

[B L O G]

HOW TO WRITE A CHINESE POEM

OLD STEREOTYPES OF ASIAN CULTURE AND SENSIBILITY CAN STILL SURFACE
IN CONTEMPORARY POETRY, ACCORDING TO POET TIM YU. HE CHALLENGES
SOME OF THESE IMAGES IN A PIECE TAKEN FROM
A NEW ONLINE GENRE, THE 'BLOG'.

A weblog, or 'blog', is an online journal or diary composed of daily entries, observations and short essays, often focused on a particular topic, and featuring numerous links and responses to other web sites and blogs. As suggested by the selection below from my blog, tympan <<http://tympan.blogspot.com>>, blogs have become major sites for the discussion of poetry. In these entries I respond to a review posted by poet David Hess on his blog, Heathens in Heat <<http://heathensinheat.blogspot.com>>, of Gary Sullivan's 2001 book How to Proceed in the Arts. I see in Hess's review—and, by extension, in a poem by Sullivan—evidence of the stereotypes about Asian culture that animate American modernist poetry and that continue to attract poets.

Wednesday, April 23, 2003, 2:54 p.m.

Commenting on Gary Sullivan's '70 Lines from the Chinese', David wrote: 'The more quiet, modest modes of Asian poetry appeal as an alternative to our overblown emotions.' My immediate response was that this assertion perpetuates a common stereotype of Asian reserve, modesty and deference, one that

seems innocent enough but that can have repressive implications, suggesting that the East is less capable of speaking for itself than the West. (Frank Chin—the well-known Asian American writer and editor of the groundbreaking anthology *Aiiieeeee!*—tells an anecdote about an American film portraying Chinese labourers in conflict with railroad bosses: when the extras began advancing menacingly on the bosses with their pickaxes, the director stopped them, telling them that this was not believable; instead, they should lay down their tools and stand politely with their hands at their sides.) I should say that my response was not a literary judgement based on my familiarity with Chinese poetry, of which I know very little; rather, it was a reaction against an orientalist stereotype that has real implications for how Asians are perceived in America.

I wasn't interested in bashing David for his statement, only in drawing attention to it, and in showing how such ideas can sneak in when we least expect them—as one line in a long and intelligent review. I have no interest in being the Asian American thought police, and I think the worst possible result of such critiques would be that people felt they couldn't talk about such issues at all without being called out. But I also realize that I'm conscious of these things in a way that others (however well-intentioned) might not be. I actually thought David was quite astute to question whether the 'lines from the Chinese' were translation or parody—the sort of tension poet John Yau also plays with.

I appreciate David's posting his own response to the matter today, raising the question of whether he's 'perpetuating this stereotype or merely making reference to it'. A good question—and I do think there is a difference, and ways to mark that difference. There has to be some kind of critical distance, a position a reader can take that allows the awareness that a stereotype is being used. And it's certainly not only non-Asian writers who get into trouble for this; Hawaiian writer Lois-Ann Yamanaka got into a world of trouble a few years ago for her allegedly stereotypical depictions of Filipinos in her work.

In my e-mail to David, I brought up my own discomfort with the role Asian culture and poetry seem to play in contemporary experimental writing, a legacy that goes back to modernism (Pound, etc.) and beyond. The turn to 'Asia' has been extraordinarily productive, but it can rely not just on stereotype but also on refusing to listen to the actual voices of Asian writers, especially modern ones. It's doubly complicated now, when you've got Asian American writers to deal with as well as the many white writers who continue their romance with Asia.

Last year, I was in Boulder, Colorado, for the summer writing program at Naropa University, and attended a well-meaning but somewhat surreal discussion on ‘diversity’. Several speakers noted that Naropa—which is, of course, home to the Allen Ginsberg-founded Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics—had to do more to reach out to students of colour because, frankly, the tradition that Naropa is grounded in (Beat writing, Buddhism, etc.) has historically (in the U.S.) been the province of white men. But I was stunned to hear some of the same speakers argue that the problem was not as pronounced for Asian American students—Naropa ought naturally to attract them since, after all, it was a Buddhist school. Never mind that I could count the number of Asian Americans I saw there on one hand, or that many Asian Americans are not Buddhists. There was simply an assumption that there was a natural, essential connection.

Things like that lead me to question what Asia and Asian culture really mean to American writers. Are they merely an attractive set of philosophies and elegant cultural traits, available to be appropriated at will? And what happens when those absorbed assumptions come face to face with flesh-and-blood Asians and Asian Americans, some of whom might, alarmingly enough, write too?

Thursday, April 24, 2003, 12:24 a.m.

Gary Sullivan has thoughtfully posted ‘70 Lines from the Chinese,’ the poem that caused the back-and-forth between me and David. I’m glad he did—I was beginning to feel pretty strange having this whole debate about a review of a poem I’d never read ...

I actually got a kick out of reading the poem—it does strike me as pretty funnily melodramatic in ways that signal it as parody:

Feeding the crumbling years, I
Sit on the grass & start a poem.
It’d be better for me if I took a
Sword and cut open my bowels.

It’s recognizably in the style of what we’ve come to know as translations of Chinese poetry, but filtered through some self-indulgent melancholic; some of the repetitions and goofy details and line breaks (‘Tears of loneli-/Ness rattle on the banana trees’) signal the parody, the pastiche. (I’m thinking of Kenneth Koch’s parody of

William Carlos Williams: 'We laughed at the hollyhocks together / and then I sprayed them with lye. / Forgive me. I simply do not know what I am doing.')

But I think the reason that readers haven't, in Sullivan's experience, 'gotten' the joke is that the tone doesn't remain stable. The final stanza, to my ear, moves to a different realm entirely; 'sticky pudding' is grotesque but not necessarily jarring in its sentiment, and the final image—which is quite lovely—has precisely the quietness and modesty that David identified as part of the poem's 'Asian' tone:

No wind blows. My heart is not
Beating: it is useless. My skin
Is like sticky pudding, my bones
Yellow powder. My spirit hangs
On its little rack: there is no
Place it wants to go. Alone,
Nothing can make it disappear.

I suspect what happened to Sullivan was something similar to what happens to many parodists: you start off fully intending a joke, only to find that you've taken it seriously without knowing it.

A few years back, just after I graduated from college, I picked up a copy of an Asian American literary journal. It was one of my first encounters with Asian American writing, and after reading it, and browsing through an anthology of Asian American poetry, I started to have a weird feeling of repetition. In retrospect this seems pretty snotty of me, but I came up with what seemed to be a few dominant categories of poems I was seeing:

- the grandparents poem
- the family photograph poem
- the exotic food poem
- the erotic poem, usually employing imagery from the exotic food poem.

Once I'd done this, I started wondering what it would be like to *deliberately* set out to write an 'Asian American' poem, since I felt I didn't have any natural sense of what that should be. So I composed a series of poems facetiously titled 'Asian American Poem #1,' 'Asian American Poem #2,' etc. making sure to write one poem in each category. Here was my product for the 'grandparent' poem:

ASIAN AMERICAN POEM #3

(Egg)

When I was ten, my grandfather
was dead of cigarettes and America.
After the funeral, my mother took me
to Chinatown for thousand-year eggs,
their darkness the purple of the past or the grave.
Later I learned that the eggs are dyed
with chemicals and that I
am a liar. The cultivation of memory
digs furrows for new seeds; my grandfather
was not a farmer and during the funeral
I was in school reading of a pink cow
whose friends were squirrels. My grandfather
always told me the same story, of his
other grandson in China, nameless, who seemed
to do very little. I didn't believe him
but listened anyway, needing to sleep. The other boy
was me, was nobody, was an egg
dyed pink and purple, was a lulling lie.

I fully intended this poem to be a parody of the genre, and hence filled it with 'lies' (e.g. my grandfather died when I was six, not ten) and with melodramatic ('dead of cigarettes and America') and goofy ('pink cow') images. Finally, in what I thought of as adding insult to injury, I sent the poem off to the Asian American magazine in question—which promptly accepted it.

Now I was confused. Had they missed the joke or gotten it? When I looked back over the poem, I realized I was no longer sure what the poem was doing; the biographical information was really only slightly distorted, and the poem's conclusion certainly had a tone of seriousness and even, dare I say, sincerity, despite its arch message. Ultimately, I think, I outsmarted myself; telling myself that I was writing a parody was the only way I could write a poem that turned out to be pretty damn expressive.

But the question remains: what did I do to the stereotypes I had ostensibly set out to mock and undermine? Did I simply reinforce them, or did I successfully critique them? I'd like to think that the discourse of 'lying' that gets set up in the

poem produces a critical space in the poem, where a reader might back away from the sentiments expressed there even at the moment that those sentiments are being experienced. But in the final analysis I'm not sure I did enough to produce that space; it's probably too easy for a reader ignorant of my intentions to take it 'straight.' You might argue that that's even more destabilizing than an obvious parody. But such a position can be dangerous when you're trying to critique a stereotype that can have such destructive implications—in this case, a racial stereotype.

I've mentioned John Yau a few times in my posts (I also wrote a review of his latest book, *Borrowed Love Poems, for Free Verse*). Some of his poems provide a good coda to this discussion. Around the same time I was writing my 'Asian American' poems, I read a poem of his—a first for me—in a book called *Radiant Silhouette*, published by the now-defunct Black Sparrow Press:

CHINESE VILLANELLE

I have been with you, and I have thought of you
Once the air was dry and drenched with light
I was like a lute filling the room with description

We watched glum clouds reject their shape
We dawdled near a fountain, and listened
I have been with you, and I have thought of you

Like a river worthy of its gown
And like a mountain worthy of its insolence ...
Why am I like a lute left with only description

How does one cut an axe handle with an axe
What shall I do to tell you all my thoughts
When I have been with you, and thought of you

A pelican sits on a dam, while a duck
Folds its wings again; the song does not melt
I remember you looking at me without description

Perhaps a king's business is never finished
Though 'perhaps' implies a different beginning
I have been with you, and I have thought of you
Now I am a lute filled with this wandering description

That stereotypical, recognizable 'Chinese' tone is in play again, even labelled as such. Or is it? You've got a poem called 'Chinese' but written in an esoteric European form. It has koan-like riddles ('How does one cut an axe handle with an axe'), but how seriously do we take them? It features the lute, an Eastern and a Western instrument; and it thematizes description, which is precisely (in the Poundian dogma) what Chinese poetry isn't supposed to do. I don't think it can fairly be called a satire or a parody; it's some weird hybrid that allows you the pleasure of a 'Chinese' style while constantly nudging you back to something more unsettled.

NOTE

Tim Yu's 'Asian American Poem #3' was first published in the *Asian Pacific American Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1998). We wish to thank Gary Sullivan for granting permission to quote from his poem '70 Lines from the Chinese' and John Yau for permission to reproduce his poem 'Chinese Villanelle'.