

Stages on the way to an 'ideal state of the mind': China as 'the Other' in the minds of Charles Dickens and Ezra Pound

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According to Adrian Hsia, the European perception of China has undergone two distinct phases with the third still in the making (Hsia, 1998, p. 23):

The first stage is inculturation, its characteristics being the efforts of Jesuit missionaries to integrate as much as possible China's cultural idiosyncracies into the monolithic European concept of the world during the initial stage of the encounter between China and Europe. The Sinocentric culture was the only entity after Columbus' so-called discovery of the new world which was not overwhelmed by European expansion [...] However, the seeds of the second stage of Sinism, that of deculturation, were also present in the same period [...] During this phase, China was no longer considered to be the equal of Europe [...] The Chinese culture was characterized as pagan. Its people were perceived to be without honour [...] The third stage would be interculturalism which is, and probably will remain, an ideal state of the mind.

(Hsia, 1998, p. 24)

By 'sinism' Hsia means the place in the European mind of the entity it knows as China, which may or may not have anything to do with what the word China means to the inhabitants of that country. In this article I want to look at the meaning the word 'China' had for two very different Western writers: the nineteenth-century English novelist Charles Dickens and the twentieth-century American poet Ezra Pound.

I will argue that while Dickens's location in Hsia's three phases of Sinism is easy to recognize – it belongs firmly to the second phase – the reasons why Dickens belongs to this phase reveal interesting tensions in Dickens himself both as a unique and a representative Englishman of his time. Certainly, everything Dickens writes about China says more about himself and about Great Britain than about China. When we come to Ezra Pound the case is more complex. On the face of it one can argue that Pound's appropriation of Chinese culture was carried out with breathtaking arrogance: his so-called 'translations' of classical Chinese

poetry, notably by Li Bai, being undertaken with no knowledge of Chinese from the posthumous notes of another European scholar. I will argue however that Pound's versions of classical Chinese poetry, in his collection of poems called 'Cathay', have permanently enriched English poetry. I would also like to be able to say that they have enriched English speakers' understanding of Chinese poetry – English readers say, after reading Pound, that it is as though he has imported the real spirit of the Chinese originals into his poems. But I suspect that only a Chinese reader well versed in both English and Chinese poetry can make that judgment. Both authors, then, raise these questions: how far is it possible for people from one culture, with their own prejudices and far from ideal states of mind, really to 'understand' the products of another very different culture? What can this 'understanding' consist of? What are the differences between imperial exploitation of one country by another, enforced by use of arms, and the appropriation by one culture of the products of another culture, however well-meaning and respectful that appropriation might appear to be?

Mention of imperial exploitation by Great Britain of China, in the context of a discussion of Charles Dickens, is relevant. Britain's aggression against China in the two Opium Wars is well-known. What is relevant to a study of Dickens's relationship with China is the silence with which Dickens reacted to those wars. One should first, however, discuss what we know of Dickens's relation to China both in his personal life and in his writing.

Although Dickens, who was born in 1812 and died in 1870, twelve years after the end of the second Opium war, never visited China himself, his eldest son, Charley Dickens, visited Hong Kong in 1860 to forward his ambition to be a tea merchant. Professor Jeremy Tambling of the University of Hong Kong suggests the possibility that, after visiting Hong Kong, Charley Dickens joined the British Expedition to China sent to enforce the 1858 Treaty of Tientsin, and

may even have marched with that Expedition on Beijing. Dickens's personal connection with China *via* his eldest son, then, was enough to cause him concern as a worried father. His intellectual connection with China is of a piece with the nature of his personal connection. Professor Tambling writes of 'the anger, anxiety and disturbed tone that constructs Dickens's sense of China and which reads as displaced autobiography' (Tambling, March 2004, p. 30) and which can be read in everything Dickens wrote about the country.

His writings are in two categories: journalism and fiction. The former includes articles in his periodicals *Household Words* and *All The Year Round* with titles like 'Taking Pirate Junks', 'Chinese Ways of Warfare', 'The Paper Wall of China', 'The Coolie Trade in China', 'Chinese Fighting Men', and 'Chinese Slaves Adrift' (Tambling, June 2004, p.5). A common theme in these articles is the superiority of Great Britain over China – intellectually, morally and politically. Here, for example, is a quotation from 'The Paper Wall of China' which contrasts China's 'defective and incomplete system of ethics' with Christianity. Having praised Christianity and Islam, both of which have one 'Divine Founder or Inspired Prophet', Dickens contrasts the situation (as he sees it) in China:

But if we travel further eastward, and enter China, instead of one acknowledged Divine Founder, or Inspired Prophet, we find philosophers many, gods hardly any, and moral doctrines so confused and contradictory, that the result is like the blending of all colours, white – a blank. The acid of one sage neutralises the alkali of another; do-nothing and know-nothing are the antidotes applied to feverish excesses of free-thinking and free-acting; and, in consequence, the people may be said to have no religion or morality.

(Dickens, 1860, p. 320)

Leaving aside the ignorance and prejudice of this article, and there are many other examples in Dickens's journalism on China, the question, put by Professor Tambling, is why did it matter so much to Dickens that Chinese culture did 'not want to underwrite the doctrine of British development? Why is it such an irritant that there should be a culture which seems inaccessible

and why must it be made accessible, at the price of imperial force?' (Tambling, March 2004, p.33). What function, in other words, did 'China' fulfill for Dickens?

To answer that question we need to look at Dickens's fiction as well as his journalism. If one read nothing of Dickens except his China journalism, one would be forgiven for thinking that the stridently imperialist tone of his articles on China represents all that Dickens thinks about China, and about British life, culture and religion. By making China the Other, Dickens avoids having to face up to the inadequacies, stupidities and cruelties of his own country. Thus by (in the journalism) condemning Chinese stasis and praising British 'energy', Dickens avoids facing the human cost of British imperial expansion. By condemning Chinese economic protectionism and praising the doctrine of free trade he avoids facing up to one of the products of that doctrine: the deliberate infliction of opium on the Chinese by his own country. By condemning what he perceives as China's lack of religion, he avoids facing the story of often brutal religious conflict which has marked the history of Christianity in Britain. As Tambling puts it in discussing the tone of another of Dickens's articles on China,

Creating its own absolutism, it is threatened with the 'inanity' it sees elsewhere, through its perpetual drive to repress admiration or acceptance of anything of what it has made other to itself.

(Tambling, March 2004, p. 33)

However, someone with even a cursory knowledge of Dickens's fiction will know that in it Dickens has a very different attitude to Britain and its institutions. In his fiction Dickens mercilessly attacks British hypocrisy, cruelty and stupidity which he sees as deeply ingrained in the institutions of church and state. I therefore suggest two possibilities about Dickens's view of China. In his journalism he projects outward his contempt and anger against Britain, by turning it on China instead; while in his fiction 'China' is something darker and more difficult

for him to articulate, like a shadow on the edge of his consciousness – something which if fully articulated would make his attacks on the life, thought and institutions of his own country even deeper. I'm thinking about how references to China in his fiction are related to Dickens's horror of British respectability, his guilt at the Opium Wars, his feeling that mid-Victorian Britain had become no better than a gigantic prison of body and spirit. In *Bleak House*, the heroine's father dies of opium poisoning; in *Little Dorrit* the hero returns to London after 20 years in China. I'll quote what Professor Tambling says about the China references in that novel:

[*Little Dorrit*] makes significant use of China. [The novel] opens in Marseilles [which Tambling suggests stands for Canton, where Clennam worked] as a port-city for returnees from the East who need to be quarantined, and as the place where the journey to the East out of Europe started. Arthur Clennam has been for 20 years in China [...]. As Clennam is silent about China, he is also silent on the nature of the trade the house of Clennam has conducted, as is Dickens [...] But it may be that the guilt within that text marks another about the overseas trade, and it is significant that he wants to be out of it.

(Tambling, March 2004, p.35)

This prompts Tambling to ask whether Clennam's desire to be out of the trade does not presuppose

a colonial guilt that cannot be articulated, for Clennam continues...to speak about his father's trouble of mind and remorse on his deathbed. That could be read as the guilt of a person who has been involved in an activity that cannot quite acknowledge what it is doing, and where colonial activity itself may be a useful means whereby guilt at home may be displaced.

(Tambling, March 2004, p. 35)

There are also equivocal references to China in *Dombey and Son* and *Great Expectations*, where the outwardly respectable thing for young men is to become China traders. 'Respectability' – living by external social codes while ignoring the promptings of one's own judgment is, as I've said, something Dickens regarded with horror, and it is in his last novel that China is bound up both with the result for the British of living by the respectable social code of money worship

(never mind how the money is gained, even by the opium trade) and individual rebellion against respectability.

The word 'horror' is not too great to describe Dickens's attitude to British respectability. In his last, dark and unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, he evokes it as a weight inherited from the past which makes life in the present almost unbearable. This is his description of the city of Cloisterham where much of the novel is set. Note the meaning of 'cloister' – an enclosed religious space with the additional meaning of protected, or even prison-like. A 'cloistered' life is one in which nothing happens.

A drowsy city, Cloisterham, whose inhabitants seem to suppose, with an inconsistency more strange than rare, that all its changes lie behind it, and that there are no more to come [...] So silent are the streets of Cloisterham [...] that of a summer-day the sunblinds of its shops scarce dare to flap in the south wind; while the sun-browned tramps, who pass along and stare, quicken their limp a little, that they may sooner get beyond the confines of its oppressive respectability.

(Dickens, [1870] 2002, p.23)

It is in this town that the chief character of the novel, John Jasper, drags out his life, which he regards as monotonous and purposeless, despite, or because of his employment as the choir-master in the most respectable of the city's institutions, its ancient cathedral. The character John Jasper, outwardly respectable but inwardly rebellious, and the oppressive city of Cloisterham are replicated in different forms in Dickens's novels, and it is necessary to understand what both character and city represent for Dickens in order to appreciate the shock of the novel's opening scene, which takes place, not in Cloisterham, but in an opium den in London, one of whose customers is a Chinese sailor. This is the opening scene – the 'He' is John Jasper, the outwardly respectable choir master:

He lies, dressed, across a large unseemly bed, upon a bedstead that has [...] given way under the weight upon it. Lying, also dressed and also across the bed [...] are a Chinaman [...] and a haggard woman.

(Dickens, [1870] 2002, p.7)

The narrator describes the Chinese man thus:

He [Jasper] notices that the woman has opium-smoked herself into a strange likeness of the Chinaman. His form of cheek, eye, and temple, and his colour, are repeated in her.

(Dickens, [1870] 2002, p.8)

On the face of it, this is no different from references to China or the Chinese in Dickens's journalism, but there is something additional going on here. In this scene the horrors of the opium trade are, literally, brought home. The trade ruins all those who participate in it – both the English (represented by John Jasper) and the Chinese (represented by the Chinese sailor). The true nature of the relation between England and China is represented by another incident: after waking from his opium dream, the Englishman physically attacks the Chinese man. One more detail in the scene is telling: the woman owner of the opium den, herself an addict, is, as we have seen, reported by the narrator as beginning to look more and more like the Chinese man. In this small scene, therefore, Dickens's unconscious perceptions about the truth of the real relation between the English and Chinese begin to become conscious. Opium is an evil for both England and China. The English are aggressors against the Chinese. And, most deeply repressed of all, is the most frightening perception that there is no difference between the English and the Chinese.

Divided by what Dickens would have called 'race', and by what he would not have called 'gender', the Chinese sailor and the English woman are united by more than divides them: by their human bodies and the fact that they – and John Jasper as well – find in opium an escape from the prisons of their lives. What also unites them is that their worlds are very distant from

the cloying respectability of that representative English town, the cloistered prison-like Cloisterham from which Jasper has periodically to escape. There is one more small detail in the scene that is worth pondering, and which, perhaps, answers Professor Tambling's question about why it mattered so much to Dickens that Chinese culture was inaccessible and did not want to underwrite British development. The detail is that Jasper, after attacking the Chinese man, calls the latter's words 'unintelligible' (Tambling asks what else would they be to Jasper, given that the Chinese man is speaking in his own language). It is as though, after all the opinions and judgments Dickens passed on China, the repressed possibility remained for him that those opinions and judgments were wrong, and that China, forever unintelligible to the British, guarded secrets – who knows, about the nature of life and happiness – from which the British were excluded.

China, then, for Dickens, represents the Other which has to be accommodated within the categories of the known. Edward Said in *Orientalism*, in a passage about the reception of Islam in Europe writes that

Something patently foreign and distant acquires, for one reason or another, a status more rather than less familiar. One tends to stop judging things either as completely novel or as completely well known; a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing. In essence such a category is not so much a way of receiving new information as it is a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things.

(Said, [1978] 2003, p. 59)

This, I think, applies exactly to Dickens and China. Rather than being open to new information Dickens has to repress the threat represented by China to his established view of things, although, as we have seen, that which he repressed may have returned in *Little Dorrit* and certainly did return in the nightmarish opium den scene which opens *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

I now want to leave Dickens and that dark scene to encounter what I hope you will agree is the site of a quite different encounter between Britain and China: some poems by Ezra Pound (1885-1972) who died almost exactly 100 years after Dickens did. Strictly speaking, I should say that Pound's poems are also an encounter between America and China, since Pound was American, but Pound with his immense knowledge of English literature and language was as much British as he was American. In my introduction I suggested that on the face of it Pound's appropriation of Chinese culture was carried out with breathtaking arrogance: his so called 'translations' of classical Chinese poetry, notably by Li Bai, being undertaken with no knowledge of Chinese from the notes of another European scholar. However, I also said that Pound's so called translations of Chinese poetry in his collection *Cathay*, published in 1915, have permanently enriched English poetry, and in the second half of this article I would like to discuss the possibility that that enrichment is the result of a very different attitude from Dickens's towards the 'Other' which China represented. I shall quote Edward Said again on the attitude to unfamiliar foreign texts displayed by the great philologist Erich Auerbach: an attitude which

involved a profound humanistic spirit deployed with generosity and, if I may use the word, hospitality. Thus the interpreter's mind actively makes a place in it for a foreign Other.

(Said, [1978] 2003, xix)

I shall explore, therefore, this possibility: that Pound's *Cathay* poems have permanently enriched English poetry because they have made a place in it for a foreign, a Chinese, Other which was not to be found in English poetry before Pound. If so, the real question, then, is: what is the nature of the Other that Pound's *Cathay* poems have made a place for? At this point I would like to quote in its entirety the most famous of the *Cathay* poems – 'The River Merchant's Wife:

A Letter' (Li Bai):

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 Chokan:
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
For ever and for ever, and for ever.
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 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.
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.

(Pound, [1915] (2011), p. 52)

What is the nature in this poem of the Chinese ‘Other’ that Pound has, to use Auerbach’s word, hospitably made room for? One man who, one might think, could answer this question is the great American poet T.S. Eliot, who hailed Pound, for English and American readers, as ‘the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time’ (Eliot, p. 14). An English reader of the poem, illiterate in the Chinese language but coming away from the poem with the uncanny sense that in it Pound has somehow captured the spirit of Chinese poetry, will echo Eliot’s words that ‘when a foreign poet is successfully done into the idiom of our own language and our own time, we believe that he has been ‘translated’; we believe that through this translation we really at last get the original’ (p. 14). But Eliot did not suggest *how* Pound had done this, or the nature of the Chinese ‘Otherness’ of this or the other *Cathay* poems, and so we have to go elsewhere for an answer – to two essays on Pound’s *Cathay* poems by two contemporary scholars, Barry Ahearn and Christine Froula, in the volume *Ezra Pound and China* (Ahearn and Froula, 2003). To begin with, Professor Ahearn outlines one ‘translation’ strategy Pound says he adopted, which is not a surprise after Dickens. Pound’s essay ‘Chinese Poetry’, Ahearn writes,

represents a sustained attempt to elide the differences between European and Chinese poetry. Pound indicates the poems he chose for *Cathay*, selected from a large body of poetry, are those with characteristics comparable to Western poetry [...] He can be most successful with this particular selection because the poems already are, in significant but unspecified ways, like Western poetry. These poems have already gone halfway to meet his abilities. (p. 34)

Pound, in this essay, in other words, denies the ‘Otherness’ of Chinese poetry. But, Ahearn continues, this was not Pound’s only translation strategy:

There is an alternative form of translation, albeit one seldom employed. This is the ‘foreignizing translation’ that ‘signifies the difference of the foreign text’ (Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* London: Routledge 1995 76). This kind of translation disrupts the reader’s expectation that the original is readily translatable into easily understood terminology. It is a method the translator uses in acknowledgment of the difference between the original text and the language with which the reader is conversant. The translator refuses to fold the original text into the linguistic practices of his own time and space. It is, in short, a way of respecting the integrity of the original [...] To put it succinctly, the poems of *Cathay* are often meant to sound like a slightly alien form of English (p. 37).

We can take two examples Ahearn gives of how Pound achieved this: his retention of place-names and details specific to China, such as the hair style of the young child in the first line, as well as his use of sometimes strange diction, as in ‘pulling’ rather than ‘picking’ flowers, which would be the more usual English word:

Pound [...] has inserted a word [...] as if chosen by a Chinese scholar who, laboring to render the poem in English, has become bewildered by the multiplicity of choices offered by his English dictionary and settles on *pulling* by mistake (p. 39).

The overall effect of such translation strategies is, Ahearn suggests, to give readers the impression

that even though these English versions may be imperfect, there must lie behind them a superior Chinese original. Pound exploits the hallmarks of inferior or near-miss translation to suggest the existence of a more perfect translation hovering just at the edge of the poems [...] One reason why the poems of *Cathay* are a success is that they *seem* to point to or circle near a brilliant – but just out of reach – translation (p. 41).

So here, I suggest, we have one answer about the nature, for English or American readers, of the

Chinese ‘Other’ in these poems. It is something just out of reach, something almost unknowable, or to use Dickens’s word, ‘unintelligible’. But while Dickens made his fictional character John Jasper use that word with contempt and anger, Ezra Pound displays nothing but respect and reverence for the not-quite-intelligible beauty, the not-quite-intelligible Otherness of the poem by Li Bai, pointing in his poem to a ‘just out of reach translation’. And so the question we can now ask about the Chinese ‘Other’ in Pound’s poems is – what might that ‘just out of reach’ translation be like and how might it clarify the nature of the ‘Otherness’ of the Chinese originals for English readers? Might this hypothetical translation reveal what Pound’s ‘translations’ do not: that the ‘Otherness’ of China for English readers is deeply rooted in what one scholar, Christine Froula, has called ‘the radical incongruence between the grammars of English and classical Chinese poetry’? And if this is the case, then there is the possibility that English readers, once they understand something of the linguistic nature of this ‘Otherness’, might be freed to learn from its beauty rather than recoil from its unintelligibility, as Dickens did.

Professor Froula, illustrating her contention about the differences between English and classical Chinese poetry, quotes James Liu’s word for word translation of lines by Wang Wei:

Kong shan bu jian ren

Empty mountain not see people

Dan wen ren yu sheng

Only hear people talk sound

Fan ying ru shen lin

Reflected light enter deep forest

Fu zhao qing tai shang

Again shine green moss upon.

Froula continues, citing James Liu's *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962):

By rendering the grammatical subject implicit – not absent but open, unfixed – the poet refrains from obtruding a singular, univocal perspective upon the scene; the subject 'can be [...] anyone,' even any *thing*. Beside Chinese poetry, with its negligible grammatical subjects, Liu argues, 'much Western poetry appears egocentric and earth-bound. Where Wordsworth wrote "I wandered lonely as a cloud," a Chinese poet would probably have written simply "Wander as cloud." 'Whereas Wordsworth describes 'a personal experience bound in space and time,' Liu's spare Chinese mistranslation grammatically domesticates the unique and solitary Western self to Chinese norms, despecifying person, number and tense to suggest a timeless 'state of being with universal applications'

(Liu, p. 41)

And here, it seems to me, we are getting close to at least the linguistic nature of the Chinese 'Other' for speakers of English, which is more than linguistic: it is a way and concept of being. Liu suggests that there is a clear relation between, on the one hand, the dualism of Western thought and science and 'the subject/object relations of Western perspectival grammar' and, on the other, 'the indeterminate relationality of the classical Chinese poems' and, historically, Chinese 'awareness of the organic interconnectedness of nature' (Froula, p. 57). Froula continues by citing the great English scientist and sinologist Joseph Needham:

In Needham's view, modern Western science owes to China, and to the idea of the Tao as 'a field of force' [...] the initial impetus for its transformation of Newtonian objectivism (paralleled in our subject/object grammar) into the mysterious, logic-defying quantum universe (p. 57)

The journey from the structure of Chinese grammar to the classical Chinese world view to the world of Western quantum physics is a long one. But it also, thankfully, takes us a long way from the ignorant prejudice and fear of Charles Dickens towards China.

I started by quoting Professor Hsia's description of the three phases of the European perception of China – inculturation, deculturation and the ideal phase of interculturalization, where

both cultures can permeate and learn from each other's. In this article I have suggested that Charles Dickens belonged to the second phase, where Dickens could, by vilifying the Chinese 'Other', repress the cruelties and stupidities inflicted by the English on themselves and on the Chinese –particularly to be seen in the opium trade. I also argued that in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* that repression fails, and that in the opium den scene Dickens paints a true picture of the relation of England to China. It will, I hope, be obvious that I believe that Ezra Pound belongs to the third phase – interculturalization, and that the version of the Chinese 'Other' he opened up for English readers in his Cathay poems is one of great beauty. I hope that Chinese readers of those poems who know Li Bai's originals will agree that while Pound may not have translated them 'accurately' he has treated them with respect and reverence and that, who knows, Chinese readers may return to Li Bai's originals with fresh eyes after an encounter with the English/American 'Other' as represented by Ezra Pound. I have also suggested that if English readers and speakers go behind Pound's beautiful versions of the Chinese poems, and try to understand even a little of the difference between the English and Chinese languages, they can encounter another kind of beauty with which they are unfamiliar. Doing this they will, perhaps, be cultivating interculturalization in themselves – what Professor Hsia, with whom I started this lecture, described as the third phase in the European perception of China: an 'ideal state of the mind'.

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