

# The Influence of Classical Chinese Poetry on the Innovation of Ezra Pound

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**Abstract.** Recognised as one of the 20th century's most challenging poets, Ezra Pound made a major contribution to modernist poetry. Inspired by ancient Chinese poetry, Pound was drawn to its vivid imagery and concise diction. He was determined to supersede the Victorian style of complicated verse and breathe fresh energy into poetry. This essay provides a detailed analysis of Pound's most well-known composition, *In a Station of the Metro*, which is characterised by its modern and exotic elements. Contrasted with his translation work, *Taking Leave of a Friend*, selected from *Cathay*, this paper aims to analyse Pound's renewal of imagery, language and metres. After the World War I, Pound became increasingly engaged with Chinese Confucian literature and resolved to write a chapter in his modern epic poem, *Cantos*, to address the indispensable role of Confucian culture in the restoration of post-war civilisation. Therefore, this article additionally evaluates his innovation within the context of his *China Cantos* and further investigates how Pound's imagism paved the way for modernist poetry. It is also hoped that this essay will serve as a valuable resource for future studies on related topics.

**Keywords:** Ezra Pound; *In a Station of the Metro*; classical Chinese poetry; Imagery; Innovation.

## 1. Introduction

Due to their aversion to sentimental language and ornate diction prevalent in the Victorian Age, intellectuals in the fields of art and literature recognized the need for a new approach to poetry. The onset of the 20th century marked the advent of the first poetic movement, Imagism, which was important despite its short-lived nature. T.S Eliot has hailed it as "the starting point of modern poetry" [1]. As practitioners of Imagism, they embraced a genre distinguished stylistically by the use of free verse, precise imagery and concise language to express their modern spirit, a sense of fragmentation and dislocation.

T.E. Hulme, impressed by the revolutionary work of French symbolism, established the foundation for Imagism, as evidenced by his works *Autumn* and *A City Sunset*. To promote his ideas that 'each word must be seen' with 'absolutely accurate presentation and no verbiage' [2], he founded a Poets' Club in 1908. Together with F.S. Flint and other British poets, he endeavoured to improve Imagism poetry by drawing inspiration from the works of ancient Greek poets, French Symbolists, and Italian Renaissance poets. It is well worth noting that the revival of Chinoiserie and Japonism in the late Victorian era also set the stage for the reformation of modern poetry. Pound subsequently became the leader of the Imagism. In order to bring Imagist poetry to a wider group of readers, he gathered the talents of Imagist poets and assisted them in editing and publishing their work. Pound then discovered the essence of Imagist poetry by studying Japanese haiku, a form derived from Chinese poetry with four lines of five or seven characters. In 1913, he published a famous haiku-form short poem, *In a Station of the Metro*, and released three major principles of Imagism, on which he and F.S. Flint had agreed: As reported by the first principle of imagism, poetry must always adhere to the 'direct treatment of things, whether subjective or objective' [3], in contrast to the romantic poem. Following that, the poem should 'not use any words that do not contribute to the expression' [3], as opposed to the Victorian poets' tendency towards excessively ornate language. Therefore, imagist poetry usually written in simple language to avoid grammatical complexity, thereby allowing personal feelings to be expressed directly. The last principle of Imagism is that poetry should be written 'in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome' [3]. However, after recognising that haiku verse was no longer adequate to satisfy his requirement for multi-image, Pound was simmering

with the zeal of classical Chinese poetry, to a large extent, which promoted the development of Imagism. Undoubtedly, it was imagism that pointed the way for modern literature towards the harsh socioeconomic reality that emerged after the World War I, elevating poetry to an unprecedented level and further establishing a new cultural value. It can be claimed that Pound brought Imagism to its height.

The emergence of imagism in the West awakened Chinese scholars from their impulsive reverence for Western culture and brought their attention to the significance of classical Chinese poetry which serves as the basis for both Western Imagism and Chinese Imagery poetry. This article employs literary analysis to examine and discuss how Pound's imagery poetry was created under the influence of Chinese culture. Furthermore, based on the previous study on this related topic, the essay explores various aspects of the topic and incorporates some novel ideas. On top of that, this research will focus on how Pound's works are influenced by his English translations of classical Chinese poetry and how he applied these theories to the creation of Western poetry. In *Critical Thinking on Pound's Treatment in Translating Chinese Poetry*, Zhu Lunan argues that many facets of Chinese poetry were left out, mistranslated, or even rewritten in Pound's translation. Nevertheless, Pound's work primarily contributes to his Imagism and the advancement of new English poetry in the process of translation. Moreover, Pound's translations are instructive in comprehending how Chinese culture influenced the development of his imagist poetry.

## 2. Background of Pound and his Works

Ezra Pound (1885-1972), an American poet, was a renowned figure driven by a sense of urgency to revolutionise literature, as reflected in his motto 'Make It New', borrowed from Confucius. Determined to promote the work of Imagists, Pound edited and published an anthology, *Des Imagistes*, in 1914, which included the works of H.D. and Richard Aldington et al. He also had a part in the formation of vorticism, an artistic movement that expanded imagism to the domain of art, alongside Wyndham Lewis and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. In addition to the above-mentioned achievements, Pound also supported many celebrated writers who endeavoured to bring vitality to the new era. Writers such as T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, William Carlos Williams, H.D., and Ernest Hemingway et al.

Pound, who followed the life motto 'day by day make it new', dedicated almost a year to polishing his work *In a Station of the Metro* into a famous two-line poem similar to the haiku form. Subsequent to his exposure to Chinese literature notes provided by orientalist Ernest Fenollosa in 1913, Pound resolved to dedicate his efforts to Chinese poetry and the philosophy of Confucius. He then published his translation work, *Cathay*, in 1915 and wrote a letter to John Quinn in 1917 that 'China is fundamental, Japan is not, Japan is a special interest, like Provence or 12-13century Italy (apart from Dante) ... I find 'Noh' unsatisfactory... it is all too damn soft' [4]. Besides, Pound's translation of the *Great Learning*, a classic of Confucianism, earned him the \$2,000 Dial Poetry Award in 1927. For the greater part of the rest of his life, he committed himself to the *Cantos*, the masterpiece he initiated writing in 1922, widely acknowledged as a modernist epic. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Pound was awarded the Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1948 for the *Pisan Cantos*, despite his imprisonment, the committee's focus was on Pound's literary accomplishments rather than his political activity. In particular, *China Cantos*, or *Cantos LII-LXI*, demonstrated Pound's attempts to use imagery inspired by Chinese culture to reinforce Confucius' governing philosophy.

## 3. Analysis

The main focus of Imagism is the use of imagery and verbal expression. Pound delved into Chinese literature with great passion after receiving notes from the orientalist Ernest Fenollosa. Pound's comprehension of haiku has been confined to the technique of imagery, overlooking the difference in language structure, on account of his limited knowledge of the language and culture. This misinterpretation is to be expected among those who are not intimately familiar with language and

culture. However, Pound's poetic theory appears to be largely rooted in misunderstandings. Nevertheless, it was these misunderstandings that drove the imagists to form their own style of poetry and distinguished from traditional Anglo-American poetry. Compared his famous poem *In a Station of the Metro* with a Chinese poem, *Taking Leave of a Friend*, written by Li Bai and translated by Ezra Pound, Table 1 makes an effort to more accurately illustrate Pound's innovation that borrowed from ancient Chinese poetry while yet preserving the distinctive features of local literature.

**Table 1.** Contrast between Chinese and Western imagist poetry

|                      | <i>In a Station of the Metro</i> | <i>Taking Leave of a friend</i> |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Quantity of imagery  | 2                                | 5                               |
| Selection of imagery | Separability                     | Integrity                       |
| Image arrangement    | Super-position                   | Juxtaposition                   |
| Salience of imagery  | Salient                          | Equal                           |
| Perspective          | Close-up                         | Panorama                        |
| Verbs                | 0                                | 4                               |
| Form                 | Free-verse                       | Free-verse                      |

### 3.1. Image

'Image', Ezra Pound took it as the essence of Imagist poetry, 'is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time' [5]. Thus, a poem will be pondered over hundreds of times to capture the ongoing shifts between vision and imagination, further revealing how these shifts shape the perception of people towards the world around them. In fact, Pound presented this idea most effectively in his short, haiku-like poem: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd: Petals, on a wet, black bough."

This poem has further demonstrated that 'the point of Imagisme is that it does not use images as ornaments. The image is itself the speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language' [6]. The author employs concise language in this poem by removing verbs, which draws the reader's attention to the dynamic imagery, perceiving the instantaneous changes between two completely different objects: the author observes the people hurrying through the subway station, but is only able to catch the glimpse of their faces; suddenly, a scene dawns on him, the petals of a flower on a wet, black branch, highlighting an obvious contrast between urban life and the natural world.

From Table 1, it can be seen that the quantity of imagery in Pound's poem were limited to its haiku form. Although this form once had helped Pound to get out of the impasse caused by his tedious narrative of magical feelings in the Underground, Pound admitted that Chinese literature was the eternal impetus for his poetic reform. In addition to that, there is an innovation in his selection of images. He mainly chose a portion of the object he needed rather than the whole, for instance, petals and faces instead of a flower and a woman. In his later poem *Dance Figure*, he tries to rich his images to describe an attractive figure in free verse, which breaks through the limitation of poetic form on the quantity of images. He compares the dancer's arms to saplings, faces to a river, shoulders to a white almond that has been stripped, and thin fingers to a frosted stream. It is remarkable that these images are distinctive because they deviate from conventional Anglo-American images and have a specific sensation associated with fragmentation exclusive to Pound's period.

It is novel to discover the discrepancy between their perspective: the poem *Taking Leave of a Friend* uses the juxtaposition method to present its images, sending us a panorama of the natural world. Moreover, it is also true of all the Chinese imagery poetry, which seems like to emerge a documentary film in mind and marvel that a natural world has been condensed in such a short poem, inviting us to travel from mountains to rivers, from city to a parting road, given an instantaneous perception transcending the boundaries of time and space to the readers. While contrasted with Chinese imagery poetry, taking *In a Station of the Metro* as a typical representative, Pound preferred to write a "one-image poem". Hakutani pointed out that 'the key to the superposition structure of Pound's image is a coalescence of two unlike images' [7]. The whole poem would be enhanced by adopting the wet,

black bough to generate or intensify petals, in turn, to intensify the major one, faces. Moreover, this is similar to taking a close-up to a noted celebrity who was surrounded by a crowd of flashlights on the red carpet.

### 3.2. Diction

Imagist poets aggressively delve into research of the images of classical Chinese poetry, yet they are bound to the path of innovation on account of discrepancies in linguistic expressions, thinking patterns, and cultural contexts. On the one hand, different languages have great diverse expression systems from each other, and there is no exception in English and Chinese. Saussure's linguistic research highlights the existence of two linguistic systems. The first system is ideographic, where a single character represents a word, independent of its sound. The other system is phonographic, intended to model the sounds of a word continuously [8]. It is evident that Chinese combines those two systems, whereas English belongs to the later system. Accordingly, Chinese ideographic characters have natural advantages in expressing meaning and images, especially objective things, conversely, English is a phonetic language that is more suited to expressing abstractions. On the other hand, it is a tough course for imagists to create a short but striking poem like a classical Chinese poem, although the poem *In a Station of the Metro* exemplifies all three elements of image poetry to the greatest extent. Thereinto, absolutely do not use words that are futile to the expression, which has been embodied in the absence of verbs. However, in any case, the poetry remains obliged to utilize the function words like 'the', 'a', 'of', 'in', and 'on' to connect the notional words in accordance with syntax. It still can be considered as a breakthrough learnt from classical Chinese poetry.

In classical Chinese Poetry, the combination of movement and stillness is a key literary device which conveys a wealth of cultural and aesthetic value. Ezra Pound translated Li Bai's poem with the following lines: 'Blue mountains to the north of the walls, / White river winding about them' [9]. In the light of the original poem, the preposition 'to' and the gerund phrases 'winding about' were supposed to be translated into 'cross' and 'around', but Pound intentionally maintained original style to achieve the poetic conception that mountain stays static, while river flowing, all those combined formed a perfect contrast. Likewise, Pound also has a good command of this poetic device and portrays it accurately. At first impression, it gives a sense of stillness amidst the crowded Metro. However, pondering over several times, it will become clear that this is a dynamic image. The first image is the 'apparition' of 'faces' in the 'crowd', The term 'apparition' makes the faces of the people appear fuzzy or ghostly. Additionally, it conveys the idea that this picture is transient and will vanish promptly as it appeared, which gives the impression that people are rushing by the speaker, with one face only being seen briefly before being replaced by another. Interestingly, the poem itself can also be considered as a dynamic one because it has taken us from a busy metro to a natural thing—petals, which only last for a few days, then fade and go. It is unquestionably true that both the poem's two images of faces & flowers and dynamic & static complement one another perfectly. Perhaps Pound is implying that despite their evident contrasts, urban life and the natural environment still maintain the same universal laws.

Apart from those, the cultural connotations of colours are radically varied in literary works driven by different languages. In significant measure, colours add vitality to the literature and have been considered the most accurate depiction in Pound's translation work for Chinese literature to partake in the culture as the Romanians do. In *Taking Leave of a Friend*, which belongs to a parting poem, Pound translates the green mountains into blue mountains. Moreover, this has lent an air of melancholy to the scene naturally, given that blue is full of passive emotion in English, which has reflected the image of mountains more profoundly.

### 3.3. Poetic Form

Ultimately, the artistic beauty of linguistic expression is inevitable will be veiled by the language barrier. Pound merely accomplished his translation work with the help of Fenollosa's note without examining the originals, which unavoidably resulted in his inability to appreciate the metrical

refinement of classical Chinese poetry. Thus, imagists started using free verse to achieve more diverse poetic forms. As Read noted, “the Imagist Ezra Pound gave free verse its musical structure to such an extent that, paradoxically, it was no longer free” [10].

#### 4. Further Discussion

From 1928 to 1947, he successively translated and published three of four Confucian classics: *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean* (Zhongyong), and *Analects* (Lunyu), as well as other works, such as *Mencius* and *the Book of Odes* (Shijing). Passionate about Chinese culture, he expanded his literary initiatives beyond the translation of Chinese literary classics and began to create his modern epic *Cantos*. One of the Chapters in *Cantos* called *China Cantos*, is blended with Confucian ideas. The last three lines of *Canto XIII*, that read, ‘The blossoms of the apricot /blow from the east to the west, / And I have tried to keep them from falling’ [11], demonstrate Pound’s desire to embrace the spirit of Chinese culture. There is a historical allusion that poets frequently used the blossoms of apricot to express their goals and endeavours since the Tang Dynasty’s announcement of the imperial examination list coincided with the blooming of apricot flowers. Therefore, the image of the apricot flower, which is steeped in Chinese culture, indicates Pound’s ambition to get more people exposed to Confucius’s teachings and dedicated to maintaining Confucius ideas. Another intuitive innovation is the use of Chinese characters in his *Cantos* to make up for the deficiency of ideographical expression in English, for instance, *ren*, is a Chinese ideogram that combined the character for “person” with the number “two” which emphasized a moral concept, the core of which is that people should love each other. Apart from that, he managed to use the technique of image juxtaposition in his *Cantos XLIX*, presenting 9 images in 33 words, but it was not famous as his *In a Station of the Metro*, which ascribed the reason to the English poetic syntax.

#### 5. Conclusion

This article examines the innovations in Pound’s poetry influenced by Chinese culture from the perspective of the three principles of image poetry: Firstly, the innovation in the image can be presented by using a superposition structure and selecting incomplete images to highlight another incomplete major image. This reveals a specific sense of fragmentation during the World War period; The second is omitting words that are not useful for the expression of images; Thirdly, the sentences should be rich in musicality, abandoning traditional rhyme and meter.

Pound always keeps his life philosophy in mind, Make It New, and take it into action. He widely read classical literature in different languages, looking for ways of imagism a brighter future. Eventually, he found that classical Chinese literary attached great importance to imagery. Moreover, the poetic style is vivid, concise, and quiet, without preaching. In the beginning, it took Pound more than a year to polish the poem *In a Station of the Metro* to stand out from others. Then, he began to translate Chinese literature and integrated Chinese cultural elements, particularly Confucian ideas that he was influenced during his translation time, into his own work. He persistently believed that Chinese culture would bring a new Western civilization, rebuild the shattered homeland of the whole West after the war, and recovered from that awful national trauma. Although Pound’s works were only a few, he contributed all his talents to greet a bright future of modern literature and provided help for many later comers. Therefore, his era was also praised as the “Pound Era”. In this era, Pound acted as a bridge, which not only connected the civilizations between Oriental and Occidental, but also transited from the Romantic period to the Modern period. Although Pound has little knowledge of Chinese, he grasps the essence of classical Chinese poetry and is inspired to carry out creative translation and poetry, which allowed different cultures to integrate, and greatly enriched Western civilization.

It is undeniable that, despite the short existence of imagism, it profoundly affected the course of modernist poetry. For example, the non-didactical nature of imagery poetry allowed Objectivist poets

to illustrate their subjective world through objective things mainly in free verse. The limitation of this research is that it only addresses the improvement of Pound's image poetry under the influence of Chinese culture based on the three theories, but it is unable to investigate the deeper impact of Confucian culture on Pound's ideas and creative output. Based on this, the future can further study the profound influence of Confucianism on Pound.

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