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BUDDHIST MODERNISM

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Resumen

The article describes the transcultural impact of Chinese written characters in East Asia and their global influence on modernism. Ezra Pound, inspired by the works of Ernest Fenollosa, transformed the Western perception of Chinese poetry, popularising the use of Chinese characters as a model for poetry. Fenollosa, influenced by Kegon Buddhism and its philosophy of interconnectedness, saw the characters as dynamic representations of nature, in contrast to Pound's interpretation focused on individual details. This interaction reflects how cultural ideas are transformed as they cross contexts, highlighting the fluid and changing nature of transcultural exchanges.

Palabras clave

Buddhism, Modernism, China, Japan, Chinese Written Characters

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Abstract

El texto describe el impacto transcultural de los caracteres escritos chinos en Asia Oriental y su influencia global en el modernismo. Ezra Pound, inspirado por los trabajos de Ernest Fenollosa, transformó la percepción occidental de la poesía china, popularizando el uso de caracteres chinos como modelo de poesía. Fenollosa, influido por el budismo Kegon y su filosofía de interconexión, consideraba los caracteres como representaciones dinámicas de la naturaleza, en contraste con la interpretación de Pound centrada en detalles individuales. Esta interacción refleja cómo las ideas culturales se transforman al cruzar contextos, destacando el carácter fluido y cambiante de los intercambios transculturales.

Keywords

Budismo, Modernismo, China, Japón, Caracteres chinos

BUDDHIST MODERNISM

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For millennia, the most significant agent of inter- and transcultural exchanges in East Asia has been the Chinese written character. It operates both interculturally, that is, as a means of communication between and among different cultures, and transculturally, that is, as an element of one culture that transforms other cultures, and transforms itself, by being introduced to the new context. The role of Chinese literacy in Japan, Korea and Vietnam has been vast and transformative, comparable to that played by the complex of Christianity, Greek philosophy, Roman law and alphabetization in Europe.

Chinese writing captured the imagination of many great twentieth-century literary minds—Segalen, Pound, Claudel, Eisenstein, Michaux, Haroldo de Campos, Octavio Paz, just to name a few—because of its circulatory promise. It appeared to portend a language as readily accepted by all people as music or food: a language that would record instantly recognizable images of things and actions which each person could read off in his or her own language. Directness, immediacy, unlimited circulation: these were also virtues claimed for other products of modernism, such as cinema or international-style architecture. These were the virtues of twentieth-century high modernism: a classical directness and immediacy, and a desire not to be restrained by provincial limits of culture or language. Now such an utopian language has never been realized in practice, and the enthusiasts of Chinese writing found their appreciation of its simplicity and universality quickly turning into an appreciation of its mysterious, riddling, poetic qualities,

as if to admit that if it held a meaning, it was not a plain and public one, but a meaning reserved for a few initiates. The history of this European fascination with Chinese writing since the seventeenth century has been told many times. It tends to reinforce the idea that there is a basic, structural, typological difference between phonetic languages (languages that use an alphabetic or syllabic writing system) and ideographic languages (languages that paint the ideas and involve the sounds of speech only secondarily or incidentally). And usually, the phonetic languages are claimed for Europe and the ideographic languages are claimed for one or another of Europe's exotic others: China, Japan, Egypt, ancient Mexico, or the hermetic tradition.

The way I would like to tell this story is somewhat different. I don't want to give you the impression that there is a permanent, basic difference between different writing-types. Rather, I want to direct your attention to specific acts of introduction whereby the idea of an East Asian ideographic written character was brought into a cultural context, made meaningful by assimilation or contrast to existing ideas, and became a shared obsession of many participants in that culture or in several connected subcultures: in other words, I would propose a genealogy of specific instances of the idea of ideographic writing, starting and spreading and crossing to new places. For anyone interested in modern poetry, the ancestor at the root of the ideographic idea is Ernest Francisco Fenollosa (1853-1908), a figure both virtually unknown and widely misunderstood.

Ezra Pound's *Cathay*, an immensely influential collection of seventeen poems published in 1915, bore the subtitle: For the Most Part from the Chinese of Rihaku, from the notes of the late Ernest Fenollosa, and the Decipherings of the Professors Mori and Ariga. T. S. Eliot some years later called Pound "the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time", which was accurate:

Pound gave Chinese poetry a voice in English which it had hitherto lacked, and that voice became expressible in other languages for which Chinese poetry had been previously voiceless. But if Pound was the inventor, Fenollosa provided the materials and the spark. Fenollosa's gift, passing through Pound's editorial hands, has been extremely rich and productive.

The story of Pound and Fenollosa begins in 1913, when Fenollosa's widow, after meeting the young American poet through mutual friends, decided that he was the only person who could "do something" with her late husband's unfinished materials on Chinese and Japanese literature, culture and art, and sent Pound several thick packages of notebooks, lecture drafts and samples of calligraphy. These materials had a powerful effect on the young poet. From 1913 to the end of Pound's life in 1973, hardly a day went by when Pound did not study his Chinese dictionary, paraphrase Confucius, or allude to the main point of Fenollosa's critical study of the Chinese written character as a medium for poetry, namely that the ideogram gives us "a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature" (Fenollosa and Pound, 2008: 45). Pound, in turn, impressed his ideas about ideogram as a model for modern poetry on two generations of disciples; he set a tone and a set of ambitions for poetry that shaped the literary climate in which Haroldo de Campos, inspirer of Brazilian concrete poetry, and the poet, novelist and indefatigable translator Octavio Paz, were formed. If Pound had not had this interest, the meaning of Chinese and Japanese poetry for twentieth-century people in the West would have been different; we would be reading it in some entirely different way. This is the first lesson of transcultural, as opposed to intercultural, study: we are never dealing with a stable thing that might undergo varying cultural "receptions" or "images," but can nevertheless be recovered in its truth by a critical examination; rather, the thing itself is

something subjected to historical transformation through its acclimatization to different contexts. "Historical" means locatable, datable, and subject to irreversible processes. Such was the fate of the Chinese character in Anglo-American modernism, in the Brazilian modernism that borrowed from American modernism as well as from Japanese surrealism, in the multiple literary experiments of the great traveler Paz, and so on. At no point in these genealogies can you point to the Chinese character and assert that it is essentially the same Chinese character that a Chinese literary mind of 1400 or 1900 would recognize. The associations and functions that it has picked up in the course of playing various roles in Western literary history have become part of this "Chinese character," so that when it is reintroduced to China by way of the poet Yang Lian or the artist Xu Bing, for example, it strikes people as an exotic and bizarre importation. That unfamiliarity—or defamiliarization—shows historical change at work.

The Chinese written character becomes an object of cultural investment not only by modernist poets writing in the English, Spanish and Portuguese languages, but also by painters, choreographers, composers and film directors, largely as indirect effects of a single man's enthusiasm in the late nineteenth century. But the enthusiasm that spurred Fenollosa to his studies of Chinese language and literature were not simply cultural or literary. His main motivation was religious. If I am successful at establishing Fenollosa's purpose in mediating between Western and East Asian cultures as he did, I will have made good on my title, "Buddhist Modernism". The influence of Buddhist thinking on modern culture, I shall be arguing, is not confined to the domain of the religious; in fact, it may be most powerful when it works through other channels and eludes specialization, to form a diffuse intellectual background or an international cultural style. Once this is taken

into account, we may start telling the story of modern poetry and art in a different way.

In temporal terms, "modernism" is a thoroughly culturally relative designation. The word means "the –ism of the now," deriving from Latin modo, that is, "the present"; and since the present is constantly changing, you might suppose, if you came from another planet, that the content of the word "modernism" is always relative to its latest updating. That is of course not true, for those of us who live on Earth and have been paying attention: "modernism" has a fixed but different temporal frame in various languages, in each case because of an occasional reference that became conventional and then sedimented and then was too well accepted to change. In English, for example, the core reference of the term "modernism" would have to be situated in the 1920s, say in the year 1922 that saw Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's "*Waste Land*," Woolf's *Jacob's Room* and the first of Pound's *Cantos*. But in Spanish, as no one can forget who wanders through Barcelona with its monuments of arquitectura modernista, the reference of "modernismo" is to the generation of 1898, the artists, writers and thinkers who saw Spain lose an empire and assigned themselves the job of worrying about her soul. Between 1898 modernism and 1920s modernism, and between empires lost and gained, there opens a space which is precisely that of Fenollosa and Pound's relation to the Far East.

The relation between these modernisms passes through a short essay by Ernest Fenollosa called "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry." The essay as we typically see it printed was first published by Ezra Pound in The Little Review during 1919 and then in a book of Pound's essays, *Instigations*, in 1920. It has always appeared under Pound's patronage, and, somewhat scandalously to my mind, has even been printed in a book of Pound's critical writings with no

special acknowledgment to the man who actually wrote it (Pound, 2005). It is undeniable that Pound, when he read Fenollosa's manuscript, recognized ideas that he himself had had, and felt that Fenollosa had prophesied the new movements in art that Pound was then backing; but it is also undeniable that Fenollosa, who died in 1908 and never saw Ezra Pound, was writing out of his own impulses and had no idea of supporting Pound's aesthetic campaigns.

What Pound learned from Fenollosa is quickly stated. The idea is that the Chinese character is at root, or at its best, an ideogram, that is, a "vivid shorthand picture" of objects and relations in nature:

> Chinese notation is something much more than arbitrary symbols. It is based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature. In the algebraic figure and in the spoken word there is no natural connection between thing and sign: all depends upon sheer convention. But the Chinese method follows natural suggestion (Fenollosa and Pound, 2008: 80).

That is what all poetry should seek to be; and therefore Chinese writing gives us the best possible model for poetry. Translations from the Chinese, in their poverty, show how far Westerners are from understanding the vivid, pictorial, naturalistic bent of the Chinese language, for we use abstractions, impersonal particles and lifeless structures where we should have used active, vital imagery. Pound saw here an opportunity for reform of all languages, not just poetic language, for he thought that the disease of weakened language had strengthened the hand of liars and cheats, otherwise known as politicians and bankers, across the world. Pound thought that an ideogram, since it is based on "something that everybody KNOWS," discouraged cheating; as a currency of knowledge, it was not easy to counterfeit (Fenollosa and Pound, 2008: 5).

And in his practice of reading Chinese characters, Pound took the single character to be a composite of visual images to be analyzed as a tableau or rebus, by creating links of meaning among the parts of the image: thus Pound motivates xin 新 or "new," the key word in his favorite quotation "ri ri xin, you ri ri xin" 日日新又日日新 , by breaking it into its components "stand up," "tree," and "axe" (立, 木, 斤). Or as Pound paraphrased the single character in his Canto 53:

> Tching prayed on the mountain and
> wrote MAKE IT NEW
> on his bath tub
> Day by day make it new
> cut underbrush,
> pile the logs,
> keep it growing
> (Pound, 1975: 264-265)

Thus Chinese name for "new" or "newness" was a kind of recipe for the operation of making it new, for keeping it modern: cut off the dead wood, keep the trunk straight, keep it growing.

The scholarly heritage most often blames Fenollosa for this sort of thing, because it is silly philology, and Pound scholars like to think that Pound was not so silly, so it is useful to portray Fenollosa as a dabbler in exotica who didn't really speak Chinese or Japanese and merely performed a donor function in bringing news of the Chinese written language to Pound's attention. But the collection of Fenollosa's papers that resides among Pound's papers in the Beinecke Library at Yale tells a different story. Careful reading of the manuscripts shows that not only did Fenollosa have a much better grounding in

Chinese and Japanese language than anyone has wanted to give him, but his essay on the Chinese written character was conceived as an element of a cultural program that pointed in quite a different direction from Ezra Pound's appropriation. This did not take a lot of subtle research to find out: the pivotal exhibit was the passages that Pound cut out or rewrote from Fenollosa's essay. These passages, barred with Pound's red crayon but still quite legible in Fenollosa's spidery Victorian handwriting, gave the manuscripts the appearance of a truncated dialogue, with one of the speakers overruling the other.

Here is one such passage. Fenollosa wrote in the manuscript of his essay on the Chinese character the following:

> All arts follow the same law; refined harmony lies in the delicate balance of the overtones. In music the whole possibility and theory of harmony is based upon the overtones. In painting, great color beauty springs not from the main color masses, but from the refined modifications or overtones which each throws into the other, just as tints are etherealized in a flower by reflection from petal to petal. One false radiation, one suspicion of conflict between any two of these overtones, breaks up the magic impression, and deadens art to the commonplace.

In this sense Poetry seems a more difficult art than Painting or music, because the overtones of its words, the halos of secondary meanings which cling to them, are struck among the infinite terms of things, vibrating with physical life and the warm wealth of human feeling.

Pound shortened this to:

> All arts follow the same law; refined harmony lies in the delicate balance of overtones. In music the whole possibility and theory of harmony are based on the overtones. In this sense poetry seems a more difficult art.

As editor, Pound certainly had the right to cut where he thought his author was getting too verbose; but the clipping here has to do with a basic orientation, not just in aesthetics, but in philosophy, or even ontology. The statement in Fenollosa's version of the essay suggests a synaesthetic mingling of the different senses, in which a meadow is like a symphony, which is like a poem, because each case presents an overwhelming harmony that crushes and blends together the tiny details. That ran counter to Pound's poetic, in which the detail had to stay sharp and individual in order to convey its maximum of implication. And Pound claimed the authority of Chinese poetry in support of this imagistic protocol, this aesthetic of the "luminous detail": obviously it would be extremely damaging if Pound's prophet had gone chasing after the wrong kind of artistic response, yearning for vague, woolly sensations where sharp perceptions were needed. One might see here only a conflict between two eras: between the Symbolist modernism of 1880 or 1890, with its love for oceanic totalities and wholesale exchanges among sense-perceptions, and the modernism of 1920, with its hard-edged specialized aesthetic; precisely the difference between Spanish modernismo and French or Anglo-American modernism, the difference between Gaudì and Le Corbusier. The feeling that history had decided which modernism was the true or adequate modernism, I think, inspired Pound to cut the version written in the essay. In doing so Pound also ignored a version of the same statement in Fenollosa's preliminary notes, where a stronger philosophical claim is made:

> true sentences let the fringes of words interlock
> as the color of a thousand flowers intermingle in a meadow, or
> the notes of orchestral chords flow into one
> (Fenollosa and Pound, 2008: 110)

The word "true" takes us out of the realm of aesthetics (the statement would not have the same force if Fenollosa had said merely that "beautiful sentences let the fringes of words interlock") and leaves us with a puzzle: with what sense of "true" is Fenollosa reckoning? If we are to take it seriously, and not just put it down to an aesthete's Orientalism-inspired dream, we will have to hunt around for a theory of truth, a theory of what the world is like, that might mesh with that strange statement. Then, whether or not we accept that theory of the world, we can at least know that there is one at work there.

The theory is one that Fenollosa acquired during his twenty years' stay in Japan, and it is one to which Pound was constitutionally allergic. It was an ontology drawn from the Kegon 華嚴 school of Buddhism (in Chinese, Huayan), the teaching that takes its source in the Flower Ornament Scripture, the Avatamsaka Sutra. The Sutra's teaching about reality (to paraphrase quickly and crudely an extremely complicated and subtle text) starts by designating the things we perceive with the senses as not unreal, but dependent: that is, their existence is predicated on the existence of other things, in infinitely complex karmic chains; no single thing is self-subsistent. The world is likened to the net of Indra, which is woven of countless threads, and at every crossing of the threads there is fixed a jewel which reflects every other jewel in the net, in a

maximal combination of interrelation (each item bearing the image of every other item) and of insubstantiality (each item sustaining every other item only as a mirrored image). This is an image with which Leibniz or Berkeley might have been at home, but when Fenollosa encountered it in Japan, he found it reminded him of "Hegel… [and] present psychologic progress" (Fenollosa and Pound, 2008: 12). It led him to say, in a statement that has survived Pound's editing to look in the eye all readers of the essay on the Chinese written character, that "relations are more real and more important than the things which they relate" (Fenollosa and Pound 2008: 54, 94). Or in another lecture given to a Japanese university audience:

> If we take an instantaneous photograph of the sea in motion, we may fix the momentary form of a wave, and call it a thing; yet it was only an incessant vibration of water. So other things, apparently more stable, are only large vibrations of living substance; and when we trace them to their origin and decay, they are seen to be only parts of something else. And these essential processes of nature are not simple; there are waves upon waves, process below processes, systems within systems;—and apparently so on forever (Fenollosa and Pound, 2008: 22).

The contrast with Pound's poetics and ontology, based on a written character that would be the image of an indubitably self-subsistent thing, a thing that stood as a rebuke to all mere human generalization, imagining and abstraction, could hardly be sharper. Fenollosa admired the Chinese character for its ability to bring things vividly to mind, but he didn't consider things the ultimate components of either reality or of a poetic composition. If Fenollosa was not committed to the ideogram as an image, as a "luminous detail" and synecdoche of truth, how did he read Chinese poetry? In another section of his

essay, also dropped by Pound, he points to parallelism as the key to Chinese poetry, not just as a verbal technique but as the image of its moral teaching:

> We sniff at figure as useless embroidery.
> But it is really a higher & more synthetic kind of truth.
> An approach to the infinity & simultaneity of Nature itself.
> Hence the many forms of parallelism in Chinese poetry & prose
> But greatest of all is the endless and intimate parallel between man and nature…
> Metaphors, especially Chinese, are like a chord in music, planes of striking.
> In these metaphors, specially, man & nature come to brotherhood.
> Union of sight, sound and meaning
> Parallelism of nature and man
> (Fenollosa and Pound, 2008: 32, 123)

The way to read Chinese poetry, in other words, is not to get stuck on the individual words but to see them in their relations, their semantic parallels, with other words in other lines of the poem, or in their relations to other poems to which they allude. A single word can no more have a poetic meaning than a single syllable can be a rhyme: without an answering syllable, it is only a potential rhyme. It might sound a bit cruel to say so, but the difference between Pound and Fenollosa is that between someone who can make out the individual words in a Chinese poem, and someone who can read them as composing a sentence. But the difference that matters does not have to do with ability, rather with interest: and Pound's interest stopped about where Fenollosa's became genuinely active.

One way of expressing the difference between Fenollosa and Pound is to base it on that between the generation of the 1890s and the generation that came to flower between 1910 and 1920. But the discrepancy between Pound's and Fenollosa's ontological commitments looks forward to a later generation. Think, for example, of John Cage, the American avant-garde composer who studied Zen Buddhism with Daisetz Suzuki in the 1940s, taught at Black Mountain College in the 1950s, and tried to make his work exemplify what the Kegon school designated as the "unimpededness and interpenetration" of all things with each other (Perloff, 1985: 201-14). Cage's teacher, Suzuki, had a complicated but close relation to Fenollosa's most renowned Japanese student, Okakura Kakuzô; among Cage's colleagues at Black Mountain was Josef Albers, who had studied with Arthur Wesley Dow, a close associate of Fenollosa's at Columbia. So there is a shadowy genealogy of the American avant-garde that sidesteps Pound, otherwise such a determining figure, and connects the modernism or post-modernism of the 1950s to the present with the unrecognizable, because so foreign, Buddhist modernism of Ernest Fenollosa in the 1890s. An awareness of these connections makes it seem insufficient to think of Fenollosa as the incompletely aware prophet of new developments in art, and Pound as the man who brought his rough imaginings to perfection; rather, it might make more sense to see Pound as a precursor of Fenollosa, the man whose work had already been written for ten or fifteen years before Pound discovered it, and while doing so discovered himself, in 1913-14.

The sketch of a continuous quasi-Buddhist ontological tradition in the American arts from 1890 to 1990, passing through Fenollosa, Okakura, Suzuki, Cage, and others, might convey the impression that "Buddhism," as an ahistorical body of doctrine, is somehow the key to American twentieth-century modernist poetry. It is never Buddhism but always a Buddhism,

and the Buddhism that caught Fenollosa's attention was a hybrid formation of the Meiji period, known at the time as "Shin Bukkyô" or "New Buddhism" and eager to develop itself in contact with Western philosophy (Staggs, 1983). Inoue Enryô, the thinker most closely allied with this New Buddhism, had studied Hegel and sociology with Fenollosa and was persuaded, not only that these new disciplines expanded and confirmed what the Zen masters had taught, but that Westerners, once they had become acquainted with the full range of Buddhist doctrine, would discover that their own dialectics and logic had been a foreshadowing of the Noble Truths. In Shin Bukkyô, as in the modernity of Imagist poetry written under Chinese influence, we have, not the mechanical combination of influences lumped together and easily told apart, but a mutual modification and accommodation, what we nowadays call transculturation. Inoue's transculturation inspired Fenollosa's, which continued to inspire and to bear fruit throughout the twentieth century.

With all this in mind, we might turn to the concept of the ideogram once more. In comparison with a theory that holds that "relations are more real than the things they relate," ideogram might be the least modernist idea of all, because it is not relativist, its theory of perception is unreflexive, it calls only superficially on the idea of time, and so on. It is out of step with the ways of thinking that were characteristically modern in most other fields, and arguably reflects the curious archaism, in some respects, of Pound and many other literary modernists of the 1920 vintage. Compare the physicists, who of all of us have the best right to be considered modern, since they actually do discard old perspectives and advance new ones. As of 1905, you were not getting far as a physicist if the permanence and substantiality of things was important to you; what mattered were subatomic particles and their interactions. As of 1925, the concept or model that ruled modernity among the physicist folk

was the idea of a field. Allow me to quote from a 1942 article by the great philologist Leo Spitzer, quoting in his turn a 1941 summary by one of Einstein's collaborators, Leopold Infeld:

> The old theory states: particles and the forces between them are the basic concepts. The new theory states: changes in space, spreading in time through all of space, are the basic concepts of our descriptions. These basic changes characterize the field.
>
> Electrical phenomena were the birthplace of the field concept. Not particles in certain points of space, but the whole continuous space forms the scenery of events which change with time (Spitzer, 1942: 196).

It is in this sense that modernism, not just Fenollosa's modernism, is Buddhist—and in the same sense that you might call it Berkeleyan or Leibnizian. This opens a program for the retrospective understanding of modernism. A genealogy is not just a record of fact, but a program (for another example also starting from Pound, see Kenner 1971). Despite the immodesty of a literary person's thinking that theoretical physics can ever be "useful" in our much more parochial discipline, I would have us take from the example of Fenollosa and Pound the lesson that attention to events in fields, spreading through time, might be more valuable to our understanding than attention to particles—be those particles the steady-state portraits of various cultures, or such cultural concretions as the ideogram or the alphabet.

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