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Epiphany in Echoland: Cross-Cultural Intertextuality in Yang Mu's Poetry and Poetics

Distinguished from simply rendering an allusion or a loan image in a different language, "cross-cultural intertextuality" can be defined not only as a term describing a work's relation to particular prior texts from another country, but also as a designation of its active participation in the discursive space of world culture.[1] Such active presence of an intertext iterates the new concept of world literature as "a mode of circulation" and emphasizes that "a work only has an *effective* life as world literature, whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture" (Damrosch 4-5). The strategic use of poetic form, internal structure, imagery and meaning from a foreign text constitutes in a work an intertextual space — an echoland where dialogues across cultures take place. Yet unlike the echo chamber of postmodern textual free-play, the interactions among texts of various sources may result in an epiphany close to the self-conscious expression of the modernist kind.[2]

1 The definition here is adapted from Culler's notion of intertextuality (103).

2 The tide of this paper, "Epiphany in Echoland," harks back to Hartman's remark on Derrida's *Glas*, "epiphony in echoland" (Hartman 33-66). "Epiphony in Echoland" is the tide of Hartman's second chapter. For a discussion of "the echo chamber," see Barthes 74.

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For more than four decades, Yang Mu, a most prolific Taiwanese poet, has been a focus of critical attention.[3] His poetry and poetics are widely acclaimed to exemplify the confluence of Chinese and foreign literary traditions. "Bicultural" is the keyword in Stephen Owen's appraisal of Yang Mu's poetry:

> his work is distinctive in moving easily between the Chinese and western traditions while exoticizing neither. He is a poet who works with the materials [which] ... include a sense of poetic and cultural history that transcends the cultural division of the "West" and China...Yang Mu offers the largest hope for the future [of Chinese poetry] ... because he draws two disparate histories together. (Owen 40)

Michelle Yeh further elaborates Owen's notion of biculturalism and considers that Yang Mu's "equal erudition in Chinese and Western classics gives him a perspective from which to reflect on the two cultures" (Yeh xxv). Hsu Hui-chih relates Yang Mu's biculturalism to the local context of Taiwan and describes Yang Mu's writings as "cultural hybrid" that unites "all three sources of influence [Han Chinese, native Taiwanese and the West]." Besides indicating confluence of traditions, "biculturalism" and "hybridity" also point to a cross-cultural dialogue between intertexts. This paper will examine how Yang Mu has assimilated foreign texts in his poetry and poetics. Special attention will be paid to the ways cross-cultural intertextuality serves to spell out the poet's insight into the global and local issues in the last decade. The

3 Yang Mu (born 1940) has published more than twelve books of poetry since his teens and is a most important Chinese poet now writing. As professor of comparative literature, he has taught in the US, Europe, Taiwan and Hong Kong. He received the National Award for Literature and Arts in 2000. English translations of his poems include: Joseph R. Allen, *Forbidden Games and Video Poems: Tbe Poetry of Yang Mu and Lo Ching* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1993), and Lawrence R. Smith and Michelle Yeh, *No Trace of the Gardener. Poems of Yang Mu* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1998). German and French translations are *Patt beim go: Gedichte chinesisch-deutscb.* Aus dem Chinesischen von Susanne Hornfeck und Wang Jue (Munchen: Al Verlag, 2002) and *Quelqu'un m'interroge apropos de la verite et de la justice.* Traduits de Chinois (Taiwan) par Angel Pino et Isabelle Rabut (Paris: You Feng, 2004).

poems selected for analysis include "The Yellow Bird" (1991), "The Lost Ring - for Chechnya" (2000), and "Temporality Proposition" (1993).[4]

"The Yellow Bird"

"The Yellow Bird" exhibits a blending of two distinct literary referents from the Chinese and English traditions. The story of the "yellow bird" alludes to a famous classical Chinese poem, "A Song of the Yellow Bird in the Field," by Ts'ao Chih. The poem's overall structural design and narrative points-of-view are borrowed from Percy Bysshe Shelley's well-known poem "Ozymandias."

Apparently, "The Yellow Bird" is a retelling of Ts'ao Chih's fable about a youth saving a yellow bird from a net:

> Windy it is up on tall trees
> Waves roar in the sea
> When the sharp sword is not in hand
> There is no point making numerous friends
>
> There are no birds to be met
> But a sparrow hawk that plunged into a net
> Those who trap the bird are gay
> A youth feels sad, witnessing the bird's fate
>
> Wielding his sword, he cuts the net
> The yellow bird is set free to fly
> Flying, and having flown up to reach the sky
> It swoops down to show the youth its thankfulness[5]

Annotators have related the poem to a historical incident. In 220 AD when Ts'ao Pi succeeded to the throne as Emperor Wen of Wei, he plotted to eliminate the friends of his brother, Ts'ao o Chih, in order to weaken his power. Ting I was one of Ts'ao Chih's friends who was well aware of his own perilous position. He went to seek help from a military leader, Shang. By

4 The three poems were collected in *Wan-cheng teju-yen [The Complete Allegory],*, 132-35, *She-shih [intervention],* 114-29, and *Shih-kuang ming-ti [Temporality Proposition],* 46-48 respectively.

5 Unless stated otherwise, the translations from Chinese are mine.

writing "A Song of the Yellow Bird in the Field," Ts'ao Chih tried to appeal to Shang's kindness and goodwill, hoping that Shang might do for Ting I what the youth did for the yellow bird. Nevertheless, Ting I was executed.

At the level of the plot, Yang Mu's poem is a swirl from its precursor's The initial situation is the same, but a similar benevolent bird-saving act yields very different results:

> That was ancient times
> Someone saw an avenging yellow bird
> In a net struggling
> Up there on a tall tree, the bleak wind blew
> In the distant land of future, the waves leapt
> He jumped off of his horse, wielded his sword and cut the cords
> The yellow bird flew into a sky of emptiness, the youth
> Was shocked and shaken, in an instant, his hair all whitened
> His blood bleached pale, his attire broken
> Into pieces, his bow dropped
> His arrows scattered, the color of the flag changed
> But still in his right hand, a sword. Yes, a sword
> Dustless, glamorous (Yang 1991,134-35)

The bird in this modern incarnation, once freed, plunges into an abyss of nothingness. As for the youth, his hair immediately turned gray after the decisive act. The present version gives up the monolithic narration of benevolence and justice in its classical source and the fable now lacks a moral. In addition to making a parodic reference to a classical Chinese text, "The Yellow Bird" adopts a double narration from Shelley's "Ozymandias," in which a speaker reports: "I met a traveler from an antique land / Who said ...." Shelley's tale is about the traveler's description of the ruined statue of an Egyptian pharaoh, Ozymandias. The pharaoh's majestic look is fashioned by the sculptor's hands and his steadfast voice carved in the epitaph on the pedestal: "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:/ Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair." Here, readers hear an arrogant mortal's declaration of his own worth in defiance of all rival gods. What the traveler sees, however, are merely the inscriptions of Ozymandias temporarily sustained by plastic arts and poetry — the diminishing residues of human achievements in the course of time. The toppled statue blows away like chaff. The multi-layered narration through the voices of Ozymandias, the traveler and the narrator wraps up pharaoh's proclamation in a pathetic self-mockery. Yet the gist of Sheila's poem is much more than mourning over human frailty. Intertextual references

to the Biblesuch as a tale in 1 Samuael 5 and the Old Testament book of the Daniel opens up other religious and political dimensions for interpretation. As Peter Sorensen suggests, the former allusion reminds readers that the Ark of God, not time, is the cause for Dagon's pitiful end and the latter points to "the ancestral memory of Israel's dramatic and miraculous deliverance from Egypt."[6] In addition, the political analogy to George III's reign is obvious. Literary conceit of England's being Israel and George III's bad leadership is compared to the rule of the ancient tyrant Ozymandias.

Presenting similar political concerns, Yang Mu's "The Yellow Bird," coated in Shelley's poetic form, highlights the layers of mediation and deepens the Romantic skepticism on the meaning and causality of events. It is a report about someone bringing back from a knight "a story of yore / about the yellow bird." Yet, the portrayal of the bird as "an avenging yellow bird" suggests an embedded story that offers a cause for revenge in the bird's past, but this is left unexplained.

In content, while the Chinese prior text calls for compassion, the English one preaches against tyranny. Yang Mu sees the two universal "truths" available to him in the intertexts and utilizes them in "The Yellow Bird." And the outcomes of this dialogic interaction vividly reflect the contemporary concerns. Since 1989, the old world has been shaken. People witnessed historical forces at work in events such as the June-fourth Incident in the People's Republic of China, the fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany, the disintegration of the Soviet bloc and the reshaping of Eastern Europe. The myth of invincible rule is demystified while meanings about the liberating changes have yet to be defined. Instead of swooping down to thank its benefactor, the yellow bird in Yang Mu's poem plunges into nothingness. Like a new world order in the making, the yellow bird now liberated in the post-1989 period seems to feel lost. The poem ends as it begins: "Someone from the corn and millet fields returned / and told me a shocking event." This refrain implies a continuous dissemination of a tale that denies narrative closure. Its future is open. Yang Mu deploys the two different cultural models and let them enter into a semantic relation to formulate a new critical stance on international events.

6 For a discussion of "Ozymandias" as a sonnet having prophetic implications for England or even America as the "New Israel," see Sorensen 76.

"The Lost Ring — for Chechnya"

Intertextuality is a two-way street. An allusion in a text makes the discovery of a foreign culture an occasion for rethinking one's own. "The Lost Ring— for Chechnya," took its origin from a news item in the American press. The creative process involved both translational and transnational transfers, in which the prominent features in the communicative situations are noteworthy. In 2000, Taiwan was ready to launch her second presidential election.[7] Shortly before the March election, the state council in Beijing released a controversial White Paper on PRC's Taiwan policy. Beijing proposed a rough "deadline" for re-unification and threatened to take drastic measures including military force to achieve it if Taiwan refused to enter political negotiations. Despite Beijing's war threats, Taiwanese people saw themselves a sovereign country electing their own president. Obviously, Taiwan's twenty million people were in a state of political uncertainty.

On 2 March 2000, a fortnight before the presidential election in Taiwan and three weeks before that in Russia, "The Lost Ring— for Chechnya" came out in *China Times* in Taiwan, as a most timely address to the political plight. The poem is dedicated to Chechnya, which was then engaged in the second Chechen war. Mr. Putin's decision was to seize all of Chechnya, the accomplishment of which would surely elevate his popularity and secure for him the Russian presidency in the March election. The subject matter of the poem comes from an oral testimony of a Chechen woman called Hedi, who had a narrow escape from death in Grozny:

> The Russian soldiers went up to loot their belongings. One of them approached the woman [Hedi] pretending to be dead and spotted a ring on her hand. He tried to take it off her finger but failed. At the moment he was about to sever the finger with his knife, the ring came off. He and the other soldiers dumped the woman with other corpses on some mattresses in a rubbish heap and attempted to set them on fire. However, the mattresses were damp because of

7 Among the three most promising candidates, two had diverged from the unification agenda. Under the shadow of the ruling KMT "state-to-state" theory, Lien Chen inevitably needed to negotiate with the separatist scheming. The pro-independence candidate of the Democratic Progressive Party, Chen Shui-bian, represented the separatist claims of the opposition party; while only James Soong Chu-yu declared a pro-unification stand.

> the rain and the fire did not catch on, so the soldiers hastily hurried off. (Yang 2001, 128-29).

Hedi gave her account of the event to the Human Rights Watch in a hospital in the Republic of Inguhetia. This report was then disseminated to the Western correspondences. Hedi's story appeared in Michael R. Gordon's article in *The New York Times* on 6 February 2000. The news arrested Yang Mu, who happened to be in New York. Inspired by the event, the poet "translated" it into a Chinese poem.

By bringing Chechnya to the attention of Taiwanese readers and the Chinese communities worldwide, the local anxiety is thrown into the full light of a global concern for ethnic independence. Through a smooth synthesizing of the "foreign" news by means of the "Chinese" language and the "Chinese" literary form, the poet creates an illuminating analogy to the Taiwan question. The prologue of the poem is a letter, entitled "A Letter Home," which reminds readers of two famous lines from a classical Chinese war poem by Tu Fu: "With flames of battie raging for three months / A letter home is worth a treasure."[8] Following the letter is a narrative poem of thirty-two stanzas that summarizes the news item from *The New York Times?*

"The Lost Ring" depicts how an innocent, peace-loving youth has turned into a resolute soldier because of the two Chechen wars for independence and the pathetic death of his sister, Hedi Ivana. The speaker in the poem assumes the role of a brother to the Chechen victim. Instead of having a central place in the poem, as Hedi did in the news report, this Hedi Ivana is kept off-stage but she occupies the thoughts of her brother who is the centre of action. Contrary to conventional initiation literature that sanctions the conformity to adult values and national narratives, there is no glorification of this youth's initiation into soldierhood. In lieu of it, a deep sense of regret and helplessness

8 "A letter home" in Chinese can be a letter from or to home. The two lines are from Tu Fu's poem, "Chun wang" [The Prospects of Spring]. An alternative translation of "three months" is "the third month" or "March." This time reference is applicable to both the second Chechen war, which lasted for more than three months, and the Taiwan situation where the presidential campaign was in progress under military threats from an offshore power. These political and military conflicts would elicit their effects in March when presidential elections in both Taiwan and Russia would be conducted.

9 For the English translation of the poem, see "The Lost Ring — for Chechnya," trans. Lisa Wong, *Renditions* 61 (Spring 2004): 71-81.

prevails. Yang Mu constructs the civilian "visions of community and versions of historic memory" through the youth and gives "narrative form to the minority position" that the Chechens occupy.[10]

That Yang Mu chose to speak to his native country from the Chechen position in March 2000 is telling. We saw how the fall of Grozny has promoted Putin's prospects to the Russian presidency in spring. In a voice of resistance, the youth prays in the concluding stanzas of the poem that Chechnya will rise again:

> H. D., I know the ring. O Hedi
> Ivana - even if I were drowned in deadly corrosive waters Sans
> yeux, my intuition would recognize and
> Distinguish it, Hedi Ivana
>
> H. D., even if I were locked in a burning
> Crucible, sans oreilles, my concentration
> Would hear our suffering nation cry to me for help and
> Respond to it, H. D. Hedi Ivana
>
> H. D., even if they let their troops
> Howl and trample our nation to doomsday
> Grozny, sans bouche, my throat would call up
> Independence, the spring prophecy of rebirth (Yang 2001, 125-26)

Yang Mu envelops this Chechen message in a letter home and concludes it with a note of affectionate advice, "Roads are slippery on rainy days. Be cautious." The poet, together with the Taiwanese people, was in anxious anticipation of the prospects that this spring election would bring to Taiwan. Visible records of intertextuality are present in this poem, yet a more significant point for discussion is the inter-contextuality. By mixing different discourses on war such as news items and poems, the poet allows the narratives of independence to be doubled or tripled by real and fictional speakers from different cultures. From *The New York Times* to *China Times*, "The Lost Ring — for Chechnya" has come to a full circle for reviewing transnational issues of the *Times* and of our time.

10 Yang Mu's text works like the discursive doubleness deployed by hybrid agencies as conceived by Homi Bhabha. See Homi Bhabha, "Culture's In-Between," in Hall and de Guy 58.

"Temporality Proposition"

Apart from bridging the global and local concerns in social and political dimensions, Yang Mu has employed cross-cultural intertexts to develop a comparative poetics for modern Chinese poetry. Marked by a series of three important publications, "Letters to Keats" (1966), *The Completion of a Poem* (1989) and *The Skeptic: Notes on Poetic Discrepancies (*1993), Yang Mu's unyielding pursuit in theorizing poetry is realized in a smooth assimilation of both the traditional and the modern of the Chinese and the West.

"Letters to Keats," whose title already indicates a professed affinity to the English romantic poets, was published in his creative prosework, *First Essays of Yeh Shan*. In fifteen letters addressed to John Keats, the young poet, known by his early penname Yeh Shan, confided his aspiration and frustration as an apprentice exploring a poetic career. Thirty years later, the well-established poet, Yang Mu, published *The Completion of a Poem*, which is considered a handbook to writing modern Chinese poetry. This book is subtitled, "Letters to Young Poets," modeled after three literary precursors of different cultures: Chu Kuang-chien's *Twelve Letters to the Youth*, Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, and Stephen Spender's *The Making of a Poem*. In spirit, Yang Mu's poetics is close to Goethe's ideas in his autobiography, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, which was mentioned in both *First Essays of Yeh Shan* and *The Completion of a Poem*. The third book, *The Skeptic: Notes on Poetical Discrepancies*, adopts a more playful approach to compare different conceptions of signification between the East and the West. Without being confined to poetry studies, the notes elicit responses to writings of various discursive modes from multi-cultural sources.

To show Yang Mu's comparative poetics in practice, "Temporality Proposition" is an exemplary illustration. As its tide implies, this poem is a philosophical and poetic discourse on Time. The discussion begins with a speaker pondering over what he was, is, and will be in a precarious world to which he is bound. From the signs of the zodiac to the Chinese myth of the moon, the poet draws on nature as well as the living world of plants, fish, and humans for propositions about Time. Literary images invoked by the speaker's contemplation are all situated in an indeterminate process, some trying to keep their balance, some are about to retreat while others are starting a journey, following or looking for a route on their way. Before a dewdrop evaporates at sunrise, before clouds gather and disperse in no time, and before mackerels

dive off unnoticed in an instant, the ephemeral world is presented in their struggling moments of existence.

Time is manifested in a paradox of mutability and continuity. Collectively, mortals enact their existence spatially in groups, and temporally in the action's repeatability. In the Chinese myth, up on the moon Wu Kang's Sisyphean task of chopping down the laurel and the mythical tree's recovery from its Promethean wounds inscribe both the man and the tree in a never-ending drama. "Sailing to Byzantium" is a legendary itinerary for every artist after Yeats. An individual artist may, one day, leave his job behind, but the work never ends. It is only taken up by the next in line. In Yang Mu's poem, Wu Kang passes its axe to the persona, "I," just as "I" will keep "you" company for a while on "your" way to Byzantium. The tension between the futility of labour and the will to transcend limitations bespeaks the timeless paradox of the living world. In this poem, activities are caught in a process, and crystallized in the very instant just before termination or suspension. To the poet, time is best captured in this "not yet but is about to" that borders on the past and the future.

Yang Mu's artistic design is to juxtapose intertexts from literary representations of time in different cultures. Of all the poems Yang Mu has published to date, "Temporality Proposition" is an exceptional one with annotations written in a mixture of classical and vernacular Chinese, and English as well as German. Apparently, his aim is to highlight the use of cross-cultural intertextuality. The last stanza shows a dramatic encounter of the prior texts in an echoland. -

> In the aging days, tenderly I continue
> Playing the zither, to see you off sailing to Byzantium
> At where it is about to end and not yet, suspended — silence
> Über alien Gipfeln ist Ruh (Yang 1997, 48)

The four lines reach a crescendo of intertextual symphony within a buried allusion to Li Po's famous poem of farewell, "To Wang Lun."

> Li Po was about to leave in a boat
> Suddenly he heard someone singing from the shore
> Peach Blossom Lake is a thousand feet deep
> But deeper does Wang Lun's affectionate farewell touch me

Wang Lun's song of farewell to the Tang poet is here replaced by the music from a zither, but the role of the persona is reversed — it is the "I" who produces the music and sees "you" off on a voyage. To those who are about to part, time is but a mixing of memory with desire, of the past with the future in the present. In spatial metaphors, a journey of quest and discovery is juxtaposed with that of recollection and nostalgia. Hence, Yeats horizontal seafaring to Byzantium is followed by Goethe's vertical trips to his old dwelling on the hilltop where he carved and re-carved his famous "Wanderer's Night-song" on the wooden wall three times. In temporal terms, the persona, as an accomplished poetic master, is now playing some music to keep "you," an apprentice artist, company when "you" sets sail to Byzantium. The artist-mentor has been playing the zither for sometime and will continue to do so in the near future, but there is no promise that the music will go on forever. However sweet the music is, there will be a time that it comes to a halt and "you" has to carry on the Byzantium quest alone. The note of farewell planted in the Chinese allusion creates a new sensation with old feelings. Added to it is the reminder of one's inevitable exit from time. With a variety of intertexts, the last stanza draws together different dimensions of time that are romantically sublimated in a spatial image of the peak and a temporal trope of silence. The proposition breaks off at a lofty place where one looks up to somewhere beyond, at a moment of silence when the music, now unheard, becomes sweeter than ever.

What Yang Mu demonstrates in "Temporality Proposition" is a cross-cultural dialogue of discursive temporalities. An individual voice that raises the issues of Time has invoked voices of poetic wisdom from Chinese, Irish and German literatures to converse in a philosophical discourse. Despite its collage of intertexts, the poem is not rendered as a postmodern textual free-play. The exquisitely wrought poetic form is a conscious attempt to evoke a mental state for the contemplation about Time. The repetition of what has already been said in world literature is structured in a way to imply a universal continuity. Not only does the poem enact the modernist conviction of transcendence through art, it also demonstrates Yang Mu's cosmopolitan outlook in poetics.

Conclusion

Through intercontinental travels and the traffic on the electronic highway, cross-cultural communications in the twenty-first century are faster and easier than ever. Only with an adequate understanding of the intertextual encounters

in the echoland can the parameters of world literature be conceivable today. Specific literary referents from different cultures and discursive modes offer multiple perspectives to an event that happened in a corner of the world. Writers can position the local in the global or vice versa to gain greater insights into the current state of affairs. Comparing the intertexts, readers can be enlightened by the meanings derived from the variations on a single theme. By his artistic and strategic interweaving of well-known texts from diverse sources, Yang Mu succeeds in addressing issues of regional or universal interest from a transnational perspective. The re-vision of humanity has been the concern of literature worldwide, and in the new century it can be achieved through an epiphany that emerges from an echoland of world literature.

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