

***East-West Exchange and Late Modernism: Williams, Moore, Pound.* Zhaoming Qian. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2017. Pp. 208 (cloth).**

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If the topic of Zhaoming Qian's *East-West Exchange and Late Modernism: Williams, Moore, Pound* (2017) is connection with and continuation of the past, this is true also of the book itself. Early in his new study, Qian outlines three ways in which cross-cultural exchange can be approached: via text, via image, and via personal interaction. The first two are associated with material infrastructures, while the third points to a human infrastructure, that is, to those interlocutors "from the target culture" who, as J. Hillis Miller explains, serve as "the most authentic and compelling source" for exchange.<sup>1</sup> Qian's earlier works, especially *The Modernist Response to Chinese Art: Pound, Moore, Stevens* (2003) and *Ezra Pound's Chinese Friends: Stories in Letters* (2008), have focused on the material. In *East-West Exchange and Late Modernism*, he develops his exploration of the human side.

For William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and Ezra Pound, collaboration in the late 1950s or early 1960s with an interlocuter of Chinese origin continued their efforts as pioneer modernists earlier in the century. All three had inter-cultural exchanges with the east during the decades of "high modernism." In the 1920s, Williams relied "on Herbert A. Giles's and Arthur Waley's translations to explore Chinese poetry" (19), including poetry from the Tang Dynasty. Moore developed her admiration for Chinese arts after observing a 1923 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Chinese paintings. Pound's activities, finally, are well known. He produced *Cathay* (1915) from Ernest Fenollosa's notebooks, leading T. S. Eliot to praise him as "the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time,"<sup>2</sup> and in 1920 he published Fenollosa's essay on "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry." Moreover, Pound collaborated with a Chinese interlocuter as early as the 1920s, and in time this exchange produced *Canto XLIX* (1937), or

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<sup>1</sup> Zhaoming Qian, *East-West Exchange and Late Modernism: Williams, Moore, Pound* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2017), xi. Subsequent references cited parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Introduction," in Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), xiii.

the “Seven Lakes” Canto.<sup>3</sup> East-west exchange during the late modernism of all three poets was therefore in keeping. Their later works were, at least partly, a revival of their early modernism, a way of “making it new”.

The first two chapters of *East-West Exchange and Late Modernism* focus on Williams’s collaboration with David Raphael Wang (David Hsin-fu Wang or Wang Shenfu 王燊甫), which began in the late 1950s. “Breaking style through translation or adaptation was not new” to Williams at this point (19); instead, Williams turned to Chinese poetry throughout his career in order to overcome particular poetic impasses. In the 1920s, for example, cubist artists “coached Williams to disregard syntax in breaking poetic lines, and it was the Tang dynasty Chinese poets who influenced him to rearrange severed lines in square-looking stanzas on the page” (20). After the second World War, Williams experimented with a triadic stanza, though he became dissatisfied with it, and it was exactly at this point, when “he did not know how to get out of it and where to turn for a substitute” (21), that his collaboration with Wang started. “The Cassia Tree”, a series of thirty-nine poems, was the initial fruit of this inter-cultural exchange, though it was not published until three years after Williams’s death. Whereas Pound had produced *Cathay* from notebooks after Fenollosa’s death, Williams’s interlocuter “chanted to him the old language, put poems on paper character by character, and provided their denotative and connotative meanings” (29-30).

In “The Cassia Tree” and in the two Wang Wei poems with which Williams and Wang began their collaboration but which were omitted from the final published series, Williams seemed especially to be influenced by the “pithy verse form” (27) of Chinese. This inter-cultural exchange via a living interlocuter “eas[ed] and speed[ed] his return to modernist minimalism in his final lyrics” (40). From Wang’s perspective, however, Williams seemed arbitrarily to exclude “Chinese expressive syntax features and cultural overtones,” especially a poem’s representation of “the perceiving act” or its “subtle Taoist/Zen Buddhist overtones” (28-9). Yet, as Qian shows, these features and overtones, absent from

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<sup>3</sup> See Zhaoming Qian, *The Modernist Response to Chinese Art: Pound, Moore, Stevens* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 123-37.

“The Cassia Tree,” returned in Williams’s last book *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (1962).

In the first place, *Pictures from Brueghel* revealed the inspiration Williams took from the form of Chinese poetry: “his search for and discovery of a refreshing style in classic Chinese poetry” made it possible for Williams to “escape from the triadic line” (41). In addition to “short-line quatrains” and “quasi-double stop-short form” (43), Qian speculates, Williams might also have been “sparked by [...] Du Fu to make [his verses] more dramatic and more conversational” (47). What is more, Qian discerns “an ancient Chinese philosophical notion” (51) in Williams’s volume, which probably came from Williams’s interaction with Wang. In particular, those notions associated with Chinese philosophy in *Pictures from Brueghel* tend to be Taoist, emphasizing “the cyclical nature of all things in the universe” (55).

Williams’s understanding of Taoism seems, nevertheless, far from profound. In the third and fourth chapters of *East-West Exchange and Late Modernism*, Qian turns to the case of Marianne Moore, whose exploration of Chinese philosophy also benefited from the guidance of an interlocuter. Whereas Williams and Wang established a “master/apprentice relationship” (40), Moore’s collaboration with Mai-mai Sze (Shi Yunzhen 施蕴珍) was one of mutual admirers. In her 1957 lecture on “Tedium and Integrity in Poetry,” Moore explicitly credited her interest in integrity to *The Tao of Painting* (1956), “edited and with a translation by Mai-mai Sze” (60).

At least partly, Moore’s modernist poetics was, before her reading of Sze’s book, inspired by modern painting. As a consequence, Moore explained, “she would find it tiresome to read any poetry with no vision of ‘another world’ or no ‘sensibility and imagination’ that created ‘another world’” (60). After being caught by the “expertly chosen plates of Chinese ink paintings and calligraphy” (61) in Sze’s book, however, Moore must have been amazed, Qian writes, to discover that “much of the Tao or the aesthetic behind Chinese poetry and painting appeared akin to her own modernist poetics.” (62) From *The Tao of Painting*, then, Moore learned about the concept of “Tao”, whose Chinese character in primitive form indicates “wholeness.” This, Qian argues, explains Moore’s choice of *integrity* as a term for Tao.

Moore was also attracted to the six canons of painting, formulated by Xie He as early as 550 CE and discussed in Sze's *The Tao of Painting*. Of the six canons, Moore turned most of her attention to "breath resonance, which refers to liveliness and animation" (63). Herbert Giles, Laurence Binyon, and Pound had each offered an interpretation of this canon in the early twentieth century, but in her lecture on "Tedium and Integrity," Moore approached it from the perspective of Taoism, and in this she was guided by Sze. Moreover, the combination of this canon with her notion of Tao influenced Moore's late works, *O to Be a Dragon* (1959) and *Tell Me, Tell Me* (1966).

As Qian notes,

Sze never worked together with Moore on any poems, but by passing onto her the spirit of the dragon and the substance of the six canons of painting through *The Tao of Painting* and giving her a yearly subscription to the [*Time Literary Supplement*] since January 1958, she became one of Moore's secondary collaborators. (75)

Such "spirit" can be detected in both of Moore's late volumes. In particular, an embedded Taoist aesthetic flows almost "everywhere in Moore's final book of verse, *Tell Me, Tell Me*" (76). Borrowed lines in "Granite and Steel" echo "the spirit of Tao—modern architecture united with nature, and heaven united with earth" (76). Finally, Moore's understanding of "breath resonance" appears in "Blue Bug" and "Arthur Mitchell," whose sensual imagery illustrates the canon well: "a direct manifestation of [*possessing ch'i*] this creative power of heaven" (76). Together with her 1957 lecture, these late verses are the products of Moore's fruitful collaboration with Sze through *The Tao of Painting*.

When Qian turns finally to Pound in the 1960s, another surviving member of modernism's old guard, he shows again that east-west exchange via an interlocuter served as a turning point in both Pound's poetic career and the evolution of American modernism. In his fifth and sixth chapters, Qian examines how Pound, in "revising and rearranging his final cantos," turned away from "the idiom of the *Pisan Cantos*" and the "'condensed political discourse' of *Thrones*" (90) through his interest in Chinese Lijiang and its Naxi culture. In this, Pound turned to a minority culture in the east, rather than to the mainstream Han culture and

Confucian culture which had, until this point, been his focus, and also the focus of Williams and Moore.

As Qian explains, it is important to historicize Pound's final cantos, placing them "in their largely overlooked cross-cultural textual and extratextual contexts" (91). Pound's serious exploration of Naxi culture was assisted by both Joseph F. Rock and Pao-hsien Fang (Fang Baoxian 方宝贤). Fang, a native Naxi man from Lijiang, assured Pound that "his people, the Naxi, still relied on a pictographic language to communicate" (94). Fang also drew "a few Naxi pictographs" for Pound and taught him "how to pronounce them" (96). Pound was also concerned with the religious rites of the Naxi. As Qian observes, "Naxi rites in *Drafts and Fragments* are the best index of Pound's turning away from Confucianism" and "also the best index of his sudden renewal of early avant-gardism in old age" (104). In particular, the allusions to "The Romance of <sup>2</sup>K'a-<sup>2</sup>mä-<sup>1</sup>gyu-<sup>3</sup>mi-<sup>2</sup>gkyi" (or a Naxi version of *Romeo and Juliet*) which feature in Canto CX marked Pound's departure from Confucianism, for the Naxi story opposes the martial practices of Confucianism and its taboo on telling "nothing of the life after death" (108).

Furthermore, if it is customary to consider, as Marjorie Perloff puts it, Pound's experimental juxtaposition of "verbal elements, fragmented images, and truncated bits of narrative" as typical of high modernism (106), Qian demonstrates that the "[f]ragmentation, condensation, modernization and updating" in these late works stem as much from Pound's frequent "uses of borrowed words", and so from intercultural exchange. The resulting "fragmentary and impersonal style", writes Qian, "bluntly challenge[d] the dominant poetic trend of 1960s" (116). But it also suggested, through the local rhyming of English and Latin words with Naxi words, "Western civilization rhyming with Eastern civilization" (123).

Qian's reflections upon east-west exchange and late modernism reach beyond these readings of Williams, Moore, and Pound. In his Introduction and a "Coda" to the book, Qian extends his discussion to include Claude Monet's encounters with eastern visual arts, the performance of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) on a Beijing stage in the 1980s, and I. M. Pei's design for the Suzhou Museum (2002-2006). East-west exchanges via personal interaction began early in the twentieth century and have lasted into the twenty-first. Considered

narrowly, these artists from diverse periods and working in diverse fields “engage[d] in exchange with less familiar territories such as Japan and China for technological and conceptual innovations” (7). Considered more broadly, such inter-cultural exchange has been what Christine Froula calls a “global historical” process: “cross-fertilization, assimilation, creative adaptation, indigenization, translation, and making-new, within and across locally differentiated traditions, through centuries of uneven modernities—to the point that there hardly exists a purely European or western aesthetics” (6).

The Coda to *East-West Exchange and Late Modernism* ends with the case of Pei, which Qian calls “far more complex than those of the other modernists” (133). The complexity comes mainly from Pei’s dual background—a combination of Chinese and American, or east and west. Pei’s inter-cultural exchange via personal interaction was rather “a process of refreshing memories of Chinese concepts or of updating old Chinese concepts” (133), quite different from the American modernist poets treated earlier in the book. By designing the new Suzhou Museum located just one hundred miles from his own ancestral home, Pei was “pay[ing] a debt to the culture from which [he] came” (134). It is tempting to think, moreover, that Qian himself is involved in this closing discussion. From *Orientalism and Modernism: The Legacy of China in Pound and Williams* (1995) to *East-West Exchange and Late Modernism*, Qian himself has observed interactions between west and east—“the culture from which [he] came”—for decades. Rather than deciding on one or the other culture’s superiority, Qian’s focus has always been on the complexities of exchange.