, revealing their functions in flattening and blurring the history – or histories – of living Chinese Americans, generation after generation.

Yet the Chinese silence – in both historical and social senses – has stirred and come together with "other silences": "[l]ike blind puppies they squirmed / and snuffled for their mother." Therefore, silence does not just belong to Chinese Americans, as the speaker addresses "you" directly in the last two stanzas:

[10] Yu (2012: no page indicated).

[11] Turner (2010).

> 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.[12]

Whoever "you" is, the person may suffer from a silence like that of Chinese Americans and face a similar problem of building one's ethnic identity and history into one's Americanness, with the latter symbolized by the cracked Liberty Bell. With this ending, the poem expands the possibilities of "Chinese silence" to all silenced strata of American society, expressing the hope of seeing them acknowledged as part of a reflective and inclusive American experience.

The flattening of an ethnic group and the disregard for its history can take place on multiple levels – racial as well as social. In "Chinese Silence No. 30, after Eleanor Goodman, 'Boston's Chinatown,'" Timothy Yu moves to interrogate the depiction of "China" in American public communication. Eleanor Goodman is an American poet and translator of Chinese poetry. She published a blog text on her new perception of Boston's Chinatown on August 3, 2011. This short text starts with "If you've spent any time in China, it's easy to slam the Chinatown of America," putting forward an assumption that the Chinatown of America is an (inferior) imitation of China. The text proceeds to describe the author's "old" impression of the American Chinatown: full of red lanterns, a place for tourists, "but people don't really *live* there."[13] Goodman thought she knew Chinatown rather well because she has worked as a translator, she ate there, and she interacted with locals ("bought DVDs in the sketchy basement").

Goodman explains why she was in Chinatown this time: she attended a charity event for the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center, an organization that helped immigrants adapt to life in the United States by teaching them English and instructing them in how to handle "that strange beast" called American culture. Goodman then describes her discovery of a "hidden city" within Chinatown through her "scavenger hunt," where "the life of the neighborhood happens." Her revelation is that "[i]t turns out that even in touristy Chinatown, as everywhere, there are treasures to discover if you just pay attention." Though this text seems to have a happy ending, Goodman's outsider perspective on Chinatown, while acknowledging its existence as a lively community, nevertheless reinforces the dark, sinister, and foreign cultural stereotype of Chinatown created by American mass media, such as Roman Polanski's 1974 neo-noir film "Chinatown," in which Los Angeles' Chinatown is used as the backdrop and plays a major noir element.

[12] Yu (2012: no page indicated).

[13] Goodman (2011).

Timothy Yu's "Chinese Silence No. 30" takes issue with Goodman's blog text by pointing out that it has transposed the low social and financial status of the people living in Chinatown onto the ethnic group of American Chinese by evoking the negative cultural stereotype of Chinatown as a seedy "hidden city" with inscrutable inhabitants. In his poem, Yu reorders – and hence recontextualizes – several sentences from Goodman's text to create a sarcastic allusion to the original. He uses the very "Chinese" and the very "American" signs to deconstruct Goodman's essentialized portrayal of Chinatown, which excludes it from American culture and reinforces the century-long prejudice that the Chinese American has not been a citizen of the U.S. but "the foreigner within."[14]

The first and second stanzas are composed almost entirely of quotes from Goodman's text, but out of order. These two stanzas replace Goodman's outsider's gaze with the voice of a Chinese American living in Chinatown. The speaker feels that the "dirty alleys" remind him of "that strange beast called American culture." This, in turn, reminds the reader that "dirty alleys" are not an exclusive signature of Chinatown – they often exist, for example, in the classic American film (and fiction) noir of the 1940s and 1950s.[15] With the word "strange," Yu's text defamiliarizes so-called "American culture" by asking whether it is a static and essentialized entity.

In the next two stanzas, Yu shows that the image of Chinatown portrayed by Goodman is related more to the social issue of poverty than to the racial category of "Chineseness." To illustrate this point, the rest of the poem practices the technique of inversion by moving the location of the poem to the Midwest, a very "American" place, where American cars used to be manufactured to provide the driving force for the "American way of life" in the mid-20th century:

> And it's all too tempting to denigrate
> The postindustrial towns of the dull Midwest.
> Of course I know there are unemployed people there.
> I heard it on NPR.
>
> Once I had to spend three hours
> In the Detroit airport, with its vendors peddling
> Chewing gum and soda.
> But people don't really live there.[16]

[14] Turner (2010: 20).

[15] Osteen (2012). The dark, dirty alleys in big American cities such as New York City or San Francisco often served as the locations of classical film noir, visualizing violence, crime, and the protagonist's sense of nightmare. I thank Matthias Fechner for pointing out a comparable case: Nelson Algren's novels, the best known of them "The Man with the Golden Arm" (novel: 1949; film: 1955), are set in Polish American slums of Chicago; they were often criticized by Chicago's Polish American community for its stereotypical portrayal of Poles as brutal and bigoted.

[16] Yu (2016).

People in postindustrial towns of the Midwest, Yu suggests, suffer the same sort of poverty. In the Detroit Airport, vendors pedal such typical "American" fare as "Chewing gum and soda." And the speaker finds the airport is indeed a place, where "nobody really lives," since only travelers pass through and foreigners / immigrants enter first – to "adjust to life in the States." The last stanza goes back to translation. By foregrounding the speaker's – that is, the persona of the Chinese American poet – experience of eating many meals in the airport, the poem brings out Goodman's failure as a translator to see – and hence to understand – Chinese Americans living between different languages.

Lucas Klein perceives Timothy Yu's parody of white poets' representations of Chinese culture as practicing translation at a very basic level. He argues that Yu's criticism of translations (of Chinese poetry) for "discursively trafficking in stereotyped images regardless of their philological accuracy" can be viewed as a sign of Yu's "translation anxiety." In this translation anxiety, Klein posits, Yu's skepticism about the penetrability of the barrier between American poetics and Asian literature "ends up redeploying the trope of Chinese as inscrutable." Klein sees this translation anxiety as a symptom of the tension in Asian Americans' (self-)expectation to "prove their allegiance to two opposing forces, the Asian and the American."[17] With the last example, I would argue that the translation anxiety, if it exists in Yu's texts, has less to do with the poet's attempt to reconcile two different – but not as impermeable as Klein implies – cultures / identities; and more to do with Yu's efforts to bring his Chinese (non-European) heritage into the dynamic process of creating an American literary tradition / canon. By writing in response to Collins' short poem "China" (2007), Timothy Yu the poet foregrounds his problems as a Chinese American writer facing a modernist and contemporary American literary canon started by Ezra Pound. First, let us take a look at Collins' "China" (2007):

> I am an ant inside a blue bowl
> On the table of a cruel prince.
>
> Battle plans are being discussed.
> Much rice wine is poured.
>
> But even when he angers
> and drives a long knife into the table,
>
> I continue to quietly circle
> the bowl, hand-painted with oranges and green vines.[18]

The metamorphosis of the speaker into an ant in Collins' poem as well as his time travel back to an ancient world of war allows the reader to understand the title

[17] Klein (2018: 270).

[18] Collins (2007).

"China" in a multifaceted way: as porcelain, as a geographical space in a pre-modern era, and perhaps also as a modern nation-state. Humble and fragile as the speaker is, he is unperturbed as an outsider by the intensive moment of the human world and rather continues to appreciate the beauty of the china bowl. The metamorphosis and the journey in time create a distance between the speaker and the scene of China and thereby present the speaker's voice as that of an observer.

Timothy Yu's poem "Chinese Silence No. 4, after Billy Collins, 'China'" follows closely the short form:

> I am a cicada floating in a coffee cup
> on the desk of the Poet Laureate
>
> Grant proposals are being written.
> many bottles of Napa wine are emptied.
>
> But even when his nodding head
> strikes the desk like a bobbing Buddha's,
>
> I lurk silently inside
> my mug, chipped by the teeth of Ezra Pound.[19]

In this poem, "ant" is replaced with "cicada" and "blue bowl" with "coffee cup." Therefore, the meaning of "China" as porcelain (china) no longer applies. The cicada is loud and floating in a cup, making the "I" much more visible and audible than the speaker in Collins' poem. The term "Poet Laureate" certainly alludes to Billy Collins, but it can be read as a general allusion to the American literary canon and its prestige, which Collins represents.

Stanzas two and three portray a humorous and sarcastic image of the life of the Poet Laureate: Californian "Napa wine" locates him in the United States; he seems depressed and desperate with the grant proposal writing, which is not easy and the competition may be as fierce as a war; his "nodding head" hits the desk like a "bobbing Buddha's." Buddha is a typical cultural trope of inner serenity and wisdom from the East. Here, however, its meanings are inverted: the bobbing Buddha's head actually signifies boredom, exhaustion, too much alcohol, and being at one's wits' end (having no ideas, no mental resources left).

The last stanza brings the poem's perspective back to the speaker. While Collins' speaker seems satisfied with his endless, quiet circling within the china bowl, Yu's speaker is silent but restless. There is no textual evidence to indicate the speaker's change of location, but now the speaker lays claim to the "coffee cup / on the desk of the Poet Laureate," in which the "I" is floating and perhaps half-drowned, as "my mug." This suggests a certain sense of identification, which is nevertheless unsettled by the speaker's anxious tone. With such ominous words

[19] Yu (2012: no page indicated).

as "lurk" (versus "circle") and "silently" (versus "quietly"), the speaker seems to bide his time. To do what? If the cracked Liberty Bell discussed above symbolizes a disputable Americanness that still leaves out or suppresses some of its ethnic groups and histories, then the mug "chipped by the teeth of Ezra Pound" can be viewed as a metaphor of an equally questionable mainstream American poetic canon, whose literary appropriation of "China" remains largely in Pound's tradition. Despite the speaker's feeling as an insider of this poetic tradition, the "I" contends that Pound's powerful legacy is damaging, if not threatening, to the articulation of Chinese Americans' history and lived experience.[20]

Collins' "China" imagines a journey to ancient China, where he witnesses a dramatic moment for a prince at war; the anger of the prince and its transience are set in contrast to the calmness of the humble observer and the eternal beauty of the "china" artifact. Yu's "Chinese Silence No. 4," on the other hand, recontextualizes a "China" in the United States and deals with a Chinese American poet's efforts to contend for a different way of writing "China" from that of Ezra Pound's tradition: while Pound and Collins turn to the Chinese (classical) cultural tradition for literary resources to write their poetry, Yu tries to resist the abstracted and anachronized "Chineseness" at hand, which has been imposed onto the (self-)perception of Chinese Americans, in order to bring their lived experience into the American literary tradition.

3. Conclusion

Timothy Yu rewrites, inverts, and parodies the literary tropes of "China" and Chinese culture from the texts of established American poets. By using the literary strategies of recontextualization, inversion, and defamiliarization, he creates a poetic hall of mirrors that refers to and reflects upon those texts. His poems inverse and interrogate the perspectives of the original texts, and thereby defamiliarize the familiar tropes and / or stereotypes of "China" in American "literature and public speech."[21]

Yu therefore relocates "China" and Chineseness as an ethnic category in American culture and as part of the Americanness that is itself characterized by heterogeneity and multiplicity. In these poems, "China" is anything but abstract and ahistorical: it may be an ancient civilization with a glorious classical cultural tradition – including poetry and the art of making porcelain – but it is also a land that suffered humiliating colonialism at home and racial prejudice abroad in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. All these facets are part of the history of Chinese Americans and still have an impact on how living individuals are perceived and perceive themselves in the United States. Through speaking out and sorting out

[20] I am indebted to David Hock for this interpretation.

[21] Silvieus (2016).

the notion of "China" in contemporary American culture, Yu's poetic practice shows that literary works by and about Chinese Americans have a dynamic relationship with the construction of the ethnic identity: "'race,'" he says, "is not a category that precedes the literary work but one that emerges in and through the work itself."[22]

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[22] Yu (2009: 162).

