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The Factors That Influenced Ezra Pound's Translation and Introduction of Chinese Culture

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Abstract

As a leading figure of Imagism in the early 20th century, Ezra Pound advocated guiding principles for the American New Poetry. It is quite well known that Ezra Pound was greatly influenced by Chinese culture. It is not only shown in Pound's *Cathy* which consists of nineteen Chinese poems, but also proved by Pound's introduction of Chinese Confucianism in his epic writing "*Cantos*".

The article aims at clarifying the factors that influenced Pound's translation and introduction of Chinese culture in the light of aesthetics of reception and polysystem theory. The first part of the paper focuses on a brief introduction of the above theories. The second part mainly deals with the two factors exerting on Pound's translation and introduction of Chinese culture: one is, Chinese poems represents "a new form of literature" that Pound has been seeking for a long time, that is to say, ancient Chinese poetry satisfied his expectations. The other is Ezra Pound purposed to utilize Chinese Confucian as a model for solving social problems in the chaotic, disintegrating western world.

Key words: Chinese culture; Ezra pound; Aesthetics of reception; Polysystem theory; Impersonality; Cathay; Cantos

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1. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF AESTHETICS OF RECEPTION AND POLYSYSTEM THEORY

1.1 Aesthetics of Reception

The aesthetics of reception originated in early 1960's. The idea was put forth by a group of scholars of Kanstanz University of Germany. The theory of reception focuses its attention to the readers (recipients) of literary works. The reception theorists claim the readers play a crucial role in the process of reading. Receptionists define the literary objects created by writers as literary texts before the reader's reception. Only after the actualization of recipients read it, can the text be to called the work of art, and it becomes an aesthetic object. They believe that the text is the only way to observe objectively the literary text.

Hans Robert Jauss, one of the leading figures of Kanstanz School, emphasized that a text's social history must be considered when interpreting the text. He asserts: "the historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addresses (Ibid). In his opinion, the text and the recipients are always in a dialogical state: The text keeps raising questions, and the readers try to answer these questions. The action of receiving text is an open and continuous process. Jauss thinks the history of literature is the history of reader's reception of it. Every dialogue between work and readership is an organic part of the endless chain of reception, and the past and the present are tied together through the dialogue. The base of the dialogue is **the horizon of expectations**.

The horizon of expectations is the key term of Jauss's historical-collective study on literary reception. Using the term horizons of expectation to include all of a historical period's critical vocabulary and assessment of a text, Jauss points out that how any text is evaluated from one historical period to another, necessary changes. In fact, the

horizon of expectations is “a kind of frame of reference” or “a frame work of concepts and assumptions” for “each work develops in the historical moment of its appearance from a previous understanding of the genre, from the form, and theme of already familiar works, and from the contract between poetic and practical language” (Seldon, 1985).

Jauss argued that, when a recipient reads a new work, he would be consciously or unconsciously compare this work with the works he has read before, and brings his reading his preconception about the literary genre. The literary forms which were disposed during the previous reading process will operate at that moment.

The horizon of expectations is not definitive. It keeps changing and being corrected. In Propper’s view, the expectation disappointment is the key of the transformation of horizon of expectations; he comments “we become aware of many expectations only when they are disappointed—for example when we come upon an unexpected step, expectation disappointments force us to correct our expectations (D. W. Fokkema and E. Kunne-Ibsch).” It shows when we meet with a work of art, whose aesthetic value is quite different from what has predisposed in our mind. The established horizon of expectations is required to be modified to satisfy the appearance of new work of art. The “horizon change” neglects the familiar experience and aesthetic values, and challenges the intellectual capability of the receptors. Through active regulation of the horizon of expectations, the readers improve their own capability and create their new expectations.

The modification of social and cultural background can also result in the change of the horizon of expectation. With the change in the outside world, people begin to modify their mode of thinking about the universe. The modification of their view on the world leads to the establishment of new expectations concerning the work of art to satisfy their new feeling, or new ways of expression. Since every writer will take readers into consideration during his creation, the alteration of readers’ expectations will result in the reconstruction of writers’ horizon and propel them to create new works.

The alternation of horizon of expectations results in the various acception of the same text, and enables the dialogue between readers and works to continue. No wonder why some elements in literary structures are actualized but others are ignored at a given moment. That is how the literature of culture at a certain moment is rediscovered by another culture.

Accordingly, Jauss argues that since each historical period establishes its own horizons of expectation, the overall value and meaning of any text can never become fixed or universal, for readers from any given historical period establish for themselves what they value in a text. A text, then, does not have one and only one correct interpretation because its supposed meaning changes from

one historical period to another. A final assessment about any literary work thus becomes impossible.

Unlike the macro-point of view of Jauss’s historical-collective theory, his colleague of kanstanz university, Wolfgang Iser concentrates his attention on the micro-point.

Inspired by the theory of human interaction and human communications, Wolfgang develops a series of theories about the dynamic interaction between readers and the texts. Once the text is actualized by a reader, it will provide the reader with a world which is not absolutely equal to the world in which the reader or writer lives. The created world is an extension of the reality. So there is no referential frame work in real-life for the readers to judge whether their ideas on the text are right or wrong. The reader is continuously regulating his actualization of the text, which makes the significance of the text indeterminate. In fact, indeterminacy is not a defect of literary works, it is the characteristic which distinguishes the work of art from other texts. In a scientific text, the signifier serves the signified, and the readers are provided with an one-dimensional perspective only, while there is no definite relationship between the signifier and the signified in a literary text. The indeterminacy is also a signifier caused by the structure of the text, and its signified lies in the interpretation of the reader. The more concrete a text is, the more the perspectives are, and the more the indeterminacy increases.

In a text, the blanks or gaps in a text are the basic structure of the indeterminacy. Blanks or gaps bring the text and readers in dynamic interaction. The blanks destroy the coherence of the whole text, create multiple perspectives and hinder readers from getting meaning directly from the words. Through filling in the gaps in the text with one’s imagination or experience, the reader brings the text to life.

But different readers have varying expectations of the text, so it is possible for readers to have diverse concretization of the same text. There cannot exist any determinate or ultimate interpretations of a text, or the indeterminacy of a text will be effaced. At the same time, it should be pointed out that the structure of a text controls the actualization. No one can fill in blanks without taking the explicit elements of a text into consideration.

From the points I mentioned above, we can see the theory of reception put its focus on the process of reception, and focuses on the active role of the recipients. The change in the horizon of expectations and the theory of indeterminacy give a good explanation of the phenomenon that some obscure works come into prominence, and some eye-striking works of art become vague, with the passage of time.

1.2 Polysystem Theory

Itmar Even-zohar, an Israel professor, declared polysystem theory in terms of the influence of translation on society. In the view of polysystem theory, all the

social semiotic phenomenon, specifically, all the human communicative forms, such as language, literature, economy, politics and ideology, etc., are regarded as a complete system, not a compound. In this system, the components comprise each other, rely on each other. However, they do not own the same position in the system, some in the center, the other in a marginal place. Meanwhile, there exists an endless fight among them: Some members in the center may be expelled to the edge while some members at the edge may occupy the center.

In Zohar's opinion, translation can be in a primary position, or a secondary position. "In a primary position" is meant that translation acts prominently in the shaping of the center. It appears in the following situation: the first is, when the development of literature is embryonic at the time, in other words, it is still "under construction"; the second is, the literature is in a marginal or disadvantaged stage, compared with the literatures in other countries; the last is, the literature plunges into a phase of "literary vacuum" or "a crisis", the present literary models do not appeal to the authors so that they turn to the alien.

The positions of translations in Polysystem can affect the way in which the translator will adopt. When translation is in a primary position, the translator will reject the domestic traditional form, endeavor to introduce a new model from foreign literature, thus, the target language is more close to the original in regard to adequacy. Consequently, most new elements in the original are brought into the target literature. On the contrary, if the target literature is powerful while translation is in a secondary position, the translator has to give in and abide by the conventional norm, so there is a big gap between the translation and the original.

However, the translator is not the only decisive factor for translation, politics, ideology, literary theory and patron, etc, all play important roles in the process of selecting, manipulating, expanding, and canceling the literary and non-literary product. Therefore, Polysystem theory helps to reread the literary translation in a profound way and exposes the factors concealed in the course of translation.

2. THE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCED POUND'S TRANSLATION AND INTRODUCTION OF CHINESE CULTURE

As is mentioned in the first chapter, the reflection of a literature in an alien country largely relies on the fusion of the horizon of expectations, we can say, a literary element that can be the dominated poetics of a certain time, and the expectations people hold of contemporary literary creation, as well as various factors explained in Polysystem, including the social beliefs and the thinking mode of the community; we can also look it upon as the ideology in the society. The following is to unveil

the above two elements which play an important role in Pound's translation and introduction of Chinese culture, one is the change of poetics caused by the transformation of horizon of expectations in the early 20th century in American and European countries. The other is trying to disclose the ideological reason why Pound was so enthusiastic on introducing Chinese culture: Pound believes that Chinese Confucianism is the right medicine to the decay of the west.

2.1 The New Poetic Movement

The early 20th century witnessed great change both in the material world and the spiritual world of the American and European people. The rapid industrialization and commercialization deprived people of their confidence in being master of the world. The two world wars were shattered people's illusion that the world was one of peace, democracy and equality. The worse is that people's old beliefs passed with the wars. The old philosophical thinking inherited from the Greek tradition had been suspected by people. Some philosophers began to reconsider the world, the inabilities and the finiteness of human beings. At that time, many philosophers got rid of the traditional, self-centered logic reasoning. They took their irrationalism as the basic thinking mode to grasp the essence of the world.

With the transformation of the whole world, literary circles faced their crisis as well. At the beginning of this century, literary circles were dominated by the "Victorian third-rate poets." Their works were full of decorations, and exaggerated self-expressions, which failed to reflect the sudden change in the material and the spiritual world. A group of sensitive writers, including Pound, were quite unsatisfied with their contemporary conditions, and were in search of new forms of expression. They are in for a classical revival, which predicted fresh air were necessary to take the place of the contemporary sentimental literature, thus, exotic flavors were necessary to help the nourish movements in literature.

Moreover, at the turn of this century, the western world was stirred by an over-whelming wave of "inversion Platonism". The modern philosophers suspect the exhaustiveness of abstract conception and classification employed by Platonist to reflect the truth of the world. The rejection of Platonism also led to a reaction against the traditional poetics. The refusal to accept a man-centered point of view to reflect the world as it is and the wide acceptance of intuition as the key to the essence of the objective world produced the poetics of impersonality, and concreteness. The poetics of impersonality demands multiple perspectives to reveal the flux of the universe. In order to keep the objective attitude to represent the multiplications of the world, and avoid subjective judgment, in the poems, there appear various voices. It is alike Chinese poems which are characteristic of juxtaposed fragmentations. Influenced by Taoism,

Chinese poets argued themselves as forming parts of the flux of the objective world, in their poems, there are not any abstract did actions or unstrained overflow of their emotion. In order to capture intuition, Chinese poets depersonalize themselves, and never make judgments directly. Their personal perceptions of the world have been dissolved by the general, impersonal intuition shared by many people.

In this case, many leading figures of the new poetry movement, showed great interest in Chinese art or Chinese literature, Pound is one of them. His chance encounter of Ernest Fenollosa, who had been an imperial Commissioner of Art in Tokyo before his death in 1908, was timely and invigorating. Pound was immediately fascinated by the concision and objectiveness of Chinese poems that were left by Fenollosa after he died. The result that came out of Fenollosa's Chinese materials was *Cathy*, a booklet of western Chinese poems published in April 1915.

2.2 The Demand of the Social Reform

Polysystem theory believed there are various reasons for a translator to select and translate a work. In fact, by disseminating a new idea, a work can be a catalyst which can accelerate the reform of a society. In Pound's great work "*Cantos*", which is a window for western reader to know some Chinese culture, the whole epic is indeed the presentation of his serious contemplation during his entire life as to why the western civilization was decaying as he saw it and his exploration through the history of mankind to find out what can help build and how to build an earthly paradise. In some parts of this book, Pound presents the hellish conditions of the modern world as a foil to his paradise and declares the necessity of renovation. He traces the causes of the decay of the west and prescribes Chinese Confucianism as the right medicine to cure the western disease. In his *Kung Cantos*, he examines the 5000 years of Confucianism and to prove its validity as a theory of order.

After the two world wars, not only the youths but also the whole society of the western world were as a loss, what the western culture needed urgently at that time was a moral norm, which should be radically different from that of the original, which, in Pound's eye, led to the degeneration of the society and the outburst of wars. Under the "old" culture (Chinese culture appealed to Pound greatly and is "new"), each conducted accordingly to one's own will and their only aim is to fulfill one's desire. However, in Pound's opinion, what Confucianism is advocating is totally different. All the virtues, i. e., the virtue of emperor, marriage, family, etc, are listed in it. Therefore, Pound turned to this original culture for help and wished to save the western world with it. Surveying the whole *Kung Cantos*, one may find that Pound adapted the Confucian scriptures directly and understandingly

so that they would be easy for western readers. Tenets of Confucian ethics are suggested that modesty, wisdom rooted in the knowledge of human nature. An order that begins within the individual shall move in ever-widening circles outward into society and the state. In Confucius's words, they are "setting right one's heart" (正心), "self-cultivation" (修身), the "education of one's family" (齐家), the "ruling of a state" (治国), and the governance of the world" (平天下). The tenets gave Pound enough inspiration that he translated this part to instruct that one should not confine his own conduct only to satisfy his or her personal desire but to act according to the requirement of the whole society and state.

In Pound's eye, this is the root from which all Confucian teaching grows and that exactly complies with Pound's political point of view at that time. So that, *Cantos* was given birth to sponsor a movement of social reform.

CONCLUSION

Ezra Pound's translation and introduction of Chinese culture have deserved the great attention since the New Poetry movement. By his translation and introduction, Chinese culture, "discovered" by the western world, exerted great influence on American literature, no matter in terms of poetry and philosophy. His translation is a medium between Chinese literature and American literature.

Through a rough study of the literature and society of Pound's age, we can find, in fact, his reception of Chinese culture is happened in a broad background. That is a very good example to prove, that the horizon of expectations fuses between two quite different cultures, also, there are various reasons that can be the impetus for translation.

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