"Misunderstanding" Western Modernism: The Menglong Movement in Post-Mao China

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“Misunderstanding”
Western Modernism:
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Ezra Pound’s “discovery” of the Chinese ideogram, thought to have resulted from a “misunderstanding” of Chinese language and culture, is a familiar story in the West. What has not been widely known, however, is the twin story of the reception of Pound’s modernist poetics in post-Mao China and the way in which it has paradoxically affected the rise and fall of menglong poetry. This study is devoted to an examination of a recent “misunderstanding” of Poundian modernist poetics by Chinese poets and critics that would have surprised both Pound and Ernest Fenollosa. I will defend what might at first seem a surprising claim: that Chinese literary production of the 1980s—and particularly the critical debate on menglong poetry—is based on and conditioned by a “misunderstanding” of Western modernism.

I

The word menglong in Chinese means “dim,” “hazy,” “shady,” “misty,” and “opaque.” It was used by the menglong poets, who wrote their controversial works between 1978 and 1983, to suggest a kind of poetic quality detached from clear-cut political messages. The word was also used by the critics of menglong poetry to describe its “obscure” and “incomprehensible” style, which, according to them, was “unfaithful to socialist realism.” In employing these definitions, both menglong’s advocates and its critics built upon ideas—often vague and misleading—about modern Western poetry. For its detractors, menglong poetry seemed unfamiliar, strange, incomprehensible, and hence decadent, bourgeois, and “Western modernist.” The advocates of menglong poetry, however, read it as different, exciting, rebellious, and hence avant-garde, revolutionary, and innovative. As we shall see, both menglong’s advocates and its detractors “misunderstood” Western modernism in fundamental ways. Here, then, is a particularly telling example of an ambivalent “misunderstanding” across cultures, one that,
taking our cue from Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence*, we might call a "contrary misprision."

At the beginning of the century the Chinese ideogram was "imported" into the West by Pound on the claim that it would, because it was "Chinese" and thus foreign, fill a lack in Western poetics. Sixty years later those very same poetics, comprised at least partly of Chinese materials, were adopted in China by the defenders of *menglong* poetry precisely because they were Western and not Chinese, and therefore would lead to a kind of "purer" poetry that would make up for what was lacking in Chinese literature! Just as Pound's "importation" of what was "Chinese" into Western culture had profound ramifications for Western literature, so the importation of Western modernist poetics into post-Mao China dramatically transformed Chinese literary practice.

Initially the advocates of *menglong* poetry were widely understood to be calling for a replacement of the prevailing Chinese poetics—which were dominated by ideological and political content—with the poetics of Western modernism. But this claim seems premised on at least two kinds of "misunderstanding" in the Chinese reception of *menglong* poetry—first, of *menglong* poems themselves and, second, of Western modernism. Although frequently accused of following Western modernist poetics, the *menglong* movement was in fact from its beginning a direct outgrowth of the ideological conditions of post-Mao China. Reacting against the earlier dominant mode of "hymnal poetry" that seemed to exist only to praise Mao and the Party, *menglong* poets gave expression to, among other things, disappointment with the Party's lost idealism, its corruption, and the bureaucracy. In fact, some of the early *menglong* poems were so "realistically" oriented that they still sang "hymns" to the late Premier Zhou Enlai, who was more popular than other top Party leaders and hence represented, for these poets at that time, a "proletarian" and "revolutionary" ideal. Thus the social content of some of the early *menglong* poems still belonged to the "critical realist" tradition that dominated Chinese literary production since the May Fourth Movement of 1915-25. Jiang He’s "Funeral" (*Zangbi*), for instance, depicted political events such as the April Fifth Tiananmen Incident of 1976, in which Chinese people publicly mourned Zhou Enlai's death to protest against Cultural Revolutionary leaders. In retrospect, *menglong* poetry can be seen as less "critical realist" than originally supposed since its anti-Maoist political content amounted to a timely celebration of Deng Xiaoping immediately after his rise to power.

Dissatisfied with the literary tradition that had prevailed since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, *menglong* poets called for a "truth-telling" literature that moved beyond a glossing of the Maoist ideology. In so doing, they only occasionally appealed to the West as a source of inspiration. The so-called "Western modernist influence" was not historically relevant to *menglong*'s emergence nor to its subsequent development. Growing up in an intellectual desert during the Cultural Revolution, when schools and libraries were closed,
the majority of menglong poets had little opportunity to read about Western modernist literature. Before the Cultural Revolution, publications on foreign literatures in the 1950s and 1960s were for the most part limited to works from the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Third World countries, with only occasional selections from Western texts, and few of these postdated the period of “critical realism.” Yuan Kejia’s Collected Works of Foreign Modernism, the only book of its kind, was not published until 1981. Indeed, the early Chinese reception of Western modernism, represented in Yuan’s endeavor, was strikingly conditioned by the ideological and political considerations still prevailing in early post-Cultural Revolutionary China. Yuan used simply the orthodox Marxist theory of historical development to explain Western modernist phenomena as end products of “a decadent bourgeois society that declined into a monopolistic capitalism in the 1920s.” Western modernism was thus characterized by Yuan as a literature of alienation within capitalist societies—alienation of man from other men, from society, from Nature, and from his own “self.” One of the prominent features of Western modernist works, according to Yuan, is its focus on “a disillusioned self,” “the pathos of a lost self and the frustration of an unsuccessful search for such self.” If Yuan’s ideologically biased introduction can be excused for representing merely the official view of Western modernism, unofficial endeavors to introduce and translate foreign works undertaken by underground journals such as Today were equally limited to an unlikely mixture of Russian symbolism, Crocean aesthetics, and German “Ruin Literature.” Yet despite the lack of any direct contact with Western modernism, critics still accused menglong poets of “forgetting their own ancestors in classical Chinese tradition” in order to import Western modernist ideology.

The evidence suggests that the charge of Western influence is, however, far from the mark. From its beginnings, menglong poets evoked the classical Chinese tradition as a source of artistic innovation. In their manifesto, menglong poets declared their “New Poetry” as neither “symbolist,” “surrealist,” “mystic,” nor “impressionist”; rather, they asserted, it embodies “a national spirit, the voice and pulse of the thinking generation, a reaction to the poetic disease of the past two decades.” In order to drive home the point that menglong poetry was not influenced by “Western monsters,” the manifesto spelled out ways of “reviving the rich visual-imagist tradition of Chinese poetry,” which, it was admitted almost as an aside, “may coincide with contemporary Western poetics. But it is certainly not worshipping and fawning upon things foreign.” Where the influence of Western modernism could be found, it was said to aim at a deeper understanding of “the true value of our own artistic tradition.” The movement defended itself in its manifesto against the imputation of Western influence, which was, of course, simply a way of stigmatizing it as oppositional. Despite these claims, however, critics chose deliberately to “misunderstand” menglong poets as following a “decadent” Western modernism dominated by nothing but “sex” and “money.” What

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resulted was a series of critical and even ideological debates on whether or not menglong poetry was acceptable to the tradition of Marxist aesthetics and its demand for "socialist realism." For some time, then, menglong poets were fiercely criticized for imitating Western modernism, for having alienated themselves from the popular and revolutionary taste of the Chinese audience, and finally for writing elitist poems that few could comprehend.

But the ironies of "misunderstanding" menglong poetry go deeper. Both menglong poets and their critics "misunderstood" Western modernist aesthetics even while evoking it. Both claimed that Western modernism was a "self-expressive" movement, a term that Western scholars would more easily associate with the poetic conventions of romanticism that Pound and his Western contemporaries had sought to displace by importing, among other things, the "Chinese ideogram." In fact, the entire debate on menglong poetry pivoted upon this central issue: should the New Poetry—a term used both by critics and defenders of menglong to suggest an ideal future trend in the development of contemporary Chinese poetry—be mostly an expression of the self, as the menglong poems allegedly were? Or should it be an expression of revolutionary, socialist idealism with the interests of the "people" and the Party at heart? Related to this issue was the recurrent concern of whether the New Poetry should imitate Western modernism or whether it should follow three indigenous Chinese poetic traditions—the classical, the folkloric, and that of the May Fourth Movement.

Behind these literary issues lie, of course, the ever-present ideological concerns that have dominated Chinese poetics for the last several decades. Chief among them are questions about literature's function in promoting China's "four modernizations"—in industry, agriculture, technology and science, and national defense—which take the West for their models. The question of how far the Chinese should go to adopt Western models in all spheres of life was therefore naturally raised. If it is necessary to import Western technology for economic modernization, should China also adopt Western philosophical and aesthetic models seen as outgrowths of a "decadent" capitalist society? Since in the Maoist reversion of Marxist orthodoxy, literature and art were considered a crucial part of a socialist superstructure that in the last instance determined the nature of an economic base, many wondered if the "bourgeois ideology of modernism" would not be detrimental to modernization in socialist China. Such concerns, needless to say, were based on various "misunderstandings" of Western modernism and its ideology—one of which was the Chinese readers' neglect of the historical fact that the modernism of T.S. Eliot and Pound, which had dominated the first decades of the twentieth century, was by the 1970s becoming passé. When the Chinese writers and readers looked to the West for an aesthetic model for cultural, political, and economic reform in the 1980s, they picked up on a modernism that had long been superseded.

It is no wonder, then, that the Chinese "misunderstood" Western modernism
in nearly every way possible. As I have already suggested, Western modernism was labeled as "self-expressive," which somehow became connected with menglong poetry, viewed also as "self-expressive" and hence "modernist" and "bourgeois." Surprisingly, however, it was the defenders of the menglong movement who first used the terms "self-expression" and "Western modernism," though they did so on separate occasions. Xie Mian argued, in "After the Peace Was Gone," that the young menglong poets had attempted to restore to their rightful place "individuality," "dignity," and "self-respect," which had been dismissed in revolutionary poetry. In another essay, Xie Mian noted "the emergence of a group of new poets who wrote some 'eccentric' or 'odd' poems after courageously adapting certain techniques from Western modernist poetics." These separate statements on "self-expression" and Western modernism set up a framework for the forthcoming debate on menglong: both critics and supporters combined these two terms as its chief characteristics.

Sun Shaoshen's seminal article "A New Aesthetic Principle Is Emerging" (1981) followed up Xie's attempts at definition by further complicating the issue of "self-expression." Celebrating Shu Ting and Gu Cheng's menglong poems as successful expressions of "secrets of the individual soul," Sun argued for an end of political monism in order to allow an artistic freedom that would explore human feelings as a basic concern in literature. Although Sun centered his argument on "self-expression," he never related it to Western modernism. Only in his concluding paragraph did he touch upon the necessity for "borrowing literary legacies from other nations" that "will enrich our own heritages in order to create artistic works of a higher level." By "other nations," of course, Sun could very well be referring to diverse literary traditions of many different countries and periods. The publication of Sun's essay, however, immediately triggered a critical debate in which Sun's opponents, such as Cheng Daixi, directly connected "self-expression" with "Western modernism." "Almost all artists of Western modernism," Cheng claimed, "regard 'self' or 'ego' as the only object for representation"; Eliot's The Waste Land, for example, "expresses an individual's totally disillusioned self." Similarly, Eliot's involvement with The Egoist aimed at nothing but a vigorous promotion of "self-expression." It is important to note here that the idea of "self-expression" attributed to the modernism of Pound and Eliot was in fact what the critics of menglong considered themselves to be reading against.

Surprisingly, however, menglong defenders willingly followed up on this attempt to relate Western modernism to menglong poetry. Xu Jingya, for example, boldly argued for an importation of features of Western modernism, such as the "self-expression" exemplified in menglong poetry, in order to revive contemporary poetry. The ensuing critical campaign against Xu's "daring manifesto on Chinese modernism" involved major literary journals such as Literary Gazette (Wenyibao), Poetry Monthly (Shikan), Contemporary Trends in Literature and Art (Dangdai wenyi sichao), and finally culminated in Xu's 1984 "self-criticism" in which he had
to admit that it was "ideologically wrong" to "blindly follow" the concept of "self-expression" advocated by Western modernists. Because of his "literary misunderstanding" of Western modernism, Xu was, of course, made a scapegoat in the ongoing "anti-spiritual pollution" campaign in which Deng Xiaoping's Party apparatus railed against an overflow of "decadent influences from the West."

This peculiar Chinese appropriation of Western modernism—marked either by claiming it as Chinese in origin in order to defend it, or by rejecting it precisely because it was not "Chinese"—became a common feature in the ensuing debate. Both the defenders of the Western tradition and the critics of its use in China were united in sharing the same limited view of the way that modernism was understood in the West. Both sides were arguing about modernism, but neither looked seriously into what Pound, Soviet critics, or Western Marxists had said about either China or modernist conventions. Thus all theoretical and most practical literary work in China was based on a "misunderstanding" of Western modernism as dominated by "self-expression." As I have already suggested, such a view is, of course, a radical departure from the Western reception. In the West, Pound is hardly regarded as an artist who believed in "art for art's sake"—a general accusation against the Western modernist movement in China.15 Very few of the numerous articles on Pound, for example, mention his imprisonment after World War II for collaborationist activities. The fact that a heavily ideologically oriented Chinese criticism should choose to "neglect" Pound's pro-Fascist political record tells us how far the Chinese critics went to "misunderstand" Pound and his modernist ideology—perhaps deliberately so. But just as strikingly, Pound's defenders seemed equally unaware of his concern for social issues. In fact, the entire political dimension of Pound's modernism, if known, would have been a source of embarrassment to both sides.

II

Chinese critics also "misunderstood" menglong poetry, which is neither "self-expressive" nor egoistic. Indeed, menglong poets frequently used "I" to speak for a collective "you" and "we" who are disillusioned with their former revolutionary idealism. Jiang He's "Unfinished Poem" (Meiyou xuewande shi), for example, depicts Zhang Zhixin, a revolutionary martyr who was imprisoned, tortured, and finally executed during the Cultural Revolution for openly challenging Mao's ideology. At the beginning of the poem, the "I" speaker projects himself into a female "you," the heroine:

I was nailed upon the prison wall.
Black Time gathered, like a crowd of crows
From every corner of the world, from every night of History,
To peck all the heroes to death, one after the other, upon this wall.

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The agony of heroes thus became a rock
Lonelier than mountains.
For chiseling and sculpting
The character of the nation,
Heroes were nailed to death
Wind-eroding, rain-beating
An uncertain image revealed upon the wall—
Dismembered arms, hands and faces—
Whips slashing, darkness pecking
Ancestors and brothers with heavy hands
Laboried silently as they were piled into the wall.
Once again I come here
To revolt against fettered fate
And with violent death to shake down the earth from the wall.
To let those who died silently stand up and cry out."

In this poem, the "I" is at once a historical "I" or a Whitmanesque collective "I"—those Chinese people who can readily identify with Zhang's fate. The "I" speaker perceives in Zhang the pathos of her nation—lonely, suffering, and in need of salvation. History, time, and the entire world are at odds with the lonely heroes who are "sculpting/The character of the nation" while their ignorant "brothers" are toiling away to build up the prison wall, willingly and silently. The heroic "I" thus regards himself as an unhappy child of an unfortunate nation, alienated from his own people, neglected and unappreciated. "I" is determined to wake up this unfortunate land: "Once again I come here/To revolt against fettered fate/And with violent death to shake down the earth from the wall." The "I" in this poem stands for a new generation who urges "those who died silently to stand up and cry out" for "truth," justice, and happiness.

In the second episode of the "Unfinished Poem," "I" changes into the voice of a mother whose daughter is sentenced to death as a political prisoner: "I am the mother. My daughter is about to be executed. / Gun-point walks toward me, a black sun/Upon the cracked earth walks toward me." The "black sun" stands out here as a strikingly defamiliarized image for Chinese readers in the late 1970s who were still habituated to the "red," "rising," and "never-setting sun"—persistent symbols of Mao, the Party, and the "socialist motherland." A typical example is He Jingzhi's much celebrated poem of the 1960s, "Our Great Motherland" (Womei weiladen zuguo):

The red sun rises in the east,
Its splendor shines upon the Four Seas,
Our great motherland
    Stands, towering and proud.
With the hands of a giant,
The spirit of a hero.

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It rearranges the vast countryside.
Just look how spring fills South China,
    Flowers bloom beyond the borders;
A thousand wonders,
    Ten thousand spectacles.
The Three Red Flags meet the east wind,
Gales and thunders of revolution come rolling forth.
O! Our great motherland
Advances toward the new age of socialism!
The great Mao Tse-tung,
The great Party,
Guide us
    Toward the bright and glorious future!

Here the “red” sun glorifies the “wise leadership of Chairman Mao” and the “bright” future of the socialist motherland. In the menglong poem just cited, however, the sun and its encoded ideology are subverted to express the sorrows of a mother—“an old tree” with “fried fingers” who mourns for her lost daughter. This “I” naturally refers to all mothers, daughters, fathers, and sons—an impersonal “we” who long for a new life that would not be smothered by the “black sun.” This episode witnesses fourteen uses of “I” or “my.” Yet as Jiang He himself once explained, these “I’s remain “selfless”—the first-person pronoun does not express private feelings and emotions but embodies, on the contrary, “an epic dimension” in order to encompass the “national spirit” of the Chinese people, which is at once heroic, as expressed in Zhang Zhixin’s deed, and tragic, as reflected in the indifferent “brothers and ancestors” who facilitated the imprisonment of the heroine.

The epic qualities of Jiang He’s poetic oeuvre culminated in his monumental work “Oh, Motherland” (Zuguo a, zuguo):

    At the places where the heroes have fallen
    I rose up to sing a song for the motherland
    I placed the Great Wall on the northern mountains
    As if lifting up the heavy fetters of a thousand years
    As if holding toward heaven a dying son
    Whose body is still convulsing in my arms
    At my back, my mother
    Nation’s pride, suffering, and protest
    A sign of uneasiness flickers
    In the eyes of heartless history
    Then, deeply inscribed on my forehead
    A glorious scar
    Smoke arose from behind my head
    Numerous white bones crying out, dispersing with the wind
    Like white clouds, like a cluster of pure pigeons.

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Despite the lack of punctuation and a clearly identifiable logic, the poem has a
definite political message. The ancient battlefield at the Great Wall no longer
testifies to the past glory of an invincible “motherland” as it once did in “revolu-
tionary” poetry. It is now compared to a dying son in the arms of “my mother”—
the Great Wall—who is suffering, protesting, uneasy with a “glorious scar
inscribed” in her forehead. In the next few stanzas, the “I” speaker “follow[s] the
white pigeons / With indignation and passion / Traveling through many ages and
places / Even through battles, ruins, and corpses / Slashing the ocean waves as
winding mountains / Bleeding, lifting up and sending off the bloody sun.”
Throughout the poem, “I” identifies himself with “mother” and “motherland,”
pondering her children’s fate and sorrow. “I” is at best an allegorical self-
expression, in which the “I” stands for a new national consciousness that questions
the “bloody sun” in a bleak landscape deserted with tears, corpses, and ruins.
Whatever “self-expression” one might find is meaningful only when it is merged
with the present and future of the nation in the flow of history. Jiang’s poems are
therefore direct products of the political and ideological conditions of early post-
Mao China. They obviously have little to do with the influence of a “Western,”
“modernist,” “egotistic” literature.

If Jiang He’s early menglong poems belong to the May Fourth realist tradition,
the woman writer Shu Ting’s poems reflect yet another May Fourth theme—the
search for romantic love and freedom, a motif that has been fully explored in
Leo Ou-fan Lee’s The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Literature.19 If anything,
Western readers would never have expected Chinese “modernist” writers to write love poems, at least of the conventional kind. Yet this is precisely the main
subject matter of Shu Ting’s poems. With a distinctively feminine voice, simple,
supple, and perhaps even delicately timid, Shu Ting’s love poems touched
readers—especially young readers of her own generation—who were emotion-
ally “thirsty” in the “dark ages” of the Cultural Revolution, during which love was
suppressed as “bourgeois ideology.” In the first stanza of the poem “To an Oak
Tree” (Zhi xiangshi), for instance, we perceive a romantic yearning to reshape an
unsatisfying present with an idealistic search for a selfless love:

If I were to love you—
I won’t be like those upward-climbing trumpet creepers, who show
themselves off by borrowing your higher
branches;
If I were to love you—
I would never mimic those sentimental birds
forever chirping their monotonous songs for some
green shade;
 nor would I be just a mountain spring
making a gift of refreshing coolness all year long;
 nor just the loftiest mountain peak.

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adding on to your height or augmenting your majestic
mien;
not even the sunlight,
nor even the spring rain.
No, not any of those can come close to my love for you!
I want to nestle to your side and turn into a
kapok tree,
assume the shape of a tree, to stand alongside of you:
the roots—tightly held beneath the ground;
the leaves—touching themselves in the clouds.
And with the passing of every breeze,
we would salute each other, reverently.

But—no one is there
to hear and understand our words.
You have your branches of brass and trunks of steel—
sharp as blades, sharp as swords,
and sharper than lances;
I, too, have my sturdy red flowers,
as heavy as heaved sighs,
as brave as a hero’s torch.
We share freezing cold, thunderstorms, wind and
lightning;
together we enjoy evening mists, auroral clouds, and rainbow;
seemingly forever parting and clinging to each other for life.

So great is our love for each other,
ever yielding and always loyal:

I love—
not just your tall, robust body,
but also your stubborn stance, the ground beneath your feet.18

In this poem, we can clearly see the influence of both realism and romanticism, which are, of course, Western in origin. Both played a major role in the history of modern Chinese literature through their impact on the May Fourth Movement. Love in this poem, for example, is reminiscent of the Kantian definition of love: “Good will, affection, promoting the happiness of others and finding joy in their happiness.”18 While it is of course possible to understand these lines as sexual, the lovers here seem to enjoy first of all a spiritual union in which “our roots clasped underground, Our leaves touching in the clouds.” Once viewed as a forbidden subject matter in revolutionary poetry, the romantic love of this poem protests against the conventional “love” for Mao and the Party. Yet at the same time, the poem participates in the realist movement since the “self” is indeed employed as a political strategy in being more realistic than the “other” of the ruling ideology. In this regard, then, Shu Ting’s love poems can be read as
only superficially "romantic," or as "romantic" with a different emphasis: they recall the Byronic revolutionary battle for Greek national freedom. Seen in this light, Jiang He's realist poems can in turn be regarded as romantic: he expresses, above all else, patriotic feelings for a national salvation, as demonstrated in his "Oh, Motherland."

However Western these poems may seem, it is nonetheless true that their romantic and realist traits are a continuation of contemporary Chinese literature, which was from time to time open to foreign influence since the founding of the People's Republic. The majority of Chinese readers were certainly more familiar with romanticism and realism than modernism; the much honored Soviet concepts of "socialist realism" and "critical realism," for example, canonized Balzac, Tolstoy, Gorki, Chekhov, Twain, and Dickens as "progressive" writers. Romantic texts by Byron, Wordsworth, and Goethe were taught as Western "classics" in universities before the Cultural Revolution. Shelley's "The Revolt of Islam" and "England in 1819" were interpreted as ideological protests against injustice and oppression. His famous line "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" from "Ode to the West Wind" was even employed as a well-known revolutionary motto by Lu Jiachuan, a Marxist character who sacrificed his life for the future of a "new" China in The Song of Youth (Qinchun zhige), one of the most popular novels in the late 1950s and early 1960s.20

III

We have so far outlined at least two maps of "misunderstanding" of menglong poetry—Chinese critics "misunderstood" it as self-expressive, and this "misunderstanding" was, in turn, based on a "misreading" of Western modernism. These related acts of "misunderstanding" had nothing to do with Western influence per se, since Chinese readers at that time had little or no contact with modernism; they were rather the expected outcome of a conflict between different horizons of literary expectation of various groups of readers at the moment when menglong poetry first appeared. Despite the claims of its critics, menglong poetry was largely "incomprehensible" or "obscure" only for certain groups of readers, those of an older generation. In this community, the readers' ideological and aesthetic principles had been preconditioned by their education and experience before the Cultural Revolution, which remained basically unchanged up to that time. Such readers, like others in China, suffered through many political upheavals—the Anti-Rightist Movement in the late 1950s and the nationwide purges of the Cultural Revolution. Unlike those from a disillusioned younger generation, many of them still somehow maintained their revolutionary idealism in spite of personal sufferings and momentary doubts. Some even had vested interests in holding on to "revolutionary" ideology: they had
spent their lives fighting for the revolution and were now occupying positions of power in the literary establishment. The passionate exposure of the dark side of everyday reality presented by the “doubting Thomas” generation, therefore, offended not only literary sensibilities but ideological ones as well. Changed images such as the “black sun” thus were puzzling, “obscure,” unacceptable, and hence, inevitably, Western modernist.

The generation gap between these two groups of readers was most clearly brought into the open by Gu Gong, father of the menglong poet Gu Cheng. His son’s poetic lines such as “Who is moving in the distance? / It is the clock’s pendulum, / Hired by the god of death / To measure life” were, he claimed, too “depressing” and too “terrifying” for him. He thus confessed in an article on menglong poetry: “I have never read this kind of poetry. When I marched and fought in the war, the lines of poetry we chanted were bright and exalted, like bombshells bursting, like flaming bullets. Not like this! Not like this at all!” Like other readers of an older generation, Gu Gong simply could not understand “why in the depths of their souls are there such ‘glacial scars,’ such ‘doubt’—or, even worse, such thoughts as ‘who is coming—the god of death.’”

In addition to its ideological differences, the formal features of menglong poetry further frustrated some tradition-oriented readers. The image of the “never setting” and “indispensable” sun on which both the natural and human world depend for vitality in Maoist poetry was now described in Bei Dao’s “The Snowline” (Xuejian) as something that can be easily forgotten:

Forget what I’ve said
forget the bird shot down from the sky
forget the reef
let them sink once more into the deep
forget even the sun
only a lamp left, full of dust and ashes
is shining
in the eternal position

In Bei Dao’s “Cruel Hope” (Canticle xiuang), the sun is associated with a “funeral procession” and the death of science and reason: “Striking up a heavy dirge / dark clouds have lined up the funeral procession / the sun sinks toward an abyss / Newton is dead.” In the same poem, the sun can even become unpredictable:

What’s that making an uproar
it seems to come from the sky
Hey, sun—kaleidoscope
start revolving
and tell us innumerable unknown dreams

The older generation would have reiterated their “unshakable” belief in the “omniscient” sun even when the “socialist course” to which they were devoted
turned out not to be such smooth sailing. Under no circumstances could they have written such provocative lines as these: “Thus perhaps / have we lost / the sun and the earth / and ourselves,” “Hope / the earth’s bequest / seems so heavy / still / cold / Frost flowers drift away with the mist.”22 Not being able to understand or accept the message of these lines, therefore, some readers chose to dismiss them as “bourgeois,” “decadent,” and “Western modernist.” This generation gap explains the reason why some of the well-established poets and critics of the older generation such as Li Ying, Tian Jian, Ai Qing, and Zang Kejia took the lead in campaigning against what they called the “unhealthy” trend of menglong poetry.

From its very beginning, however, menglong poetry was accepted by many readers of the younger generation—the same generation that produced it—and even by some not-so-young critics such as Xie Man, who was attacked for favoring menglong poetry at the expense of his successful career of promoting revolutionary poetry. As time went by, however, the defamiliarizing aspects of menglong poetry gradually gave way to a process of familiarization. More and more readers began to realize that menglong poems were not so “obscure,” after all, but quite clear and direct in their images. Much of the credit for popularizing menglong poetry, however, should be given to the critical debate itself. Both supporters and critics were given many forums to clarify their own views on it and on the assumptions evoked by such terms as “Western” and “Chinese traditions.” Miao Yushi noted that in the very debates on menglong poetry in which most theoretical and poetic issues were fully addressed, both sides found more and more common ground in their once seemingly irreconcilable stances. Those who earlier regarded menglong as “obscure” and “suffocating” now began to accept it as one of many possible poetic trends. Indeed, the menglong debate even educated Chinese readers, and poems such as “Autumn” (Qiu) and “Night” (Ye), which earlier had seemed difficult to understand, now began to make sense. This transformation demonstrated that “the public’s reading habits and our critics’ way of artistic evaluation have been undergoing a spontaneous change in the last few years.”23

Underlying these changes, of course, was a much more relaxed ideological and political atmosphere for artistic creation than was present in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Critics and readers became more tolerant of opinions different from their own and from the current policies of the ruling ideology. When these “nonliterary” changes occurred, past acts of “misunderstanding” were gradually turned into acts of “understanding.” The menglong poet Gu Cheng was thus correct in saying that “after the poet had smashed the old reading habits with the creation of his new poems, both the author and his readers will experience a rebirth together.”24 Yet it must be emphasized that this rebirth was made possible only with readers’ changed horizons of literary expectations and their new interpretative acts, which were conditioned by the political and ideological circumstances at a specific historical moment. As theorists like
Hans Robert Jauss have argued, the transformation of a literary system and its various meanings is due to events in both the aesthetic and the socio-economic systems of a culture. If, as seems to be the case, the only meaning a text can have is the transitory one that resides in the minds of its readers, then perceived meaning is, in a sense, predetermined by the preceding literary and cultural experiences of the reader. The historicity of menglong poetry, as we have seen, resides not within the text but outside it, in readers' interpretative processes of understanding and "misunderstanding." Or said otherwise, the historicity of menglong poetry can be situated entirely within texts that are themselves the products of a socio-economic-political moment.

IV

Yet the story of the acceptance of menglong poetry, by diverse groups of readers and by the ruling ideology, is even more paradoxical than what I have just described, for the process of familiarization with menglong poetry also resulted in a parallel process of familiarization with Western modernism. What used to be "foreign" and "negative" gradually became "domestic" and "positive." These new horizons of expectation concerning Western modernism, not surprisingly, altered, among other things, the literary and political reception of Ezra Pound, who was suddenly received not only as a "native Chinese" but also a "classical Chinese." It became fashionable to argue, for example, that Western modernism was not "harmful" after all since it was "originally" inspired by the classical Chinese tradition. Ironically, therefore, the same Pound who was held responsible for initiating Western modernism by "misunderstanding" classical Chinese poetry in the West was now glorified in the East as a talented "China hand" who revived Western literature through his "understanding" of Chinese tradition. By extension, then, things Western, or things Chinese with "Western influence," became less terrifying than before because they seemed ultimately to reaffirm the "superiority" of a Chinese heritage. Zhou Qiwan argued, for example, that the menglong tendency was by no means "Western." It was in fact so uniquely "Chinese" that even Pound had to borrow it from Li Bai's poems in order to establish his own imagist movement in the West. The same was true for other genres, Zhou argued. Zhang Xu's "symbolist" painting in the Tang Dynasty, for instance, "influenced" impressionist art in the West, while Chinese operatic theater inspired Bertolt Brecht's expressionist theater. Seen in this light, then, Zhou believed one should no longer condemn modernism as reflecting "decadent" and "capitalist" ideology. To do so naturally implies a rejection of "our own" national legacies such as Tang poetry, Sung lyrics, and Yuan drama, traditions emanating from a feudalist society that Marx considered a much more "backward" historical period than capitalism. Here we see a surprisingly paradoxical
twist: Pound’s modernist poetics not only rescued the menglong movement, it also sanctioned Chinese classical traditions now recognized as “positive” and “historically progressive” only after having been valorized by “Western monsters.”

In such a dialectical process of literary reception, the changing fate of Pound and his modernist movement in turn altered once again the interpretations of menglong poetry. Shi Tianhe suggested that menglong be renamed “imagist” poetry after its ancient predecessors such as “When a Crane Cries” (Heming) in The Book of Songs (Shijing). The “ironic fact” here, according to Shi, was that Western imagist poems seemed to be very popular among menglong poets, who claimed to have borrowed them from the West, whereas Chinese classical imagist poems were greatly admired by modernists such as Pound. It seemed that Chinese poets “were anxious to break away from their own tradition by importing imagist methodology from the West,” whereas Western imagist writers “sold their Chinese goods back to the home market after processing them in the West.” In Shi’s opinion, then, Pound was a Western salesman who became desperately in love with Chinese goods, eventually proving to the Chinese themselves that his poetic goods were of indigenous provenance. Pound, who by Western accounts “misunderstood” classical Chinese poetry, was now portrayed in China as a disciple of the Chinese cultural past, a past from which menglong poets had tried hard to escape, only to find themselves embracing it in the same manner as their Western “poetic fathers.”

In fact, in these Chinese accounts not only did Pound help Chinese writers and readers discover their own literary tradition, he also offered a solution to a dilemma of menglong poets. Huang Ziping noted two polarities in the writings of the young poets after the Cultural Revolution. On the one hand, they were more philosophical and abstract, focusing on a contemplation and even a negation of the past cultural tradition. On the other hand, they demanded the fullest expression for deep, emotional, and personal feelings. It was Pound’s concept of image—one that “presents an intellectual and emotional complex with a quick rendering of particulars without commentary”—that offered the young poets a delicate balance between a philosophical “cool-headness” and an “enthusiastic expression,” thus helping them achieve “a sudden emancipation from spatial and temporal confinements.” It is worth noting here that Huang was especially cautious in delineating Pound’s relationship to menglong poetry—the young poets merely “seemed” to be inspired by Pound’s theory. It was, of course, extremely hard for Huang to prove that these young poets actually had any direct contact with Pound’s imagist theory since most of Pound’s poems had not yet been translated into Chinese at that time. The important point is Huang’s implicit recognition that a rereading of Pound’s poetics as something fundamentally Chinese, classical, and therefore beneficial brought about a new way of understanding menglong texts, texts that only a few years earlier were conceived of as having been “influenced” by Western “monsters.”

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Equally striking in the menglong debate is the fact that so much was written on Pound's modernist poetics that they soon became part of the critical vocabulary of literary discourse. For a while it seemed that a critic in contemporary China could not talk about menglong without somehow bringing in Pound. His name was frequently evoked even in fields not directly relevant to modern poetry—in discussions, for example, of the classical tradition. Xiao Chi argued in an essay that Western tradition, which is based on the classical genres of drama and epic, emphasizes "imitation" of human actions, whereas the Chinese tradition, with its emphasis on lyric poetry as a high genre, focuses on expressions of human feelings through depictions of natural images. In his conclusion, Xiao says quite unexpectedly: "Chinese classical poetry has been greatly admired by Ezra Pound, one of the architects of Western modernist poetics. As has been pointed out by Michael Alexander, "This use of nature as a language is a permanent contribution of China to Pound. . . . (The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pounda [sic] by Micheal Alexander.)" Spelling mistakes such as those in the English book title were frequent occurrences in the Chinese journals at a time when the press could not catch up with the fashionable trend of citing Western sources. Later on, Xiao obviously realized the irrelevance of Pound to his discussion: when he included this essay in his book The Aesthetics of Chinese Poetics (Zhongguo shige meixue) in 1986, he left out the concluding paragraph on Pound.

The acts of literary reception that formed part of the menglong debate were brought about by acts of "misunderstanding" or "misuse," as Xiao's essay clearly illustrates. According to the conventions of cross-cultural studies as they are usually practiced, such acts of "misunderstanding" are to be deplored as a product of a regrettable ignorance. But it would be a mistake to dismiss the various "misunderstandings" of Western modernism so strikingly apparent in the menglong debate merely as the products of ignorance. They were some of the few possible ways that Western modernism could become meaningful to different reading communities in post-Mao China, at a time when cultural exchanges with the outside world were neither available nor deemed desirable. Whatever "Western modernism" might have meant to Chinese readers, it played a major role in initiating artistic movements, movements not limited to lyric poetry but that included other genres such as the novel, film, and drama.

The critical debate over the menglong movement, narrowly conceived, was short lived, since this type of poetry was finally accepted by the official culture; it became canonized andanthologized as one of the leading poetic traditions in modern China. Yet the place of the Western tradition in contemporary Chinese literary production was by no means settled. To some extent, it was precisely because of different layers of "misunderstanding" among the Chinese readers and writers that Western modernism became, rightly or wrongly, a reference point that defined and conditioned specific forms of literary production and reception. Self-expression, for instance, was still regarded as an important fea-

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ture of Western modernism. This so-called “Western” sense of the self was further explored later by some menglong poets in their efforts to develop new kinds of poetry—“national epic poetry,” “searching-for-roots poetry” in 1984 and, subsequently, “abstract” or “philosophical poetry” in 1988.

V

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize two points. First of all, the story of menglong poetry illustrates the way Chinese literary production of the last decade—and the critical and poetic discourses associated with it—is conditioned by a “misunderstanding” of twentieth-century Western modernism. Such acts of “misunderstanding” are to be appreciated, not regretted, since they offer one way to understand the larger arena of Chinese-Western literary relations. Such a perspective, in contrast to the traditional quest for “correct” reading and the commonplace privileging of understanding, views “misunderstanding” as a legitimate and necessary factor in the making of literary history. In speaking this way, I mean to evoke a conception of “misunderstanding” that is sociological rather than epistemological. I do not mean, of course, to suggest the preexistence of an epistemologically grounded “proper” or “correct” understanding of the text or a literary movement to which a “misunderstanding” can be opposed; I hope that it has become apparent that my argument strongly rejects such a claim. By “misunderstanding”—in quotation marks—I mean a view of a text or a cultural event by a “receiver” community that differs in important ways from the view of that same phenomenon in the community of its “origins.” “Misunderstanding” in this paradigm is the natural result of a cultural dialogue between readers both within and between cultures who attempt to analyze, in the words of Barbara Johnson, “the specificity of a text’s critical difference from itself” in light of their own specific place and time in history.31 Indeed, in this model for studying the role of “misunderstanding” in cross-cultural literary relations, there is no such a thing as “understanding” without embodying in the same term a “self-understanding” or “re-understanding,” which is also to say a “misunderstanding” if conceived from the traditional point of view. Or to reverse the same argument, there is no such a thing as “misunderstanding” without an admission that this “misunderstanding” is the only way to “understanding.”

The second point I would like to emphasize is that in twentieth-century cross-cultural literary study it is almost impossible to separate different national traditions. As my study has shown, one can no longer talk about Pound and his modernist poetics without mentioning his Chinese “father tradition.” Neither can one discuss the menglong debate without exploring the theory and practice of Pound and other Western “father poets.” In a larger sense, then, one can claim that sinology is Western literary study and Western literature is tied intricately to an

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understanding of sinology. For sinology, world literature and culture can no longer be ignored or assigned a secondary status as mere source or influence. Especially in view of the increasing exchanges between cultures, sinology cannot exist without Western contacts and without the contexts of Western texts. Neither is it possible to speak of a Western tradition that is "uncontaminated" by things Chinese. Let me cite a single example from recent literary history. Maxine Hong Kingston's Woman Warrior may seem to be one of the first Chinese novels that has made a major impact on twentieth-century American literature. Yet Woman Warrior is popular among the Western readers not because it offers descriptions of minority or peculiarly Chinese experience, but rather because the Chinese experiences are depicted, in the words of King-kok Cheung, "in a mode that reflects their own multicultural legacies." Kingston's seemingly "Chinese" accounts are indeed typically Western since she has "instated [herself] in the American tradition by hitting upon a syncretic idiom at once inherited and self-made."392

Yet Kingston's self-articulation of both Western and Chinese experiences is by no means a "new" invention. Long before Kingston, Pound's reading of Chinese poetics was already inseparably tied to the Western tradition. As we have seen, Chinese texts were only used, or "misused," by Pound in order finally to fit into his own Western "father traditions." It is in this sense that we say the poetics of Ezra Pound and of menglong are both Chinese and Western; they are inclusively both and hence exclusively neither. In order to fully understand a so-called "Chinese" tradition, therefore, one must look at how the very "Chineseness" of this tradition has already been "contaminated" by Western readers in the course of cross-cultural literary reception. To understand what Chinese culture meant in the West for the sinologists, then, one must inevitably encounter the reception or "misreception" of Chinese culture by Marco Polo, Matteo Ricci, Arthur Waley, and Gary Snyder, to name only a few. In a similar manner, a thorough study of any contemporary Chinese literary phenomenon has a great deal to do with Western influence, as we have demonstrated in discussing menglong poetry.

Notes

3. Ibid., 9.
5. Differing from Chinese critics who saw the menglong movement as Western modernist, scholars who live outside the People's Republic read it, together with other post-Mao texts, as belonging to a "New Realism of 1979–1981" that depicted "a political system caught up in corruption, opportunism, and bureaucratism." See Helen F. Siu and Zelda Stern, "Introduction," in *Mao's Harvest: Voices from China's New Generation* (Oxford, 1983), xiii. Michael S. Duke sees menglong poetry as part of "the tradition of critical realism" in May Fourth literature, which "did not die" after 1949. See his "Introduction" to *Contemporary Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Post-Mao Fiction and Poetry* (New York, 1985), 3. William Tay reads menglong as a "political allegory" of the Cultural Revolution. Menglong poems did not elicit for Tay—or for other Western readers familiar with imagist poetry—the "defamiliarizing effect" that their experimentation seemed to stimulate in China and, "with it, all kinds of negative criticism." See Tay, "Obscure Poetry," 135, 137. Leo Ou-fan Lee considers the poetic world of menglong "transparent rather than dense, impressionistically mimetic rather than abstrusely mythic"; "Beyond Realism," 67. Alternatively, Sean Golden and John Minford explore the "interrelationships between Yang Lian's interest in his own culture and the influence of Western culture," yet they point out "one of the most interesting aspects of Yang Lian's work from the point of view of a Western critic: what may at first glance seem to be a perfect case of a young poet trying to use Western modernist techniques in a Chinese setting turns out to be a young poet well acquainted with Western modernist techniques trying to rediscover what is essential in his own culture"; "Yang Lian and Chinese Tradition," in *Worlds Apart*, 120, 123.
9. For a more detailed account of Sun's article and its significance in the context of menglong debate, see Tay, "Obscure Poetry," 146–47.
13. Pound's idigrammatic method has been understood in the West as a rebellious act against the romantic tradition of self-expression and hence an "objective" presenta-

inality' in poetry," a modernist gesture that was anything but "self-expression." See Laszlo Gein, *Ideogram: History of a Poetic Method* (Austin, Tex., 1982), 4. Thus "self-

expression" even in the "most individual" part of a work asserts only the "immortality of the dead poet most vigorously," as Eliot observed in "Tradition and the Individual

Talent." Western literary theorists have likewise persistently argued for the anti-
institutional dimension of the modernist movement, which would not celebrate "self-

expression." Peter Bürger observed that "avant-garde artists were actively attacking the institution of art. Their effort was not to isolate themselves, but to reintegrate themselves and their art into life." For Bürger, then, modernist movements "negate those determinations that are essential in autonomous art: the disjunction of art and the praxis of life, individual production, and individual reception as distinct from the former"; *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, ed. and trans. Michael Hays (Minneapolis, 1984), xxxvi, 53-54. For Matei Calinescu, it would even be "difficult" to conceive of Eliot and Pound as "representatives of the avant-garde" since they "have indeed very little, if

anything, in common with such typically avant-garde movements as futurism, dada-

ism, or surrealism." For Calinescu, the rejection of past tradition in the modernist

movement is highly paradoxical since "the antitraditionalism of modernism is often subtly traditional"; *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kuisch, Postmodernism* (Durham, N.C., 1987), 140. Rather than an emphasis on the self, the "subtle" sense of tradition is characteristic of modernism, at least according to the views of the major explorers of this movement.


16. The poem was written in May 1979, first appeared in *Today* 4 (1979): 1-5, and was later collected in *Lao, New Poetic Movements*. The English translations are mine.


20. The *Song of Youth* by Yang Mo was published in 1958. A summary of the plot and a sample translation in English can be found in *Literature of the People's Republic of China*, ed. Kai-yu Hsu (Bloomington, Ind., 1980), 328-38.


22. The quotations are from Bonnie S. McDougall's English translations of these two poems in her *Bei Dao: The August Steeplewalker* (London, 1988), 78, 24-27. Bei Dao is the pseudonym of Zhao Zhenka; the chief editor of *Today*.

23. Miau Yushi et al., "Four Critics' Views on Poetic Criticism in Recent Years" (*Jinnianlai
e shige pinglun siren tan*), *Poetic Experiment* (Shitansuo) 5 (1982): 84.
25. For a view of generic changes as dependent on the literary expectations of readers, see Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis, 1982), 3–79.
27. Ibid., 50.
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