

## REVIEWS

GUIYOU HUANG. *Whitmanism, Imagism, and Modernism in China and America*. Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania: Susquehanna University Press; and London: Associated University Presses, 1997. 166 pp.

Guiyou Huang's book joins the growing number of studies devoted to understanding how Whitman has influenced and been shaped by cultures outside the United States. In 1934, Harold Blodgett published *Walt Whitman in England*, which examined Whitman's English followers and his influence on British culture. In 1946, Gay Wilson Allen included a chapter on "Walt Whitman and World Literature" in his *Walt Whitman Handbook*, which suggested how Whitman had become what Allen called a "world poet," whose many translations had now carried his work into non-English-speaking cultures. Allen's *Walt Whitman Abroad* (1955) demonstrated the breadth of Whitman's influence by gathering examples of varied German, French, Scandinavian, Russian, Italian, Spanish, Latino, Israeli, Japanese, and Indian responses to Whitman. Allen's work made it clear that Whitman's influence not only had become surprisingly international but also that each culture was developing distinctive ways to read and understand his work. There were a growing number of quite different Walt Whitmans emerging around the world as his work was translated into more and more languages and as his poetry became absorbed into other national traditions.

In the last couple of decades, the studies of Whitman's relationship to other cultural traditions have proliferated, with numerous essays and two important case studies—Betsy Erkkilä's *Walt Whitman among the French* (1980) and Walter Grünzweig's *Walt Whitmann: Die deutschsprachige Rezeption als interkulturelles Phänomen* (1991), published in an English version as *Constructing the German Walt Whitman* (1995). Both these studies were in part inspired by Fernando Alegria's pioneering *Walt Whitman en Hispanoamerica* (1954). Alegria, Erkkilä, and Grünzweig demonstrated the efficacy of exploring a single intercultural relationship in detail, as each tracked the complex history of Whitman's absorption into a particular foreign culture and indicated the multiple constructions of Whitman's work that resulted. In 1995, Gay Wilson Allen and I published *Walt Whitman and the World*, which gathered analyses of Whitman in Britain, Spain, Latin America, Portugal, Brazil, the German-speaking countries, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Italy, the former Yugoslavia, Poland, Russia, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Israel, India, China, and Japan. Guiyou Huang contributed the essay on "Whitman in China" for that volume, offering an illuminating overview of the history of Whitman's reception in Chinese culture. His new book expands on that essay and offers the first extended examination of the complex interaction between Whitman's work and the most populous country on earth.

In the introduction to *Whitman and the World*, I noted that “No other poet in English since Shakespeare has appealed to so many people in so many places in so many ways.” Guiyou Huang adds significantly to our understanding of just why this is so, and he points out that in China Whitman’s appeal in fact exceeds that of Shakespeare. This is because the Bard of Avon and the Camden Sage entered Chinese culture in very different ways. Shakespeare, he writes, “was originally brought into the country by missionaries as a sample of European cultural civilization,” and interest in his work “has been largely confined to academics.” Because of the circumstances of his introduction into China, Shakespeare came to represent “imposed” Western values. Whitman, on the other hand, was imported into China by the Chinese—“they picked up Whitman of their own accord.” So, argues Huang, “Whitman’s impact was broader than that of Shakespeare and many other authors: he was not only studied by academics and imitated by poets but used by politicians for propaganda purposes” (57). Shakespeare was largely a British export, Whitman a Chinese import, and that distinction has made a huge difference, as Whitman has been absorbed into Chinese literary traditions as a “naturalized” poet.

More than half of Huang’s book concerns Whitman; the other half deals with Ezra Pound and imagism (for this part of the book, Robert Kern’s recent *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem* [1996] serves as a good supplement and counterpoint to Huang’s analysis). Huang’s overall thesis is an intriguing one. He argues that it was during the first two decades of the twentieth century that “foreign ideas rushed in” to China. This was the time that Whitman’s work entered Chinese culture and in some ways initiated Chinese modernism. It was also the time that Chinese culture for the first time began to have a major impact on American and British poetry, especially through Ezra Pound, Ernest Fenollosa, and imagism. “The cultural and literary exchange between China and America that took place in the first decades of the twentieth century was indeed vital to the birth of modernism in both countries” (15), Huang notes, and he sets up a fascinating dynamic of mutual poetic exchange between the United States and China: while Pound was importing Chinese poetry, experimenting with ideogrammic methods, and translating Confucian thought, all in the service of formulating imagism and beginning a modernist revolution in American and British poetry, Chinese poets were importing Whitman’s work and using it to formulate an analogous revolution in China, discovering in Whitman a radical guide for breaking out of tired and worn traditions and developing a new vernacular poetry.

Poets in both China and America, then, were looking elsewhere for traditions that could energize their own enervated pasts, and the pasts that seemed enervated to each culture proved energizing to the other. So, while Pound found Whitman problematic—a “pig-headed father,” as he called him—Chinese poets like Guo Moruo and Ai Qing found him fresh and liberating. Meanwhile, Pound’s own absorption into Chinese culture would be slow, since—despite his admiration for things Chinese, his translations of numerous Chinese texts, and his Chinese-inflected *Cathay* poems and China cantos—his politics were anathema to China’s progressive political program. Pound the fascist brought China to America; Whitman the democrat brought America to China. In the revolutionary times of early twentieth-century China, Pound was

construed as the reactionary, and Whitman was “naturally read with political enthusiasm as well as literary interest” (16) as the radical poet of the common people. The results of this odd double foreign exchange were momentous: “The birth of imagism in America and the birth of vernacular Chinese poetry are indisputably the products of [this] active cross-cultural interaction” (132). Huang’s introduction sets up this dynamic cross-cultural interplay, then his first three chapters explore the Whitman-aspect of the intercultural exchange, while the next three chapters investigate the Pound/imagism aspect, concluding with an overview of Pound’s attenuated influence on Chinese poetry. The book ends with a brief homage to Ai Qing, who died in 1996 just before Huang was scheduled to meet him in Beijing.

As Whitman’s poetry moves from English into other languages, many alterations obviously occur. Every translation is inevitably an interpretation, and Whitman in other languages is never the same poet he is in the original English. The distance is all the greater when the two languages involved are as unrelated as Chinese and English. So, when Huang explains the Chinese struggle between “classical language (*wenyan*)” and “the vernacular (*baihua*),” and suggests how “the Chinese utilized [Whitman] to create vernacular language and democracy” (34), the discussion remains quite general and abstract, since it is not possible to demonstrate in detail how these effects of language manifested themselves in the poetry. Huang’s book is written for English readers, and what little Chinese poetry is quoted is offered only in English translation, so readers finally can only guess at the actual impact—at the level of diction, line, rhythm—that Whitman’s style and language had on his Chinese admirers. When Huang tells us, for example, that “the term ‘working people,’ as used in ‘Song of Myself,’ is nearly identical with a predominant political term in China, the ‘proletariat,’ and with some of the terms Mao used in his speeches and writing” (62), we are left guessing at just how striking the similarities could be, especially since Whitman in fact uses the term “working people” only once in “Song of Myself” (and, after 1855, drops the passage containing the term). Robert Frost’s observation that poetry is what gets lost in translation is particularly applicable in a study that crosses the kinds of linguistic barriers this one does.

Still, we learn many important things in Huang’s book about the way Whitman has been a presence in Chinese art and politics. One of the most intriguing relationships that Huang traces is that between Whitman and Mao Zedong. The great Chinese leader was also a poet, and in Chapter 2 Huang suggests a direct link between Mao and Whitman: “Whitman’s aficionados have included the supreme leader of modern China, Mao Zedong” (55). As we progress through the chapter, though, the link weakens into a set of indirect associations: Mao was a friend and admirer of Lu Xun, who in turn was fascinated by Whitman and in 1928 helped get a Japanese essay about *Leaves of Grass* translated into Chinese: “Lu serves as a connector between Mao and Whitman” (58). Similarly, Tian Han, who wrote an influential essay on Whitman in the journal *Young China* in 1919, became friends in 1920 with Guo Muruo, whose own poetry was influenced by an idiosyncratic mix of Whitman, Shelley, and Heine, and who “became China’s leading literary figure after Lu’s death in 1936” (68). Guo also “was Mao’s longtime friend,” and thus, when Mao writes

in favor of vernacular poetry, Huang assumes that the Chinese leader's connections to Lu and Guo assure that "Mao's commentary on vernacular poetry . . . confirmed Whitman's use of free verse" (69). It's all part of the convolutions and surprising interweavings of Chinese political and literary culture: some of the admiration for Whitman in China simply results from Mao's approval of two of Whitman's Chinese admirers. Finally, Huang admits that Mao's contribution to "Whitman's warm reception in China" came only "unconsciously and indirectly" (62), and we are left wondering if Mao ever even heard of Whitman. But it is clear that Lu and Guo, major literary figures who were key supporters of Whitman, "had close political, ideological, and literary ties with Mao" (71), and, in Chinese culture, such ties are significant enough, even vital—part of the skein of "visible and invisible ties" that "underlie Whitman's reception in China" (69).

Huang argues that "the Chinese reception and appropriation of Whitman have always been dominated by contemporary governmental politics," and that only in the past two decades has Whitman begun to become "part of an academic discourse" in China, instead of solely a "political message" (91). As late as 1978, Whitman's poetry was often read in purely political terms in China, as in the postscript to Chu Tunan's translation of Whitman's work: "Today, Whitman's poetry retains a degree of positive significance against imperialism, hegemonism, racial oppression, and the decaying and declining bourgeois culture; it is also an encouraging force for the masses who strive for national liberation and social progress" (81). According to Huang, it was not until Zhao Luorui's translation of the complete *Leaves of Grass* appeared in 1987 that a "more objective and scholarly" evaluation, one that "resists reducing the poetry to political issues," was widely available in China (82). And Huang emphasizes the importance in China of Maurice Mendelson's Russian study of Whitman, which was translated into Chinese in 1958 (Mendelson's book did not appear in an English translation until 1976). Mendelson's study was influential in guiding Chinese readers to hear Whitman's work as Marxist and also as internationalist, very much part of a worldwide revolutionary movement. Such a perspective explains the Russian and Chinese admiration for poems like Whitman's "O Star of France," poems that have elicited relatively little commentary in the United States. So, while some Chinese commentators took Whitman to task for his failure to embrace socialism and to reject capitalism, most Chinese readers have reacted positively to Whitman's progressive democratic ideas.

In this study, Huang is not centrally interested in Whitman's own attitudes toward China, a subject that is only briefly addressed as a kind of afterthought in Chapter 2, where we are told in very general terms that Whitman respected China and was interested in it. At times, Huang tries too hard to inscribe Whitman into Chinese traditions, as when he suggests Whitman can be understood as part of the *kuangren* tradition, the Chinese worship of the madman, a tradition that includes Li Po, much of whose poetry was written under the influence of alcohol. Here, Huang leans heavily on Whitman's claim that he wrote *Franklin Evans* while drunk to make an unconvincing argument that Whitman's inspiration was similar to Li Po's. And, while Huang acknowledges that "Whitman was not mentally ill when he wrote and revised *Leaves of Grass*," in his effort to

tie him to the *kuangren*, he insists that the poet nonetheless “did rid himself of social attributes, becoming completely transcendent” [!](78). Despite such occasional lapses, and despite some problems with organization and clarity, Huang’s book offers valuable material on Whitman’s influence in China that is available nowhere else. It is a welcome contribution to our evolving understanding of Whitman’s international impact.

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