Some Chinese Influences on Latin-American Writers

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At the turn of the nineteenth century, two major Spanish-American writers drew directly upon ancient Chinese sources for inspiration and used Chinese models in their own work. A later and completely separate wave of Chinese influence occurred early in the twentieth century concomitant with the Imagist movement and the translations of the North American poet Ezra Pound. None of the Latin-American writers in either period were able to read Chinese, but relied upon French translations of Chinese works, which they retranslated into Spanish, paraphrased, or drew upon as background for original productions. This process is a well-recognized phenomenon in comparative literature, symbolized by the triad Emitter – Intermediary – Receiver. Here Chinese writers serve as originators, French ones as intermediaries, and Latin Americans, with whom we are primarily concerned, as receivers.

No attention whatsoever outside of Latin-America has been given to the two waves of Chinese influence, and even within the Latin-American orbit of criticism, they have been strangely neglected.[1] One reason may be that the Chinese materials are in a sense imported at second hand through French translations. More probably, critics have mistaken for indigenous developments several important literary conventions which actually stem from Chinese sources.

The French Symbolist poet, Mallarmé, whose verse was dedicated by and large to portraying through language the distilled essence of things, wrote in a sonnet published in 1866 at the outset of his career, "imitate the Chinese."[2] The sonnet itself provides a number of examples of the manner in which images may be produced through the concentration of language, in a sense an approximation of the oriental ideogram. Among Mallarmé's intimate circle, the fellow poet Theophile Gautier and the latter's daughter Judith shared his enthusiasm for the Chinese literary tradition.

While still a young girl, Judith began studying the Chinese language with the help of a native tutor Ting Tung Ling, and she soon began reading and translating Chinese poets.[3] In 1867, at the age of 17, she published a small book of verses entitled *Le Livre de jade* (*The Book of Jade*),[4] comprising translations of classic Chinese poets, including Wang Wei (王維), Tu Fu (杜甫), Su Tung Po (蘇東坡) and Li Po (李白). This small volume made a tremendous impression upon her contemporaries in Spanish America as well as in France. Indeed it was one of the works that contributed most to the use of free verse during the French Symbolist movement.[5] Judith's father, the eminent Theophile Gautier, loved it so much that he wrote in it as an inscription that only Baudelaire's poem "Les Bienfaits de la lune" could be compared to Li Po's poem describing the Empress of China.[6]

In 1890, the Nicaraguan poet Ruben Darío included in the second edition of his well-known volume *Azul* a short story entitled "The death of the Empress of China" in which he narrates the story of a young sculptor and his bride who receive as a wedding present from a friend in Hong Kong a beautiful porcelain statue bearing the inscription "Empress of China." The sculptor, we are told, adored two French authors, Judith Gautier and Pierre Loti, a French contemporary, who like Gautier was fascinated by the Orient. After the receipt of the gift, for which a special cabinet is constructed and given a place of honor in the house, the couple's relationship starts deteriorating. The sculptor becomes enchanted by the statue and completely absorbed by it, and his wife becomes jealous. Their happiness is reestablished only after she breaks the statue, and at this point the story ends.[7]

We know from Darío's life that he became interested in China partly as a result of his friendship with a Chilean Pedro Balmaceda Toro who had lived in China, and the poet's biographer indicates that the story is based on the life of this friend who owned such a statue.[8] Its literary antecedents are indicated, however, by the internal reference to Gautier and Loti.

Darío mentions Gautier again in a long poem called "Digression," included in a later book *Prosas profanas*, published in Buenos Aires in 1896 and in Paris five years later.[9] In four stanzas addressed to a woman in which he declares his love, he indicates that she fascinates him as a rose from the Orient and asks her to reply amorously in Chinese, in the sonorous language of Li-Tai-Pé (李太白). He in turn, following the example of the wise poets who interpret destiny, will say that she is more beautiful than the moon

and that the caress from her ivory fan is worth more than the treasures of the sky. Finally, comparing himself to Judith Gautier, he justifies his extravagance by explaining that his French predecessor also adored Chinese princesses. Darío reaffirmed his admiration for Judith Gautier in a prose essay entitled "A propósito de Mme. de Noailles."[10]

Another major Latin-American poet to be influenced by Judith Gautier was José Juan Tablada, who began publishing romantic verses in 1891, but, like other poets of his milieu belonging to the Modernista Movement, was soon influenced by the French Parnassians and Symbolists. Previous scholarship has been unaware of the great debt of Tablada to Gautier, but has emphasized instead his connections with Japan, in which his interest had also been aroused by French publications.[11] In 1900, one of his patrons provided the financial backing for a trip to Japan, where he spent several months. From a combination of reading and travels, he developed a love for the haiku, which he learned to imitate in Spanish. In 1919, he published two works entitled *One Day* and *The Vase of Flowers,* the first of which was dedicated to the Japanese poets Bashó and Shiyo. Three years later Tablada complained that critics of these works had incorrectly judged them to be influenced by Chinese poetry, ignoring his dedication to the two Japanese.[12]

Another influential book by Tablada, published a year after his Japanese-inspired poems, provides ample evidence of the influence of Chinese models. This book is entitled *Li Po and Other Poems.* It consists of translations of poems by Li Po and other Chinese poets taken from Gautier's The *Book of Jade* together with original poems adapted from other Chinese models. Tablada himself, however, nowhere acknowledges his indebtedness beyond quoting Mallarmé's injunction to imitate the Chinese (p. 394). The Japanese influence on Tablada's poetry has been studied by many critics of Spanish-American literature, but his book *Li Po* is mentioned only in connection with French Cubism and related works.[13] Only a single critic has indicated that Tablada sketches the biography of Li Po and that he draws upon some of Li Po's actual verses in the construction of the poem.[14] No critic, however, has heretofore specified which poems in the collection are translations or traced their source to Judith Gautier from whose book they were obviously taken.

Other evidence of Tablada's interest in China is found in his novel called *The Vessel from China,* which he mentions having written in his

autobiography. Unfortunately it was burned in manuscript along with other papers of Tablada, by the zapatistas, a Mexican political group.[15]

Li Po and Other Poems is divided into two parts, the first entitled simply "Li Po" and the second "Other Ideographic Poems." The first section introduces Li Po as one of the "Seven" (rather than the usual eight) wise men of wine and subsequently portrays some of the main images of Li Po's poetry. These images are conveyed not only through words, but also by the typographical arrangement of the lines on the page. For example, when Tablada compares Li Po to a cup of sonorous jade, the verses are arranged to form the cup, or when he describes the poet as being drunk the verses convey the zig-zag effect of a drunken man as he walks. All of the poems in the book are arranged in this pictorial fashion (pp. 395-402).

Strangely enough, critics have not associated Tablada's shaped verse with its Chinese antecedents, but have instead traced it to another collection of poetry in French, the *Calligrammes* of Apollinaire, a volume which appeared two years prior to *Li Po and Other Poems.* Apollinaire's calligrams, like Tablada's verses, consist of words printed typographically in the shape of the objects being described, but he makes no formal acknowledgment of their being inspired by Chinese ideograms. There can be little doubt, however, that he had read the tributes of Gautier and others to Chinese poetic techniques, and I personally believe that he was conscious of the parallels between his verses and oriental ideograms. Latin-American critics have unanimously linked Apollinaire's *Calligrams* with Tablada's *Li Po,* however, without investigating the independent Chinese elements in the latter work.

Shortly after the publication of *Li Po,* Tablada in a letter to a fellow poet particularly disassociated his work from that of Apollinaire by affirming, "my ideographic poetry although similar in its principles to that of Apollinaire is today completely different; in my work the ideographic character is circumstantial; the general characters are really the suggestive synthesis of the lyrical themes, pure and discontinuous; and they show a more energetic relation of actions and reactions between the poet and the causes of emotion. My books *One Day* and *Li Po* will explain my purposes better than this premature exegesis."[16] Tablada indicates, moreover, that he had discovered in a Greek anthology by a certain Panude that one Greek poet had written a poem in the form of a wing and another in the form of an altar. Incidentally, these are themes of two poems in shaped verse by a

seventeenth-century English poet, George Herbert, one entitled "Easter Wings" and the other "The Altar." Tablada continues: "I found out through my studies of Chinese that in the temple of Confucius a certain hymn is sung the characters of which the choreographer writes in conjunction with the movements of the dance on the floor." Soon after he had composed one of the poems in *Li Po*, Tablada had noticed several similar attempts by some Cubist painters and a Modernista poet. For him, the ideogram has the "full force of an expression simultaneously rich and graphic, and it also preserves the secular ideophonic character. Moreover, the graphic aspect substitutes advantageously the discursive or explication aspect of ancient poetry, leaving the literary themes in the rank of 'pure poetry' as Mallarmé had desired." It is significant that Tablada here mentions the French poet who had advocated imitating the Chinese.

The evidence is almost conclusive that Tablada drew directly from Judith Gautier's *Book of Jade* in the composing of his *Li Po*. In another publication, I am showing that three of the poems in his collection are exact Spanish retranslations of Gautier's original translations from the Chinese. In the preface to her *Book of Jade*, Gautier explains that "a charming and original effect, a quality possessed only by Chinese poetry, results from the ideographic nature of the characters; one gets a definite impression from the appearance of the writing, and an unexpected vision of the whole poem. The flowers, the forests, the streams, and the moonlight, all these present themselves before one has commenced to read."[17] She illustrates this statement by indicating that the poem "Good fortune on the high road" by Li Tai Pé (the form of the poet's name which she regularly uses) at first glance gives the effect of "prancing horses, and before knowing what he will say, one seems to see the poet riding haughtily among the flowers."[18] Tablada's verse seems to reflect an identical desire to synthesize and to convey the whole image.

The first part of his book *Li Po* contains, as we have mentioned, a succinct verse biography of the Chinese poet, introduced as one of the Seven Sages of Wine. By incorporating the images most frequently found in Li Po's poetry, Tablada summarizes the symbols and themes of his model as well as the most publicized aspects of his life. Indicating at one point that Li Po is himself the writer, Tablada introduces a translation of the famous poem "Drinking alone by the moonlight" (月下獨酌, pp. 400-401). He refers in addition to the equally well-known episode when the

emperor commands Li Po to appear before him, and the poet does so in an intoxicated state (p. 400). A transference of images from another Chinese poem, "The Cormorant" serves to present a meditating Li Po standing at the edge of the river contemplating the reflection of the moon on the waters (p. 399).

Elsewhere in his book, Tablada refers to Li Po's poem "To Nanking" and paraphrases a few lines of "The Porcelain Pavilion" in which a reflected bridge resembles a crescent of jade. The form of the crescent moon encloses one of the legendary versions of Li Po's death, that in which he drowned through seeing a reflection of the moon on the water and confusing it with a cup of wine. The poem ends with another image of a full moon formed by verses which express the idea that after 1100 years China resounds in a funeral lamentation for the death of the poet in the light of a full moon. This part also includes a beautiful tribute to the poetic genius of Li Po within the figure of the Chinese ideogram signifying longevity. What better way of praising his works as immortal? (p. 398)

In a later book *La Feria* (1928), Tablada compares a morning spent in a Mexican city to a "trip to the country of porcelain, to marvelous China" and affirms that nature in Mexico may be compared to the immortal works found from Nanking to Kuantón (p. 490). China also appears prominently among Tablada's posthumously published works. A poem entitled "The sailor speaks" is a song of praise to Hainan and its women, the city described as "a glass of jade where one can hear the breeze whispering a verse from Tu Fu" (pp. 562-563). In another poem with the significant title "Tao," Tablada describes his intention of pursuing the teaching of Lao Tse and reveals that he apparently followed the wrong path by singing to women, that he discovered that this was not the way to Tao, and that subsequently he returned to the quest for nature, which, nevertheless, still seemed to evade him.

The second wave of influence consisted of offshoots from a later collection of translations of Chinese poems also published in Paris. The poems – a treasury of Chinese classics – were compiled by Ts'ao Shang Ling, translated into French prose by Franz Toussaint, and published in 1920 in an extremely attractive Art Nouveau format under the traditional title, *The Flute of Jade.*[19] This anthology, consisting of prose rather than verse and consequently by no means superior to Gautier's *The Book of Jade,* had a tremendous vogue, attaining at least 131 editions in French by 1958

as well as partial retranslations in English, Spanish and Portuguese. As the result of the division of labor between anthologist and translator, the many editions of *The Flute of Jade* are variously listed in printed catalogs under either Ts'ao or Franz Toussaint. There is even some doubt as to the exact contribution of the latter, for later editions bear a dedication to Ts'ao, stating that he has gone to sleep in the Garden of Seven Springs after confiding to Toussaint the care of presenting to the French public the illustrious poems which he had selected and translated. The collection consists of 170 poems by 68 poets, including Tu Fu, Wan Wei, and Li Po.

The most recent edition of *The Flute of Jade*[20] represents an experiment in typography and the technique of translation although in a different direction from Tablada's calligrams. A Danish lithographer, Asger Jorn, attempted originally to present as calligrams twenty or so poems from Toussaint's work in his own language. He then had his own Danish text retranslated into a literal English, which was in turn rendered back into Chinese. The English translation was next modified into an extremely modernized Anglo-American text, and finally this text was calligrafied into present-day Chinese characters. The printed work contains versions in Toussaint's French, in Jorn's Danish, in Anglo-American English, and in Chinese retranslation.

In 1929, a Colombian poet Guillermo Valencia, one of the most important in the Modernista movement, published a verse translation of *The Flute of Jade* under the title *Cathay,* appending an epigraph from Pierre Loüys to the effect that "poetry is a flower from the Orient which does not thrive in our hot greenhouses; . . . it is necessary always to go and search for it at the fountain-head of the sun."[21] The book appeared when various avant garde movements were at their zenith in Spanish America. Clearly indicating in his prologue that his book comprises texts which are centuries-old, Valencia suggests that many of the poetic innovations of his own time clearly derived from the Chinese. He ironically remarks that he did not translate the book "for the benefit of cubists, ultraists, dadaists or futurists, since the most ancient authors of these verses lived between the eighth and thirteenth centuries before our Era, an epoch during which, I have heard it affirmed, there was no indication of the presence of such complicated literary movements as ours; which is an extremely astonishing consideration if one realizes that the people at that time were furiously occupied with the writing of the hundred thousand ideograms."[22] Valencia concludes

his prologue by comparing the collection of poems to a famous cup of tea offered by the Chinese poet Wuan Tsi (王績) to a friend in 740. Valencia is figuratively subjecting to a second infusion the same leaves which Toussaint had originally offered to European Sinophiles and then presenting them to curious aficionados to determine whether they are able to perceive a samll taste of that liquor of divine aroma which refined for sensitive men the inscrutable complexity of the Celestial Empire.[23] Valencia took the trouble of transposing Toussaint's prose into Spanish verse, but his best poetic efforts unfortunately have a prosaic ring.

Valencia was not the only Spanish American who translated *The Flute of Jade.* A literal prose translation by Ernestina de Champourcin appeared in 1944 in México with a preface by Juan José Domenchina extolling the merits of Chinese poetry. Domenchina indicates that ever since Toussaint's original edition, *The Flute of Jade* had been one of the books most widely read and enjoyed by the public at large. Echoing the opinion of Mallarmé and others in his circle that Chinese poetry is able to attain the highest degree of pure poetry, Domenchina affirms that the "reader is able to see how the mere statement of a beautiful word which corresponds to a beautiful material concept is indeed in itself pure poetry."[24] Domenchina's preface contains other valuable insights, but the translations are literal and undistinguished. The same is true of an edition in Portuguese without preface or other commentary published in Brazil in 1942.[25]

It is hard to say which of the two French anthologies, Gautier's *The Book of Jade* or Toussaint's *The Flute of Jade,* has had the greater impact upon Spanish America. The latter volume was translated and published in three different countries, Colombia, Brazil and México, but only one of its translators, Valencia, was a poet of stature in his own right. Gautier's *Book of Jade* has never been translated in its entirety into Spanish, but, on the other hand, it provided the inspiration for one of the most influential books by a major poet of Mexico, Tablada. The latter's adaptations from the Chinese have been widely circulated, moreover, and in addition have been praised by eminent critics such as Otavio Paz. It is safe to conclude that many more Latin-Americans have been exposed to the Ts'ao-Toussaint anthology than to Tablada's adaptations and have thus been given a wider perspective of Chinese poetry than may be derived from Tablada's limited range. But the artistic superiority of the Mexican poet may have given his readers a more profound insight into the fundamental nature of Chinese

poetry.

Notes

1. A Sorbonne thesis by Marie-Josèphe Faurie entitled *Le Modernisme Hispano-Américain et ses sources françaises* correctly indicates that interest in the Orient developed in Spanish-America through French writers. The work emphasizes Japanese influences, however, treating Chinese materials in depth only in the writings of Ruben Darío. (Paris: Centre de Recherches de l'Institut d'Etudes Hispaniques, 1966).
2. "Las de l'amer repos. . ." in *Oeuvres complètes* (Tours: Gallimard, 1965), p. 36.
3. "Le Second rang du collier" in *La Revue de Paris,* II (1903), 81-83.
4. (Paris: A. Lemerre, 1867)
5. Catulle Mendès, *Le Mouvement poétique français de 1867 à 1900* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1903), p. 153.
6. Gautier, op cit, p. 83.
7. Ruben Darío, *Obras completas,* V (Madrid: Afrodisio Aguado, S. A., 1953), 709-719.
8. Faurie, *Modernisme,* pp.135-136.
9. Darío, *Obras,* V, 771-772.
10. Darío, *Obras,* I, 300-308.
11. Faurie discusses Japan as the only oriental influence on Tablada and mentions the latter's book *Li Po* merely in a footnote with the comment that the work was an example of Tablada's desire to renew himself and of his inclination toward avant garde movements. *Modernisme,* p. 123, n. 13.
12. José Juan Tablada, *Obras: Poesía* I (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1971). See the "Prologue" to *El jarro de flores,* 42. All references to Tablada's writings in this article are based upon the preceding edition and will be included hereafter directly in the text.
13. Amanda Mariscal Acosta, *La poesía de José Juan Tablada* (México: Impresora Económica, 1949), 87-95.
14. Eduardo Mitre, "Los ideogramas de José Juan Tablada," in *Revista Iberoamericana,* No. 89 (Oct.-Dic. 1974), 676.
15. José Enilio Pacheco, *Antología del modernismo: 1884-1921,* II (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1970), 30. Pacheco includes an excellent brief biography of Tablada.
16. Pacheco, *Antología,* II, 62-63. No editor or critic except Pacheco transcribes this letter entitled "Como se explica su nueva lírica José Juan Tablada" when it was published for the first time in *El Universal Ilustrado* (noviembre 13, 1919).
17. See *Chinese Lyrics from the Book of Jade* by James Whitall, a translation of *Le Livre de Jade* by Judith Gautier (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1923), 14-15.

18. Whitall, *Chinese Lyrics*, 17.
19. (Paris: H. Piazza, 1920).
20. (St. Gallen: Erker-Verlag, 1970).
21. *Obras poéticas completas* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1955), p. 253.
22. Valencia, *Obras*, 253-254.
23. Ibid, 256.
24. (México: Centauro, 1944), 8.
25. Mauro de Freitas, *A flauta de jade: Poesias chinesas* (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1942).