

# The Self is That Which Gets Lost in Translation: A Sociolinguistic View of Chinese Poetry Translation through Modernity & Parataxis

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**Abstract** How has the translation of Chinese poetry into English contributed to the reconsideration of the self—or “the lyric ego”—in contemporary and avant-garde Anglophone poetry? Examining the micro-history of avant-garde English presentations of Chinese poetry, and the shifting configuration of China in the politico-economic sphere and the Anglophone imaginary over the last hundred years, this paper will offer a socio-linguistic reflection on the notion of the self. Specifically, I will approach the divergence between so-called “avant-garde” and “Unmarked Case” (my term for “establishment” or “mainstream”) poetic communities by interrogating whether such a distinction is sociological or linguistic. Through the lens of Chinese poetry translation, I will trace the development of “Classical” Chinese poetry in English translation from its former association with English experimentation (Pound, Rexroth, Snyder, etc.) to being upheld by stalwarts of “Official Verse Culture” (Milosz, Merwin, Wright, Young, etc.), leaving avant-gardists (Hejinian, Padgett, Waldrop, etc.) to entertain their current predilection for the contemporary in Chinese poetry. This examination will yield conclusions both about our definitions of “modernity” and “tradition” as well as about how we deploy language and rhetoric to signify those concepts. Finally, looking at the few current poetic avant-gardists—John Cayley, Kit Kelen, Jonathan Stalling, and Jeffrey Yang—who work both with modern and pre-modern Chinese poetry, I will conclude with an appeal for a view of translation that can work to reconcile the socio-linguistic divisions between the avant-garde and the “unmarked.”

**Key words** translation; avant-garde; self; transcendence/immanence; parataxis/hypotaxis

In 1975, after a batch of his translations of Japanese poet Rai Sanyō 赖山阳 (1780 – 1832) appeared in the journal *Montemora*, translator Burton Watson wrote to editor Eliot Weinberger, saying, “I can’t tell you how honored I am to be in the same magazine as Charles Reznikoff.”<sup>1</sup>

Reznikoff, only recently rescued from the forest of obscurity,<sup>2</sup> was the writer for whom Louis Zukofsky coined the term Objectivism.<sup>3</sup> Generally known for its Judaism

and Leftism (as opposed to the Rightward anti-Semitism of Modernism's first generation Yeats, Pound, and Eliot), Objectivism is also thought to have developed from Ezra Pound's earlier Imagism. Developed from, not a redux of: Imagism's "Direct treatment of the 'thing'" could be either "subjective or objective,"<sup>4</sup> and Objectivism's object was a double (as in, its vision of the "art form as an object"<sup>5</sup>). Nevertheless, Imagism and Objectivism share a common association with the Chinese aesthetic<sup>6</sup>: "Poetry presents the thing," Reznikoff quoted the epigram to A. C. Graham's *Poems of the Late T'ang*, "in order to convey the feeling. It should be precise about the thing and reticent about the feeling."<sup>7</sup>

So Reznikoff quotes a Chinese critic in outlining his own poetics; perhaps Watson, praising him to Weinberger, was only returning the favor. And yet, what classical Chinese translator today would be so well versed in the contemporary avant-garde that he or she could name—and be honored to appear beside—a similarly obscure avant-gardist American poet? And more to the point, would any avant-garde poet be able to return the favor by asserting her or his poetics as in line with classical Chinese poetry as conveyed by a particular translator? Clearly, things have changed, both in the world of Chinese translation and in the literary system of contemporary poetry in English. Shifting between angles historical, sociological, and literary, this paper will examine some of the reasons why.

### 1. Immanence or Transcendence: A Socio-Linguistics of American Poetry

One of the most pressing questions today in contemporary American poetry is the relationship between literary style and sociology. I intend to reach a definition of avant-garde treatment of Chinese poetry as involving both paratactic juxtaposition and a questioning of selfhood, but to get there—and to questions about how Chinese tradition and modernity get inscribed within the history of poetry in English—I will first have to trace or tease out why and how the entanglements of style and sociology got so pressing. If the pressure of the debate can be said to have a single source in recent times, that source is probably Ron Silliman, one of the original "Language Poets." *Silliman's Blog*—the closest thing to a common reading list and community many poets have in the new millennium—has also been the locus for much of the debate on the overlap between sociology and style, taking the form of an argument about Silliman's terms "post-avant" and "School of Quietude."<sup>8</sup> Umbrella terms for sociological / stylistic trends Silliman sees in contemporary American poetry, named both generally and specifically as an attempt to overturn the hierarchy between them, "School of Quietude" and "post-avant" have proven very contentious. Silliman might even relish such contention; here he is recently explaining the division once again:

I know, whenever I use the phrase School of Quietude in some pointed fashion, what kind of response I'm going to get... Surely I could have used some other term, though the only adequately descriptive alternative I can think of is Neophobe... Regardless of the noun involved, the Unmarked Case invariably has a history & a politics... The School of Quietude is poetry's unmarked case, and its most characteristic — even defining — feature is the denial of its own existence

... (Silliman 2010)

In the background to the “School of Quietude” is a socio-linguistic awareness of class: for Silliman, the “School of Quietude” seems to graph onto the bourgeoisie, and as Roland Barthes has pointed out, “the bourgeoisie is defined as *the social class which does not want to be named*” (Barthes 126).<sup>9</sup> For this reason—and so I don’t adhere too closely to Silliman’s controversial terms or his understanding of them—I’m tempted to refer to Bourgeois Poetry rather than the “School of Quietude,” which would give the oppositional term, the avant-garde, the full weight of its associations with the Leninist *vanguard*. And yet, Silliman’s notion “post-avant” is worth digging into, as well; he defines it at face value, saying, “The avant became the post-avant the minute poets began to think of themselves as part of a broader avant-garde tradition, given that avant-gardism is a fundamentally synchronic move within the arts and tradition is fundamentally diachronic, rendering ‘avant-garde tradition’ an oxymoron of practice” (2009). Nevertheless, a quick close-reading of “post-avant” suggests that “post” latches onto “avant” in “post-avant” the same way it latches onto “modernism” in “postmodernism”; that is, certain underpinnings of the ideology of an “avant-garde,” namely, the logic of an artistic vanguard behind which will come mass motions of literary or artistic history, no longer seem viable.<sup>10</sup> While on the one hand I believe that such a view of literary history would be simplistic, in its incorporation of pre-modern Chinese sources at least, the avant-garde has indeed proven itself to be a leader of a certain historical current, behind which the literary “garde” has fallen in step. If this means that “avant-gardism” can no longer be understood as a “fundamentally synchronic movement within the arts,” then so be it. Therefore, I’ll still refer to the “avant-garde,” though I’ll temper that by resisting my urge to refer to “Bourgeois Poetry,” and call it—socio-linguistically, rather than socialistically—the “Unmarked Case.”

Silliman, at any event, is not the only one to try to define these groupings, and the definition is not always sociologically motivated: younger poet / blogger Seth Abramson has tried to defend, and define, a “School of Quietude” for his (no-longer) Unmarked side putting the literary first: “The greatest divide in poetry, by far,” he says, “of the past hundred years has been between poets who treat language as a locus for immanent meaning and those who treat it as a locus for transcendent meaning” (Abramson 2010)<sup>11</sup>. For Abramson, the “School of Quietude” is “Quiet in the sense that they are not permitted their full expression as “words-qua-words,” but instead remain merely signifiers of a series of referents whose acknowledgment, comprehension, and internalization is the most important work of the poem” (ibid.). What this has to do with translation and Chinese poetry’s reception in English is complicated, and will be addressed anon; nevertheless, I believe we have reached a central tension in the approaches to translation—in general, though also to translation of Chinese in particular—seen in various poets of differing “schools,” tendencies, or ideologies, which has to do not only with linguistic transcendence or immanence but with how poets associate with traditions of linguistic transcendence or immanence. If the twentieth-century poet of “transcendent meaning” *par excellence* is Robert Frost,

does his quip that “poetry is that which gets lost in translation”<sup>12</sup> not assert that poetry is defined by linguistic immanence? Meanwhile, if the paradigmatic twentieth-century poet of “immanent meaning” is Ezra Pound, do his translations suggest faith that language could refer to transcendent meaning, as well?

While Abramson defines these schools solely based on how they use language, he seems to overlook the sociological aspect for such divisions in the house of American poetry. In short, because of the expanse of the population and of printing in the US and throughout the English-speaking world, the demimonde of poetry grew so large nobody could read it all, and factions began to fraction. American poets began to take notice in the Seventies; while in the Sixties limited publishing outlets and a general opposition to the Vietnam War gave poets everywhere the sense that they were part of a larger community, even if they stood at disparate edges, by the Seventies the early fissures—Robert Lowell’s “Raw and the Cooked”<sup>13</sup> (in which he suggested himself to be a mediation between the two, a notion laughable to the avant-gardists of the day, who saw him as cooked to a crisp), and Paris Leary and Robert Kelly’s *A Controversy of Poets*<sup>14</sup>—degraded into a free-for-all.

By the end of the decade, *Montemora* could host a feature, compiled by Weinberger and Nathaniel Tarn, inviting members of the extended American poetry community to sound off on the predicament. “We are in the midst,” they wrote, “of a poetry pandemic:”

2000 American poets registered in the government Directory, thousands more unlisted, some 3500 small presses and little magazines, scores of government and corporate-sponsored “service” organizations, creative writing schools producing legions of creative writers, endless grants and programs and prizes and residencies and readings. In short, the production of poetry and poetry-related services has become a branch of American business, a respectable middle-class occupation. (We even have our own trade paper, CODA, which advertises itself: “Poets read CODA the way bankers read The Wall Street Journal.”) (Weinberger & Tarn 73)<sup>15</sup>

Many participants took the opportunity to present sociologies of the poetry scene. Of particular note is scholar Robert Bertholf’s social history, “The Polity of the Neutral,” which also engages in some creative cartography on the way to examining a literary-psychological question:

For the sake of the poetic map, I would like to make a separation that is not completely accurate; one line leads from Pound to Olson to the New Poetry, and a second line leads from Eliot to Lowell to the confessional poets, and to the writing schools . . . When Eliot pronounced that in his impersonal theories “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality,” he went behind a façade of the objectivity of his poetry . . . And with the concentration on the objectivity of expression, there was a shift away from the concern for the intensity

and care of expression of the passional, to the procedures, the techniques of expression; technique, to push the point to the extreme, predominated over expression, so that the critical concern over the split between form and content ... re-emerged into critical thinking. (Bertholf 94 – 95)

From there, Bertholf further historicizes the rise of egocentric writing out of the dregs of the ethic of impersonal poetry:

The split between form and content was now an operative principle ... But in the 1950's and into the 1960's a movement came into the universities which announced technique to the exclusion of all else. The procedure put to countless versions got to the poet where poetry became an exercise of conformity to such an extent that it was necessary to re-assert the "I" of the poet to provide a subject. ... But in an abstract sense this is a restatement of the impersonality of the poet, in Eliot's sense, because the product is fixed in a segregated reaction, itself neutralized from other events, and not related. (ibid. 95)

His conclusion: that "With the only subject the ego of the poet, and the ego's reaction to events, and with the overlay of the right procedures, then the reaction to the events comes out as a process of writing as an act of therapy, without the benefit of professional training" (ibid. ). By the Seventies, the American avant-garde picked a losing battle against the self-contained unity of the ego.

This battle can be seen as well in Weinberger's own entry to the *Po-biz* feature, where he also picks up on writing-as-therapy as a response to "massive overproduction" of poetry and "thousands of writers and few readers." (Weinberger and Tarn 98) "Psychoanalysis," he says,

of course is largely textual criticism; not an analysis of the experience, but of its discourse: narratives of the waking life, slips of speech, the texts of dreams. In collapsing society, egocentrism flourishes in the absence of social concern: we have become a nation of analysts (practitioners and fellow-travelers). Social-religious conviction has been replaced by worship of the self: the litany is the monologue, and, to the point, the scripture is *my* thoughts and *my* feelings petrified in the typed, xeroxed, and too-often printed word: *my* poetry. (ibid. )

For Weinberger, part of the redress of poetry's "worship of the self," moving the writer beyond "*my* thoughts and *my* feelings," is translation; Weinberger would later write, "A translation is based on the dissolution of the self. A bad translation is the insistent voice of the translator" (Weinberger 60)<sup>16</sup>.

But while translation is not the only way to dissolve the self, it became the centerpiece to Weinberger's debate with his nemeses on the avant-garde, the Language Poets. The Language Poets have also critiqued the main streams of American poetry for its egocentrism, stating in their group manifesto, "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry," that "our work denies the centrality of the individual artist...

The self as the central and final term of creative practice is being challenged and exploded in our writing” (Silliman etc. 264)<sup>17</sup>. But if both the Language Poets and Eliot Weinberger are members of American poetry’s avant-garde, and seem to agree on the necessity of a poetics beyond the self, then why are they nemeses? In short, it comes down to what Weinberger sees as the Language School’s nationalism, and their avoidance of translation—the Language poets are notable for not being interested in languages, he’s said.<sup>18</sup> (Silliman claims that his class background did not afford him any opportunity to learn languages other than English<sup>19</sup>; also, Charles Bernstein’s and Lyn Hejinian’s later engagements with translation—from the Russian of Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, the Portuguese of Régis Bonvicino, as well as *Shadowtime*, Bernstein’s libretto on Walter Benjamin—deserve mention). But can Language Poetry’s Deconstruction of the Self in One Country be reconciled with Weinberger’s translation-centered notion of the avant-garde?

Yes and no. The history of Chinese poetry in English translation shows why.

## 2. Methods of the Ideogram: A Historical Taxis of Chinese Poetry Translation

If there is a method to Language Poetry’s madness of deconstructing the self, it is paratactic juxtaposition. Such method is laid out in Ron Silliman’s “The New Sentence”—best encapsulated by Silliman’s Language comrade Bob Perelman, as

a new sentence is more or less ordinary itself but gains its effect by being placed next to another sentence to which it has tangential relevance. New sentences are not subordinated to a larger narrative frame nor are they thrown together at random. Parataxis is crucial; the internal, autonomous meaning of a new sentence is heightened, questioned, and changed by the degree of separation or connection that the reader perceives with regard to the surrounding sentences. (Perelman 313)

—but paratactic juxtaposition as a hallmark of the avant-garde in English is not new. It was part of the invention of Chinese poetry in our time: Ernest Fenollosa’s essay, edited by Ezra Pound and published as “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,” harbored it in in what must be its most important statement, “two things added together do not produce a third thing but suggest some fundamental relation to them” (Fenollosa & Pound 46).

The lesson took a while to stick—in *Cathay*, which Pound also took from Fenollosa’s notebooks, Pound translates Li Bai’s (Rihaku’s) 李白 paratactic 浮云游子意 / 落日故人情 with hypotaxis: “Mind like a floating white cloud. / Sunset like the parting of old acquaintances” (Pound 258)—but the association of parataxis with the Chinese character created Pound’s “ideogrammic method.” This method not only gave Pound a building block for his *Cantos*, it also enabled readings such as the following:

Tching prayed on the mountain and  
 wrote MAKE IT NEW  
 on his bath tub  
 Day by day make it new  
 cut underbrush,  
 pile the logs  
 keep it growing.

新 hsin<sup>4</sup>  
 日 jih<sup>4</sup>  
 日 jih<sup>4</sup>  
 新 hsin<sup>4</sup>

The last three lines are from Pound's "ideogrammic" reading of the character 新 (*xīn*, "new"), which Pound understood as underbrush cut [斤] with logs [木] piled up and growing [立].<sup>20</sup> After this, the avant-garde treated history as a source for made newness, and Chinese as an opportunity to suggest a fundamental relation between things.

The importance of the Chinese character and its paratactic conglomeration of elements was important to translations of Chinese we no longer consider very avant-garde. Amy Lowell, for instance, whose *Fir-Flower Tablets* with Florence Ayscough was the response to Pound from the Imagism he had left behind, also considered the paratactic conglomerations of the Chinese written character as significant—and signifying—in her English renditions. And while her translations do not read as particularly avant-gardist today, consider her translation of Li Bai's "Yè sī" 夜思 against that of Herbert Giles. Here is Lowell and Ayscough:

### Night Thoughts

In front of my bed the moonlight is very bright.  
 I wonder if that can be frost on the floor?  
 I lift up my head and look full at the full moon, the dazzling moon.  
 I drop my head, and think of the home of old days. (Lowell and Ayscough

74)

床前明月光 疑是地上霜 举头望明月 低头思故乡

And here is Giles, published the following year, but reading as if it were written a generation earlier:

### Night Thoughts

I wake, and moonbeams play around my bed,  
 Glittering like hoar-frost to my wondering eyes;  
 Up towards the glorious moon I raise my head,  
 Then lay me down—and thoughts of home arise. (Giles 329)<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the conscientiously anti-poetic diction in Lowell and Ayscough's plain-spoken lines, which emerge all the more forcefully when contrasted with genteel Giles, is the new aesthetic of the immanence of language and the texture of writing as an element of signification: the repetition of "full" and "moon" in line three is, I think, an attempt to get at the repetition of 月 (*yuè*, "moon") as a component in Li Bai's line three, as a character on its own and in 望 (*wàng*, "to look, to gaze") and 明 (*míng*, "bright, clear").

Parataxis as a medium for translating Chinese poetry was, however, a firmer fixture in the avant-garde. Another avant-gardist to reach prominence as a transmitter of Chinese poetry in English was Kenneth Rexroth, for whom parataxis was also paramount in suggesting a fundamental relation between things, as in this translation of Du Fu 杜甫:

### Snow Storm

Tumult, weeping, many new ghosts.  
Heartbroken, aging, alone, I sing  
To myself. Ragged mist settles  
In the spreading dusk. Snow skurries  
In the coiling wind. The wineglass  
Is spilled. The bottle is empty.  
The fire has gone out in the stove.  
Everywhere men speak in whispers.  
I brood on the uselessness of letters. (Rexroth 6)

### 《对雪》

战哭多新鬼 愁吟独老翁 乱云低薄暮 急雪舞回风  
瓢叶尊无缘 炉存火似红 数州消息断 愁坐正书空

Pound and Rexroth were very similar poets and figures in many ways: both close with their mutual publisher James Laughlin, they were likewise anti-academic autodidacts who translated from many languages, particularly Chinese, and were equally invested in the relationship between the politico-economic and the poetic. Despite this, or because of it, Rexroth needed to define himself against Pound in the face of all their similarities—countering Pound's fascism with his anarchism, reading Daoism and Buddhism while Pound read Confucius, but translating Du Fu whereas Pound translated Li Bai—Rexroth even said in a 1958 interview with Jerome Rothenberg and David Antin, "as a poet I find [Pound's] verse soft and mellifluous . . . a limp soft line. It's not what I'm looking for at all" (Rothenberg & Antin 2011). Nevertheless, Rexroth's method of translating Du Fu is very much based on a Poundian ethic of juxtaposition, foregrounding the poetic device over and against the poetic persona.

This reaches an apparent culmination with Gary Snyder, whose translation style compelled him to avoid personal pronouns even more conspicuously than the Wang Wei 王维 poem he translates:

### Deer Camp

Empty mountains:  
no one to be seen.  
Yet—hear—  
human sounds and echoes.  
Returning sunlight  
enters the dark woods;  
Again shining  
on the green moss, above. (Synder 539)<sup>22</sup>

### 《鹿柴》

空山不見人 但聞人語聲 返景入深林 復照青苔上

With this translation style, we seem to see how the juxtaposition of parataxis, Chinese translation, and dissolution of the self could culminate in the suggestion of a fundamental relation between them. With Snyder's Buddhism, we might even think we arrive at the apotheosis of Fenollosa's essay—right after describing “two things added together,” he says, “A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature” (Fenollosa and Pound 46), which must certainly apply to the ego as well—especially in light of Haun Saussy's revelation, in his introduction to the *Chinese Written Character's* critical edition, that Pound largely edited out Fenollosa's allusions to Tendai 天台 Buddhism in preparing the essay for publication.<sup>23</sup> And yet, we should not overlook Snyder's more famous translations, of Han Shan 寒山, where the self seems much more stable:

Some critic tried to put me down—  
“Your poems lack the Basic Truth of Tao”  
And I recall the old-timers  
Who were poor and didn't care.  
I have to laugh at him,  
He misses the point entirely,  
Men like that  
Ought to stick to making money. (Synder 526)

客難寒山子 君詩無道理 吾觀乎古人 貧賤不為耻  
應之笑此言 談何疏闊矣 願君似今日 錢是急事爾

These two examples deepen the rift we witnessed between a Poundian linguistic immanence that translates and a Frosty linguistic transcendence that does not, reaching a fissure as well between translation's egolessness and the dominance of the lyric self in poetry by the Seventies. Such a rift was prefigured in Alan Watts's 1958 essay, “Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen,” where he says,

the Westerner who is attracted by Zen and who would understand it deeply must have one indispensable qualification; he must understand his own culture so thoroughly that he is no longer swayed by its premises unconsciously ... He must be free of the itch to justify himself. Lacking this, his Zen will be either “beat” or “square,” either a revolt from the culture and social order or a new form of stuffiness and respectability. (Watts 610)

Watts even specifies Snyder’s poetry, saying, “as I know it, it is always a shade too self-conscious, too subjective, and too strident to have the flavor of Zen ... which would rather hand *you the thing itself* without comment” (ibid. 611). Of course, both translators and Zen adepts know how unattainable *the thing itself* can be, especially if the isolated thing does not exist in nature.

By the 1980s, the split suggested in Snyder’s translations becomes enlarged in the translation of Chinese poetry as a whole. By now, not only has Language Poetry seemingly taken over parataxis, but the avant-garde barely translates pre-modern Chinese. Instead, ancient China has entered the mainstream, though it doesn’t necessarily fare any better: *A Book of Luminous Things* shows Czesław Miłosz placing Chinese a grab-bag of pre-modern Chinese poets in ahistorical dialogue with international greats such as Elizabeth Bishop and Joseph Brodsky; the Chinese calligraphy cover image of Charles Wright’s *Black Zodiac* is printed upside-down, then “corrected” by a reprint that’s right side-up, but backwards. And the poetry itself? W. S. Merwin’s stable lyric ego (to say nothing else of what Merwin does to the motivation of Li Bai’s homesickness in “*Yè sī*,” the Lowell / Ayscough and Giles translations of which I quoted above) —

### Quiet Night Thoughts

I wake and my bed is gleaming with moonlight  
 Frozen into the dazzling whiteness I look up  
 To the moon herself  
 And lie thinking of home (Merwin 17)

—and David Young’s hypotactic Du Fu:

### Gazing at Mount Tai

How to describe a peak  
 that has produced such reference?

there’s greenness that surrounds it—  
 two provinces, Qi and Lu

all creation is contained  
 on those dark slopes, that sunny side

layers of clouds refresh  
 climber and climbed alike

the birds fly up and up  
 beyond our straining eyes

someday I want to stand  
 right there on the summit

the other mountains dwarfed  
 spreading in all directions! (Young 5)

《望岳》

岱宗夫如何	齐鲁青未了	造化钟神秀	阴阳割昏晓
荡胸生曾云	决眦入归鸟	会当凌绝顶	一览众山小

Even translators of Chinese poetry who consciously write against the dominance of hypotactic Unmarked Case poetry are bound to find themselves caught up in it; a recent review of David Hinton's *Classical Chinese Poetry: An Anthology*<sup>24</sup> said that one of Hinton's translations "sounds like something Charles Simic might write" (Thorburn 88).<sup>25</sup> I wonder how Hinton felt about that.

At the same time, when the avant-garde translates Chinese poetry, it translates the modern and contemporary. Xue Di 雪迪 has a book translated in part by Keith Waldrop and Forrest Gander,<sup>26</sup> and I have done versions of Bei Dao 北岛 with Clayton Eshleman,<sup>27</sup> but mostly this takes place in anthologies: *New Generation: Poems from China Today*, edited by Wang Ping, includes versions co-translated by Lyn Hejinian, Ron Padgett, David Shapiro, Keith Waldrop, and Anne Waldman—all representatives of various avant-garde or "post-avant" groupings—and *Another Kind of Nation*, edited by Zhang Er 张耳 and Chen Dongdong 陈东东 included translations done in part by Leonard Schwartz, Bob Holman, Cris Mattison, and Susan Schultz, also all part of the avant-garde tradition writ large.

The reasons for this return us to the sociological. The entry of pre-modern Chinese poetry into "Unmarked Case" poetics reflects a risk-averse "investment strategy," allowing a move such as Chinese poetry translation to demonstrate success or failure on the periphery before being brought into the "mainstream." Meanwhile, the avant-garde's move from classical to contemporary Chinese poetry reflects the shift towards modern languages and the logic of "applicability" (no matter how much the avant-garde purports to disdain such logic) in the American educational system. And while paratactic juxtaposition is a main mode<sup>28</sup> in Chinese "Obscure" 朦胧 and "Post-Obscure" poetry (Bei Dao even describes Eisenstein's "montage," which of course grew from his understanding of the Chinese character, as influential to his early poetics<sup>29</sup>), mostly, I believe, the shift has to do with social networks and China's "reform and opening up" 改革开放, whose prongs have been exile and immigration and access to international poetry festivals, all of which allows for living Chinese and

American poets to enter the same social networks. Bei Dao's friendship with Eliot Weinberger and Clayton Eshleman, for instance, has led both to translate Bei Dao, and the pairings of Chinese poet with American poet-translator in both Wang Ping's anthology and Zhang Er's is the result of—and testament to—everyone's membership in interlinked social networks.

Such a pattern to the reception of Chinese poetry in English presents a problem, however, since Chinese poetry is rarely able to fulfill one of the main purposes and functions of avant-gardism, which is to challenge preconceptions (perhaps the "avant-garde" has become the "post-avant," after all). Instead, the split between "modern" and "pre-modern" Chinese poetry gets mirrored in Anglophone poetics, and a historical divergence is inscribed as a matter of taste (the avant-gardists like the "contemporary," while readers of the "Unmarked Case" like the "classical"). And rather than being able to exist as a text related to its own time and culture and later, distant times and cultures, pre-modern poetry in English translation once again becomes victim of the May Fourth prejudice against it, and becomes "traditional." This is quite a change from the early twentieth century, when classical Chinese poetry constituted an essential component of modernism.

### 3. Transcending the Transcendent Self: Towards a Reconciliation

Two questions remain: *why* has paratactic juxtaposition been so important to Anglophone avant-garde poetry? and are any avant-garde poets using what they've learned from the "ideogrammic method" to build pre-modern and modern Chinese poetry into a single, if polyvocal, tradition in English?

The first question is very large, of course, but parataxis is not new as a method in English poetics; Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis* considers it one of the fundamental literary techniques of Western literary heritage. But the way he describes it is telling: "far from weakening the interdependence of the two events," Auerbach says, parataxis "brings it out most emphatically; ... in English it is more dramatically effective" (Auerbach 62). But if it is more dramatically effective in English already, in poetry it represents language charged with meaning all the more because it is poetry. I see the development of parataxis in avant-garde English language poetry in the early twentieth century as a response to the dominance of the novel, which had occurred over the previous hundred years, and the dominance of literary realism within that dominance of the novel. "Prose," observe Michal Peled Ginsburg and Lorri Nandrea, "has come to appear 'natural': what we all, like Molière's M. Jourdain, speak without even knowing it and writing without needing a special talent or art" (Ginsburg and Nandrea 246); poetry—and avant-garde poetry in particular—gains its force, the dramatic effectiveness Auerbach mentions, by being determinedly unnatural.

Literary realism, meanwhile, has become dominant to the point of not only describing reality, but creating it. Peter Brooks explains:

Once a radical gesture, breaking with tradition, realism becomes so much the expected mode of the novel that even today we tend to think of it as the norm

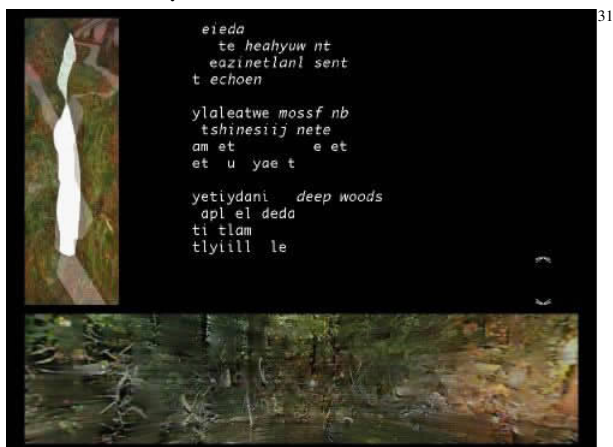
from which other modes ... are variants or deviants. That is, we eventually came to regard [its] styles of representing the world ... as standard, what we expected fiction to be. The novel in the airport newsstand will tend to be written from a repertory of narrative and descriptive tools that come from the nineteenth-century realists. What they are doing, and their radical pioneering in the novel, has ceased to astonish us. (Brooks 5)

I would go further, even, and say that literary realism writes not only the way we expect fiction to be, it writes the way we expect reality to be, as well. If the ego seems stable to us in reality, it is less because of the stability of the *lyric* subject than because of the pervasiveness of realism's narrative arc. In challenging its artistry through parataxis, avant-garde poetry also challenges its ideology. The transcendental ego can be dissolved.

But if avant-garde poetry can try to dissolve the transcendental ego, can it also complicate the overarching simplicity of Chinese poetry's reception in "modern / avant-garde" and "Unmarked / traditional"? At this juncture several potential conclusions present themselves: I could press harder on the "bourgeois" nature of Unmarked Case poetry and Chinese translation, thinking through the politico-economic views and poetry-world positions of figures such as Pound, Rexroth, and Sam Hamill; I could consider the functions of race and the avant-garde vis-à-vis Chinese poetics, looking at poets such as Afaa Weaver and Arthur Sze; I could go in depth about translators such as David Hinton and Brian Holton who have worked extensively on both pre-modern and contemporary Chinese poetry... but if the poetic avant-garde—for all its sociological shortcomings of representationality, race-based, gender-based, and class-based—is going to be defined by its writing *as well as* and not *only as* sociology, then I should focus on the carriers of the avant-garde tradition, and I should do so by looking not at translation *per se* but at the avant-garde poetic writing adjacent to translation proper, since such writing draws the most from and contributes the most to the constitution of Chinese poetics within the schools of Anglophone poetry. I should, therefore, conclude by presenting work by four poets I believe to be continuing the dissolution of the lyric self through avant-garde poetry and translation practice that unites, rather than divides, pre-modern and contemporary Chinese poetry. In debt to Weinberger's model of bringing knowledge of pre-modern Chinese translation (e. g., his *New Directions Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry*) to bear on translation of contemporary Chinese poetry (his translations of Bei Dao), the four poets I mention—John Cayley, Kit Kelen, Jonathan Stalling, and Jeffrey Yang—all extend the avant-garde tradition of questioning a transcendent self through their renewal of the "ideogrammic method."<sup>30</sup>

John Cayley, English, writer of digital media currently at Brown University. He describes one piece, *riverIsland*, a three-dimensional hyperspace presentation of Wang Wei's 輞川集 that expands on Weinberger's *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, as "a navigable text movie composed from transliteral morphs with a few interliteral graphic morphs ... a spatialized aural poetic environment in which you may also investigate of procedures of textual transformation associated with translation, which are

here proposed as transliteral”:



Kit Kelen, Australian, poet and professor in English at the University of Macau. Having lived in Macau for nearly a decade, he incorporates English — Chinese and Chinese — English translation into his poetry (with his students, he has translated, most notably, Meng Jiao's 孟郊 poetry, and all his English writing is published with Chinese versions *en face*). Here is a poem that in English refers to Snyder and in Chinese to the *Canon of Verse* 诗经 and the “Rhymeprose on Literature” 文赋 by Lu Ji 陆机<sup>32</sup>:

hewing an axe handle with the only thing handy	操斧伐柯
words are always more than themselves	词语总是超越 词语
they've been everywhere we've not	它们无处不在 甚至在我們无法到达的地方
but where can they go without us?	但没有我们 它们又能去哪儿
we take them on through new doors every day	每天 我们都把它们 带进崭新的门
words are wise	词语聪慧
when you're not looking they wander away	你一不留神 它们就会逃逸
rolled up in a scroll	卷成轴

or sealed tight between covers 或封存在书与书之间  
 you'd think they'd be safe asleep 你以为它们睡得安详

but that's the dark they travel 但那里有它们穿行的黑暗

you know that they've been 你知道它们曾到过  
 in every corner 每个角落  
 because there's nothing 因为没有什么  
 words can't handle 词语无法控制

the problem 只要肯承认  
 if we could only admit it 问题在于  
 is ours 我们自己  
 in finding them 是否将它们找寻 (Kelen 220 - 1)<sup>33</sup>

Jonathan Stalling, American, Assistant Professor of English at University of Oklahoma and editor of *Chinese Literature Today*. In addition to translating the work of noted contemporary poets such as Shi Zhi 食指,<sup>34</sup> Stalling's experimental translation of pre-modern poetry has focused on sound—and especially, tone—as a previously unexplored area of English poetics. From *Yíngēlishī—Chanted Songs Beautiful Poetry*:

请再说一遍  
 please say it again  
 pù lì sī sāi yì tè 'è gān  
 曝栎  
 思塞  
 臆臆  
 萼甘  
 Oak exposed to the sun  
 stopped thoughts  
 hysterical insects  
 sweet floral collar  
 (Stalling 92)

Jeffrey Yang, American, editor at New Directions, and translator of the poetry of Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波 as well as Su Dongpo 苏东坡. In both his original poems—recently published as *An Aquarium*—and his translations, he brings avant-garde parataxis and Chinese allusion together to constitute a re-birth of poetic modernism nearly a century after Pound's first development of the “ideogrammic method.” Two of “his own” poems:

**Jiang Kui**

Jing Wang translates Jiang Kui of the Northern Song: “In writing poetry, it is better to strive to be different from the ancients than to seek to be identical to them. But better still than striving to be different is to be bound to find one’s own identity with them, without striving to identify; and to be bound to differ with them, without string to differ.” (Yang 2008: 21)

**White Whale**

Round and round we wheel  
around the White Whale  
in a braided cord  
of good and evil,  
till self’s  
freed  
from ego. (ibid. 53)

Plus a translation of Wang Wei:

**BAMBOO DWELLING**  
Sitting alone            within a hidden bamboo  
grove    plucking the qin    repeating long  
howls            in a deep forest no one knows  
bright moon            illuminates the harmony

(Yang 2005: 7)

**《竹里馆》**

独坐幽篁里    弹琴复长啸    深林人不知    明月来相照

Through original poetry and translation (blurring at times the distinction between such categories), each of these poets has engaged not only with Chinese poetry at both the modern and pre-modern level, but has found the potentially avant-garde within the pre-modern Chinese tradition, as well, applying that further to the dissolution of the self via writing against the hypotactic mode of fictional “realism.” Always the result of collaboration, translation, too, “denies the centrality of the individual artist,” even if it also requires the handling of “transcendent meaning”; and yet through parataxis, their work expresses the urgency of “immanent meaning,” as well, revealing that what truly gets lost in translation is the self.

## Notes

1. Personal conversation (July, 2010) and correspondence (Nov. 24, 2010) with Eliot Weinberger.
2. See Seamus Cooney, ed., *The Poems of Charles Reznikoff: 1918 – 1975* (Jaffrey, NH: David R. Godine, 2005).
3. See Zukofsky “Sincerity and Objectification: *With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff*,” first published in *Poetry*, 1931, and available in reprint in Louis Zukofsky, *Prepositions + : The Collected Critical Essays*, ed. by Mark Scroggins (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001) 193 – 202.
4. See Ezra Pound, “A Retrospect,” < [http://www. poetspath. com/transmissions/messages/pound. html](http://www.poetspath.com/transmissions/messages/pound.html) > .
5. See Zukofsky, “Sincerity and Objectification,” 2001: 194.
6. Pound’s Imagism, for that matter, was not as interested in Chinese translation as was his Vorticism, though this is not how most people remember it.
7. Epigram by “Wei T’ ai,” in A. C. Graham, *Poems of the Late T’ ang* (London: Penguin, 1965): 9. In Chinese, this section of the epigram reads: “Poetry conveys emotion by presenting the thing; things prize precision, emotion prizes reticence” 诗者述事以寄情, 事贵详, 情贵隐 (Wei Tai 魏泰 [11<sup>th</sup>/ 12<sup>th</sup> cent. ], in Chen Yingluan 陈应鸾, ed., *Línhàn yǐnjū shīhuà jiàozhù* 临汉隐居诗話校注 [Remarks on Poetry from the Hermitage that Overlooks the Han] [Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 2001]: 37); for Reznikoff’s quotation of the epigram, see L. S. Dembo, “The ‘Objectivist’ Poet: Four Interviews [Charles Reznikoff],” in *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 10, no. 2 (Spring, 1969): 193.
8. For a taxonomy of the term “School of Quietude,” which comes from an Edgar Allen Poe review of Nathaniel Hawthorne from 1847, see *Scarriet*, 21 July 2010 < [http://scarriet. wordpress. com/2010/07/21/come-along-quietly/](http://scarriet.wordpress.com/2010/07/21/come-along-quietly/) > .
9. Also see James Mitchell, *Il Bloggio di Plainfeather*, 1 August 2010 < [http://plainfeather. blogspot. com/2010/08/whats-wrong-with-modern-poetry. html](http://plainfeather.blogspot.com/2010/08/whats-wrong-with-modern-poetry.html) > , where the bourgeois character of the poets Silliman points out allows for another name; the “American Standard” school (A. S. S. ). Accounting for “(say) 90% of contemporary poetry … it excludes transgenderism, radical politics, anti-Establishment tyrades, moral bankruptcy, drugs, criminal activity, strikes, masturbation, religious visions and many other more exotic human behaviors, and it characteristically excludes language and imagery which is difficult to understand.” It is also, Mitchell notes, the only school “certified and approved by capitalism and is accordingly the single recipient of its favors, and epitomized, according to Mitchell, by Billy Collins ( Mitchell provides a link to Collins’s website, saying, “don’t forget to go shopping later for the products linked to in the right-hand column”). The name “American Standard” not only derives from the name of “the language most of us write in,” but also because American Standard is a toilet.
10. As A. D. Jameson puts it, “The term’s early 19th-century Socialist origins have mostly been forgotten,” so that the “avant-garde” “assumes an incorrect model of how art and innovation actually proceed. It begins by positing that there’s a single conservative high art world, which follows a long and noble yet conservative tradition, and that there’s a single low art world, which is popular and commercial (i. e. , crass). And then it assumes that there’s a small band of daring creative pioneers, huddled in some corner of the culture somewhere, who pass all artistic innovation to both the highs and the lows. (It’s the art world version of Reaganomics.)” A. D. Jameson, *Big Other*, 4 January 2011 < [http://bigother. com/2011/01/02/why-i-hate-the-avant-garde/](http://bigother.com/2011/01/02/why-i-hate-the-avant-garde/) > .
11. Of course, such a definition is also sociological, since it allows Abramson to re-draw Silliman’s map of cools and squares: “The School of Quietude would now like to assert its claim on the bulk of the poems produced by the following purportedly ‘post-avant’ poets: Frank O’ Hara; Ted Berrigan;

Robert Creeley; virtually all second- and third- wave (so-called) ‘New York School’ and ‘Black Mountain School’ poets; all the Modernists but Pound; all under-forty so-called ‘Neo-surrealists’ (but not any of the *actual* Surrealists); and the so-called ‘Imagists’ and ‘Neo-Imagists’” (Suburban Ecstasies, 14 July 2010 <<http://sethabramson.blogspot.com/2010/07/supplied-herein-definition-of-school-of.html>>).

12. This famous quotation does not appear anywhere in Frost’s published writings, though he accepted attribution (See Luba Zakharov, 8 March 2009 <<http://www.packingtownreview.com/posts/5-featured-response-by-luba-v-zakharov-to-quotwho-said-poetry-is-what-gets-lost-in-translationquot>>.) Its formulation is so memorable, and so anathema to the ethics and aesthetics of avant-garde-leaning translators, that Eliot Weinberger copies its syntax while rebutting it in the first line of *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*: “Poetry is that which is worth translating” (Eliot Weinberger & Octavio Paz 1).

13. See Robert Lowell’s acceptance speech at the National Book Award ceremony, 1960, for *Life Studies*.

14. Paris Leary and Robert Kelly, eds., *A Controversy of Poets: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry* (New York: Doubleday, 1965).

15. Looking back from today, though, such overpopulation seems sparse. With a journalistic exclamation point, Chad Harbach notes in “MFA vs. NYC,” “There were 79 degree-granting programs in creative writing in 1975; today, there are 854!” (Chad Harbach, “MFA vs. NYC—America now has two distinct literary cultures. Which one will last?” *Slate*, Nov. 2010 <<http://www.slate.com/id/2275733/pagenum/all/#p2>>). Nevertheless, the contrast with the Sixties is an important incitement to the *Po-biz* feature.

16. Weinberger’s twenty-five maxims were originally published as “Notes on Translation” in Clayton Eshleman’s journal *Sulfur* in 1988.

17. Marjorie Perloff has testified—in a test of the manifesto’s manifest success—to the pervasiveness of their logic amongst the avant-garde, saying their argument “has been so thoroughly internalized in our own ‘advanced’ discourses about the place of the aesthetic in our culture. The demise of the transcendental Ego, of the authentic self, of the Poet as lonely Genius, of a unique artistic style: these, as we have seen, are now taken as something of a given” (409).

18. Weinberger stated this, among other times, at the “Translation; Ethics, Censorship, Speaking Out” roundtable at the National Grad Student Translation Conference held at Columbia University, March 30, 2008. For an earlier take, see “The ‘Language’ Letters,” in *Written Reaction: Poetics Politics Polemics* (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1996), 83–96.

19. Personal conversation with Ron Silliman during discussion at Yale Working Group on Contemporary Poetics, November 7, 2008.

20. Ezra Pound, “Canto LIII” in *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1993) 264–265. For more on the phrase Pound quotes, see also Edward Shaughnessy, *Sources of Western Zhou History: Inscribed Bronze Vessels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 7, and Haun Saussy, “Conclusion: The Difficult Inch,” in *Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Cultural China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, Harvard University Press, 2001), 183.

21. In fact, it may indeed have been written a generation earlier: “The first edition of this work was published,” Giles wrote in Cambridge, 1922, “in 1898, and has long been out of print. The present edition, considerably enlarged, is a companion volume to *Gems of Chinese Literature*, also in its second and enlarged edition...” (290). The versions from the 1898 edition are indistinguishable from those that constitute the expansion, which shows that while avant-garde poetry in English pushed literary history forward, Giles’s translations were for a readership that preferred to adhere to earlier norms of English verse.

22. For further discussion of Snyder along similar lines to my discussion, see Jonathan Stalling, “Teaching the Law: Gary Snyder’s Poetics of Emptiness,” in *Poetics of Emptiness: Transformations*

of *Asian Thought in American Poetry* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010) 97 – 120.

23. See esp. section 5 of Haun Saussy, “Fenollosa Compounded: A Discrimination,” in Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, and Lucas Klein (eds), *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: A Critical Edition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008) 18 – 23.

24. David Hinton, trans., *Classical Chinese Poetry: An Anthology* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008).

25. Simic became a particularly contentious figure on the poetic left when his review of the double-volume *Collected Poems of Robert Creeley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) came out (“The Cat Went Out for Good,” *The New York Review of Books*, October 25, 2007).

26. Xue Di 雪迪, trans. by Keith Waldrop, Forrest Gander, Stephen Thomas, Theodore Deppe, Sue Ellen Thompson, Hu Qian, Wang Ping, Hil Anderson, Waverly, and Iona Crook, *Another Kind of Tenderness* (Brooklyn: Litmus Press, 2004).

27. Bei Dao 北岛, translated by Clayton Eshleman and Lucas Klein, *Endure: Poems by Bei Dao* (Boston: Black Widow Press, 2011).

28. In at least instance, English translations demonstrate a continuation of avant-gardist language even when the tone of the Chinese is markedly different; consider Donald Revell’s and Zhang Er’s translation of Han Dong 韩东:

**About Da Yan Pagoda**

About Da Yan Pagoda  
 What more to know?  
 The people come from far  
 To climb it, to be  
 Heroes for once, or even a second time  
 Some of them, or perhaps more.

**有关大雁塔**

有关大雁塔  
 我们又能知道些什么?  
 有很多人从远方赶来  
 为了爬上去  
 做一次英雄也有的还来做第二次  
 或者更多

See Donald Revell and Zhang Er 张耳, “About Da Yan Pagoda,” in Zhang Er and Chen Dongdong 陈东东, eds., *Another Kind of Nation: An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Poetry* (Jersey City: Talisman Publishers, 2007) 69.

29. Personal conversations (March, 2011) with Bei Dao.

30. Another important forebear vis-à-vis China is J. H. Prynne, whose engagement with China deserves (and has received; see Joshua Kotin, “Reading Ezra Pound and J. H. Prynne in Chinese,” in *Private Utopias, Transnational Modernism* [Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, August 2011]) its own study, but surely can be a model for poets trying to engage with China’s textual, material, and ideological histories and implications.

31. John Cayley, *riverIsland* (2007) <http://programmatology.shadoof.net/index.php?p=works/riverisland/riverislandQT.html>.

32. The Snyder poem in question is “Axe Handles” (in *The Gary Snyder Reader* 489), which reads:

One afternoon the last week in April  
 Showing Kai how to throw a hatchet  
 One-half turn and it sticks in a stump.  
 He recalls the hatchet-head  
 Without a handle, in the shop  
 And go gets it, and wants it for his own.  
 A broken-off axe handle behind the door  
 Is long enough for a hatchet,  
 We cut it to length and take it

With the hatchet head  
 And working hatchet, to the wood block.  
 There I begin to shape the old handle  
 With the hatchet, and the phrase  
 First learned from Ezra Pound  
 Rings in my ears!  
 “When making an axe handle  
 the patten is not far off.”  
 And I say this to Kai  
 “Look; We’ll shape the handle  
 By checking the handle  
 Of the axe we cut with—”  
 And he sees. And I hear it again:  
 It’s in Lu Ji’s *Wên Fu*, fourth century  
 a. d. “Essay on Literature”—in the  
 Preface: “In making the handle  
 Of an axe  
 By cutting wood with an axe  
 The model is indeed near at hand.”  
 My teacher Shih-hsiang Chen  
 Translated that and taught it years ago  
 And I see; Pound was an axe,  
 Chen was an axe, I am an axe  
 And my son a handle, soon  
 To be shaping again, model  
 And tool, craft of culture,  
 How we go on.

33. This poem is translated by Fan Xing 樊星. Kit Kelen, “Hewing an Axe Handle with the Only Thing Handy,” in *China Years: Selected and New Poems* (Macao: ASM, 2010) 220–221.
34. Shi Zhi 食指, *Winter Sun*, Jonathan Stalling, trans. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012).

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