



Chinese Modernity, Irish Modernism

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Chinese Modernity, Irish Modernism

Ireland was a central interest of intellectuals of the late nineteenth and of early twentieth centuries in the emerging Chinese nation-state. Ireland's people and intellectuals were perceived as having suffered under, and stood up to, the same British imperialism that had wreaked havoc in what is now China in the nineteenth-century Opium Wars.

I say what is now China, since in the nineteenth century there was no China, there was just an imagined nation that Europeans had called China since the 16thC. Only during the nineteenth century did the local elite start identifying them as Chinese, a concept that was ethnically and politically very nebulous.

"China", the word and the imaginary that conjured up a homogeneous space, people and culture, had only existed (alongside the word "Cathay") since the sixteenth century. And only in the mid-nineteenth century, after the onslaught of Western territorially and technologically invasive imperialism, would "the Chinese" and "China" emerge as an identity and an entity subscribed to by the dominant elite living within the borders of the Manchu-ruled state called Great Qing state.

In fact, the imagining and making of the nation-state in both Ireland and China were almost chronologically parallel and in China as in Ireland owed as much to literary and linguistic creativity as it did to past mythology. There was no modern national language when China was founded in 1912. This would come into being only as the 1920s wore on. And national-language literature was heavily dependent on foreign models in terms of form but also in terms of ideology. All nationalist writers from other, especially subjected countries, were examined for what they might bring to the creating of the new literature and the new state.

Nobel prizes naturally attracted additional attention. The awarding of the Nobel prize to Rabindranath Tagore coincided with the Chinese revolution (1911) and the founding of the new Chinese Republic (1912). In the years that followed, young Chinese poets were striving to craft a new vernacular poetic language and Tagore provided them with much inspiration.

The Chinese interest in Yeats also dates from the pioneering efforts of writers in the new Chinese language and literature of the early twentieth century. Even before Yeats won the Nobel prize, he was introduced to the Chinese public, by the main literary magazine of the day, *The Short Story Magazine*. In 1923, the same publication would also translate and publish his Preface to *Gitanjali*, and the last issue of the year would carry articles relating to

his being awarded the Nobel Prize. Chinese writers and readers were interested in Yeats as a poet, as a representative of the Irish renaissance, and as a champion of anti-colonial Irishness. But Yeats himself, unlike Tagore, seemed disinterested in the Chinese social reality, and China for him remained bound up with an Orientalist, exoticized vision of the East similar to that he had demonstrated in his earlier appraisal of Tagore. Thus, Yeats in a very real way exhibited the stereotypical interest of the Anglophone bourgeois world for all that was ancient in the East, whereas Tagore engaged with Chinese poets and others who were about imagining a new Asian culture.

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If part of Yeats's genius involved inhabiting and making his own the language of the imperial metropolis, for young Chinese writers, the language of the oppressor was not an external language to be re-moulded, but a dead language practised and imposed by a 2000-year-old Confucian order, and latterly also the instrument of the Manchu's oppression of what would become China. Writers were creating a new language and their models were the European languages to hand and, in particular, English and French. English was the most widespread foreign language, while Japanese also gave access via translations to world literatures. The English language was unproblematic for them, indeed it enabled an immediacy of access.

Yeats's poetry was accessible to well-educated readers and aspiring Chinese writers, and his Irishness equally should, in theory, have made of Yeats an influential voice in China. However, this was not the case.

Whereas George Bernard Shaw actually visited China in 1933 and reached out to a burgeoning Chinese literary and intellectual constituency, Yeats, never did visit China, and seemed interested only in a cultural China fixed in the past, a Orientalist and invented China. Whereas Ireland had long been territorially as well as intellectually colonized by Britain's imperial power, China's experience while just as brutal had brought little that might be considered usable. The Qing dynasty that had ruled over the territories that constitute what is now China, had been brought to its knees by the British-led opium wars in the mid-nineteenth century, but Britain's authorities and capitalists were only interested in the economic exploitation of China, not in colonizing it linguistically and culturally. And it was in the shape of troops serving under the British flag that most people living during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would become acquainted with the Irish in China.

As for literature, while British literature was known, before the end of the nineteenth century little was known of Irish writing as such. The great literary rebel hero in the eyes of the turn-of-the-century Chinese literary world was the much-translated Byron who in his poetry had condemned British aggression and supported Greek independence. So a few words about

the Chinese context.

At the dawn of the new Republic that was China, an old poetic language and formal rules had dominated literary creation for over 2000 years, and this despite evolutions in the common language that rendered the poetic idiom in the old literary language incomprehensible to all but the elite; much as Latin poetry would be inaccessible to a modern-day European. It was thus impossible for young intellectuals who were attempting to forge a new literature in and for a new standard national language to make use of it. Moreover, the vast majority of the population was illiterate; a more accessible, teachable, language was needed.

For formal and conceptual inspiration, they turned to poets of both the present, and the past but beyond China's frontiers. A few were attracted to the Anglophone tradition, many to French *vers libre*. The poetry produced by these young nationalist, poetic pioneers was unrecognisable to those in the West who had both invented and popularized "Chinese poetry" for European and American consumption: to Waley, Fenellosa, Pound, and later in the twentieth century Rexroth and Snyder. The efforts of these modern translators and modernist poets located, in a very Orientalist way, so-called "Chinese" poetry in an invented past. Indeed, the Victorian and later twentieth-century notion of China as a whole was in great part created and bolstered by translators. And, from the Jesuits onwards "China" was largely invented through translation.

The Western representation of Chinese literary creation as produced and fixed in the past, a vision aided by local politico-cultural conservatism, would make the efforts of the writers of China's "New Poetry" in the emerging national language inaudible. Indeed, vernacular national language poetry would not become a credible poetic medium to most readers until the late twentieth century. However, even then there continued to be polemical debate within the Western sinological community as to the "worth" of modern Chinese poetry compared to that of the past.

The Struggle for Irish Independence and the Emerging Chinese Imaginary

The first generation of poets in emerging Chinese national language (guoyu 國語) were avid not only for poetic models from outside but also for romantic role models of anti-colonialism and the independence movements that shook nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe.

The poet Guo Moruo 郭沫若 followed closely the Irish independence struggle and the tribulations of its heroes and even wrote a long, impassioned poem about the hunger striker Terence MacSwiney. The place of the Irish martyr in the Chinese intellectual imaginary is little known. And yet, as we see in the lyric representation of Guo Moruo, MacSwiney's case

was followed with great attention by this young Chinese student who was abroad studying in a modernizing Japan. Guo Moruo thus avidly followed the telegraphic dispatches concerning the state of MacSwiney's health during his 1920 hunger strike.

The young Guo Moruo took a keen interest in, and wrote on a daily basis, about Terence MacSwiney. In his narrative poem "Victorious in death", written in praise and commemoration of MacSwiney, the voice of the poem echoes the sentiment of Sean O'Casey who had been "deeply moved by the assertion of the hunger striker Terence MacSwiney that it was not the people who could inflict the most, but those who could suffer the most who would win in the end." In Guo's poem the paratext, the notes surrounding the poem, are essential in conveying the extent and nature of the Chinese poet's imaginary concerning Ireland and its contemporary martyr; the poet claims that the sections of the poem were written, 'in real time', as milestone events took place on 13th, 22nd, 24th and 27th October. MacSwiney died on 25th October 1920. The poem is thus constructed as a narrative with a sense of telegraphic immediacy.

Guo Moruo represents MacSwiney, the Irish Republican Army and Irish youth as standard-bearers for freedom, by which he intended national freedom. China itself was re-imagining itself for the first time in history as a nation-state modelled on the Western, and now Japanese, modern nation-state. The Irish as a long-standing colonized, subjected people so physically close to the heart of the British Empire necessarily inspired the imagination of the Chinese revolutionary who longed for a similar national revolutionary fervour in China.

Honoured MacSwiney!

Dear sons of Ireland,

the spirit of freedom will ever stand by you

for you stand by one another,

you are the incarnation of freedom!

October 13

On 22 October, Guo Moruo wrote these lines:

Terence MacSwiney, Irish patriot!

Today is the 22nd of October!

(Never has a calendar on the wall so fixed my attention!)

Are you still alive in your prison cell?

There came a cable from London on the 17th:

It was 60 days since your fast began,

And yet you bear yourself as well as ever.

Your strength was failing daily ...

and today is the 22nd October.

.....

A cable on the 17th from your native Cork

Told that a Sinn Feiner, comrade of yours, Fitzgerald,

fasted for 68 days in Cork City Gaol

and suddenly died at sundown on the 17th.

Cruel deaths there are in history, but few so tragic.

Michael Fitzgerald had indeed died after 60 days on hunger strike in Cork Gaol. And then Guo compares the two Irishmen to ancient legendary Lords of the Shang Dynasty, Boyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齐 who when their dynasty was overthrown, a millennium before our era, rather than surrender took refuge in the Shouyang Mountains where they eventually starved to death.

The Shouyang Mountain of Ireland!

The Boyi and Shuqi of Ireland!

The next cable I dread to read....

On 20th October MacSwiney fell into a coma, on the 24th October 1920 Guo writes:

Now arrives a cable of the 21st:

Three times MacSwiney has fainted,

.....

Bestial murderous government, are you bent on casting an indelible stain on the history of the world?

Cruel, callous Englishmen, has the blood of Byron and Campbell ceased to flow in your veins?

On the 25th October MacSwiney passed away. Two days later Guo wrote:

Brave, tragic death! Death in a blaze of glory! Triumphant procession of victor! Victorious death!

MacSwiney, fighter for freedom, you have shown how great can be the power of the human will!

The night has closed down on us, but how bright is the moon....

In this panegyric, it is not only the heroism of MacSwiney that is eulogized, but a whole people. The Irish struggle against British imperialist dominance was understood as a shining example for China.

Yeats, Things Chinese, and History

While Yeats never set foot in China, he remained enamoured of the exotic lure of the “Orient”, of its past, and of the Western imaginary of the East. Yeats’s knowledge of, and perhaps his interest for, China was limited to his readings and very much influenced by his relationship with Pound, and in general terms, filtered through a European Orientalist imaginary of Asia. Indeed, Yeats seems to have been blind to the similarity his Chinese contemporaries perceived between Ireland’s colonial condition and China’s subjugation to British imperialism, or if he was aware of it he saw no need to address it. Indeed, “the Chinese” seemed not to be agents or subjects to Yeats, but rather the token Orientalist fantasy figures we see emerge in his poetry which are very much the product of a tradition of British Chinoiserie. Yeats’s understanding of East Asia, in which Japan and China constituted a pre-modern cultural pond into which the Irish poet could dip his pail, was dependent on Fenellosa and Pound, who both despite their Modernist stance, or indeed probably because of it, had simply exploited pre-modern literature from East Asia understood as a body of exotic texts totally dissociated from any contemporary social reality. Of course, we might establish an apology for Yeats by simply explaining he was a product of his times and his class.

Let us examine, Yeats’s China-related poem, “Lapis Lazuli” unproblematically and without comment evokes and re-inscribes the derogatory ‘Chinaman’ of Yeats’s poem. But even Yeats’s interest in the object remained superficial. There was an inscription on the back of the object which Yeats’s friend Edmund Dulac surmises is a poem and which he offers to have translated; a proposition which seemingly drew no response from Yeats. He was not interested in a potential intertext, but solely in the imaginary scene he conjured up in his own mind.

Richard Ellman famously divided the poem into “Western” stanzas and “Eastern” stanzas: “the East, according to Yeats, rejects intellectual pride and optimism as trivial and is indifferent to history.” And yet, the year the poem was published, 1938, was heavy with historical significance for “the East”. China had been invaded Japan in 1937, and was in the

throes of war that would last until August 1945. But again, Japan in Yeats's imaginary was not the militaristic, fascist power of the 1930s, but the Japan he had apprehended while associating with Pound in 1913-1916; Yeats, after all, "was intrigued by what he learned of Japanese Noh drama." And yet, the Japanese state at the moment "Lapis Lazuli" was published had become an agent of death and destruction, and the Chinese people, unlike "the Chinamen" who peopled Yeats's imaginary "East", were far from being "indifferent" to history. Rather, the supposed "indifference" is constructed and compounded not only by Yeats himself, but by his interpreters, intent on maintaining this east/west divide that characterizes the West's imaginary of "the East". But, then, without the West's invention of the East there would be no divide.

Then there is the earlier, 1921, poem "Nineteen hundred and nineteen" in which the following lines appear:

*When Loie Fuller's Chinese dancers enwound
A shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth,
It seemed that a dragon of air
Had fallen among dancers...*

The famous dancers were, in fact, Japanese, and yet what is perhaps more significant here is the absence in this poem of a sense of any East Asian reality, that a monumental injustice against a people may be occurring elsewhere than Ireland in 1919; an injustice, what is more that shared the same imperialist origins. The post-World War I Versailles peace treaty of 1919 had signed over defeated Germany's Chinese colonies to Japan whose military-dominated authorities would use them as a foothold for further encroachment and eventually in 1937 of full-fledged invasion of China. In China, the 1919 treaty gave rise to major clashes between students and the Chinese authorities at Tiananmen Square and led directly to the creation of the 4th May Movement - a literary, linguistic and cultural nationalist movement that saw a national language and a national culture as essential to China's salvation. The poet Guo Moruo was a product of this movement, and it was, as we saw, who would write in that same year of Ireland's struggle against Britain's "bestial murderous government". That Yeats might have been ignorant of twentieth-century current affairs is always a possibility, but hardly a likely one. That he did not care to take an interest is more probable. In a letter written to Dorothy Wellesley in December 1936, at a moment when Europe itself was already in the grip of Nazism and fascism, and with the Civil War raging in Spain, Yeats could write: "why should I trouble about Communism, fascism, liberalism, radicalism, when all...are going downstream with the artificial unity which ends every civilisation." To return to the poem "Lapis Lazuli", it is a poem which is also noteworthy for its blatant misogyny.

Yeats had written:

*I have heard that hysterical women say
They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow,
Of poets that are always gay,
For everybody should know
That if nothing drastic is done
Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out*

The women seem mocked for their justified concern about wars, the coming European war, and the rise of fascism and Nazism in Europe. The first three stanzas of this poem relate to futile concern of the passage of civilizations, “Old civilizations put to the sword”, futile since “All things fall and are built again”, the last two relate to a millennial, eternal, timeless Orient where “Chinamen” with “ancient, glittering eyes” sit unconcerned with worldly concerns. Such a division between European and Chinese perspectives could only be built on a refusal to see what was happening in the world on a real global scale, to move beyond the parochial and the inherited Orientalist vision, and see that the same forces of domination and subjugation that had been at work in Ireland were holding sway the world over.

The poet and critic Tom Paulin provided a sober and incisive critique of Yeats when he wrote: “He was self-consciously old-fashioned and... quite incapable of identifying with socialism, feminism or any movement which depended on what he scorned as ‘Whiggish’ notions of progress.”

Conclusion

Yeats’s relationship with China, such as it was, was constituted by the Irishman’s vision of the Orient as a collection of fantastic objects, and maybe summed up as orientalist, reifying and exploitative: a one-way street. Yeats seemed uninterested by China’s trying to unshackle itself from multiple colonial oppressions, and was ignorant of the burgeoning cultural creativity of the new Republic, a Republic slightly older than his own, that was China. Yeats was simply “fascinated”, as all European Orientalist were, and still are, by an “Oriental” past. Moreover, Yeats’s was an Orient filtered through the eyes of Ezra Pound and Fenellosa. For Edward Saïd, Yeats was one of the “poets and men of letters of decolonisation”, a writer who “rises out of his national environment and gains universal significance”. Saïd even singles out the poem “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” as “a terrible new beauty that changes the old political and moral landscape”. But, despite the enormous respect we have for Saïd’s work

and its contribution to postcolonial studies, my own humble reading of Yeats's work does not permit me to share Said's perception of its "universal significance". Indeed, in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" we find a text that betrays no interest in the greater context of the colonized world. It is a poem that ultimately is parochial and inward-looking. Indeed, Yeats's poetry cannot be seriously considered of "universal significance" to those who aspire to cultural decolonization, as it has merely comforted a minor segment of the world's colonized.

Yeats's engagement with China was minimal, his fantasy "China" leaving but a few scant intertextual traces in one of his late poems. His disregard for, or at best disinterest in, China's anti-colonialist struggle and cultural nation-building project was in tune with the West's, even the liberal West's, vision of new Post-First World War order, the Wilsonian world of self-determination reserved to white European would-be nation-states coupled with a disdain and disregard for the still colonized peoples of Asia and Africa. He would be no second Byron for China.

This then is a story less to do with a reception of Chinese literature but of missed receptions in both directions. There was little Irish interest in the burgeoning new Chinese culture, and the literature that ought to have interested China did not yet exist.

DRAFT